

THE EMMY AWARD WINNING SERIES



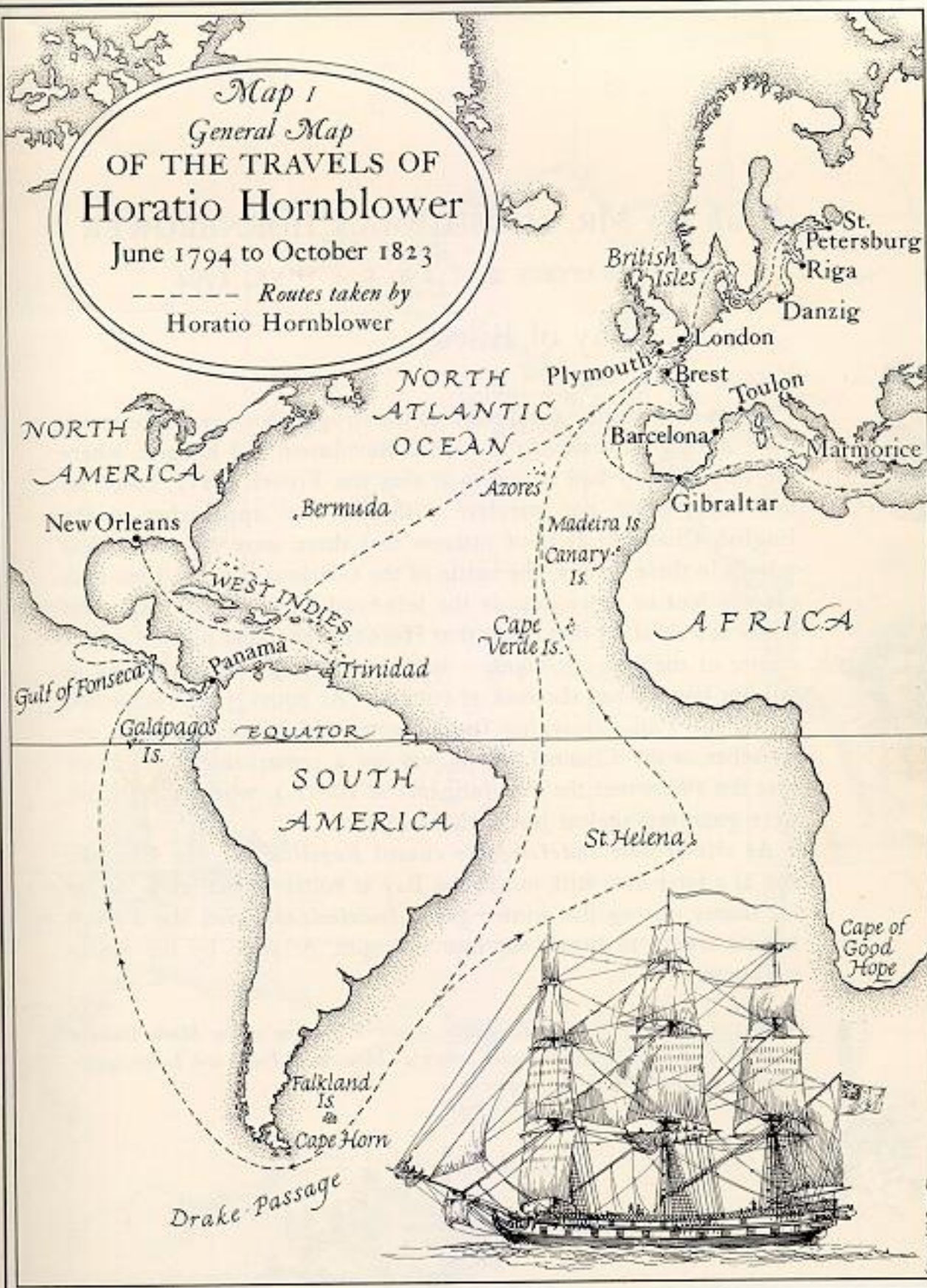
HORATIO
HORNBLOWER

THE NOVELS BY C. S. FORESTER

Map 1
General Map
OF THE TRAVELS OF
Horatio Hornblower

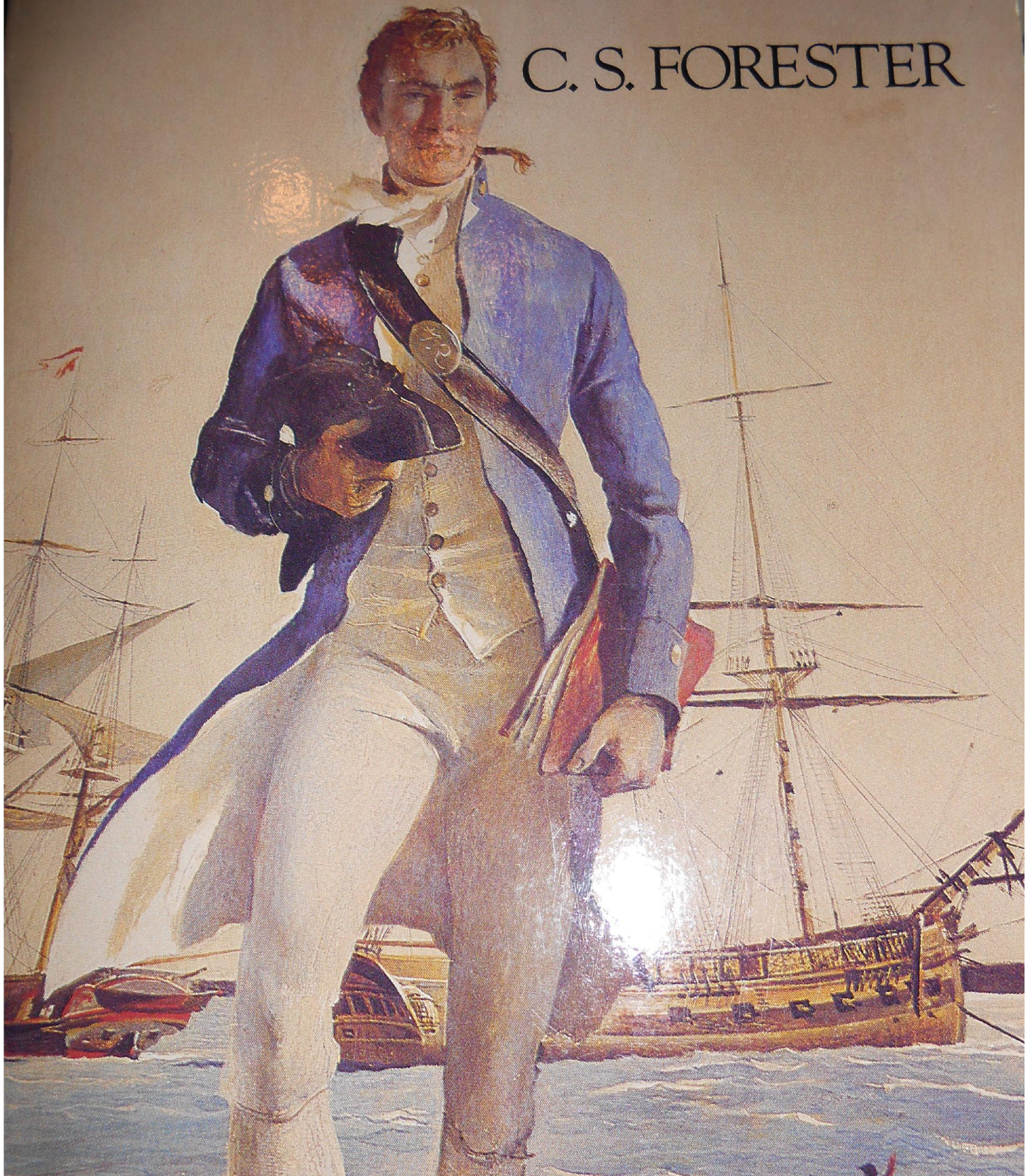
June 1794 to October 1823

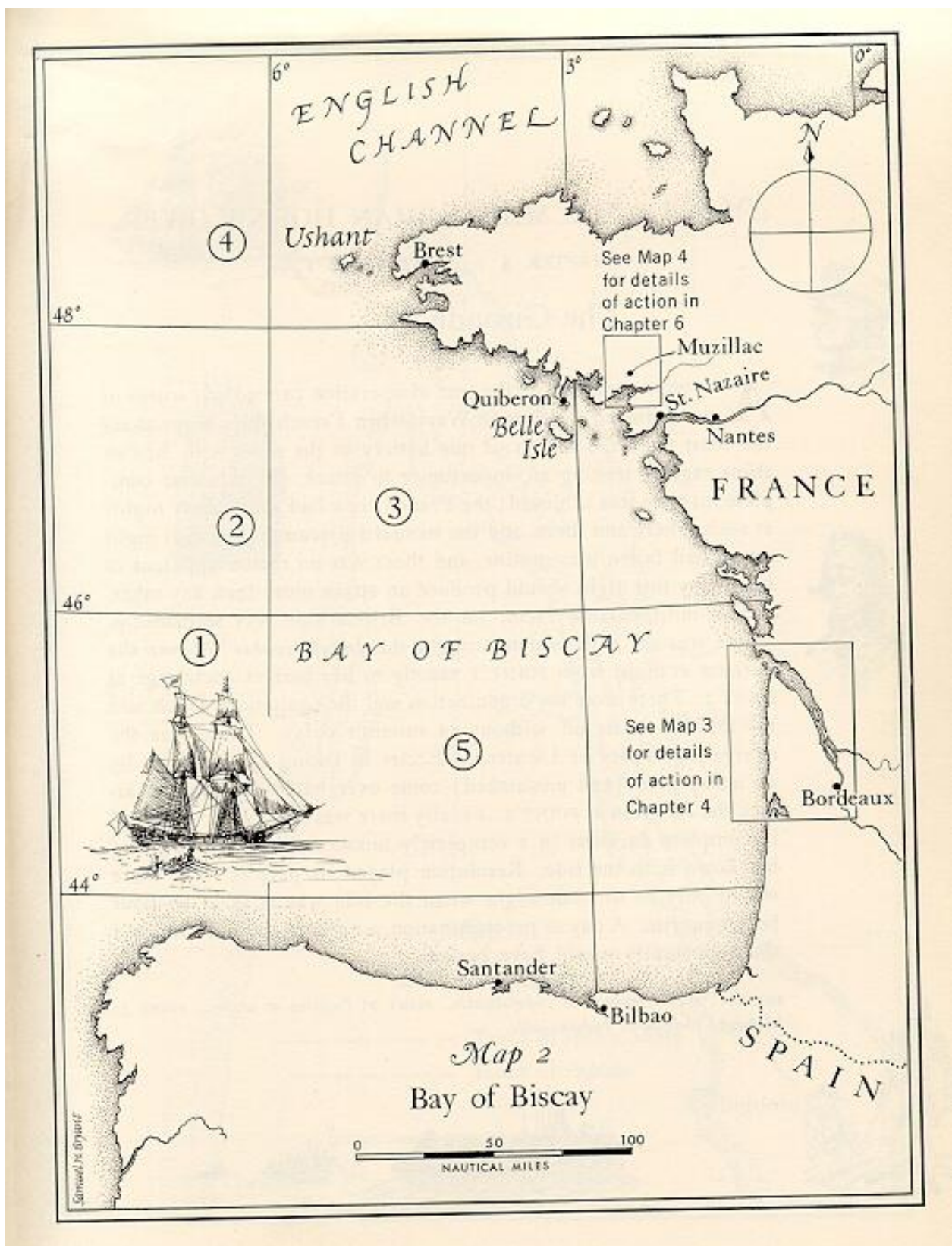
----- Routes taken by
Horatio Hornblower



MR. MIDSHIPMAN
Hornblower

C. S. FORESTER



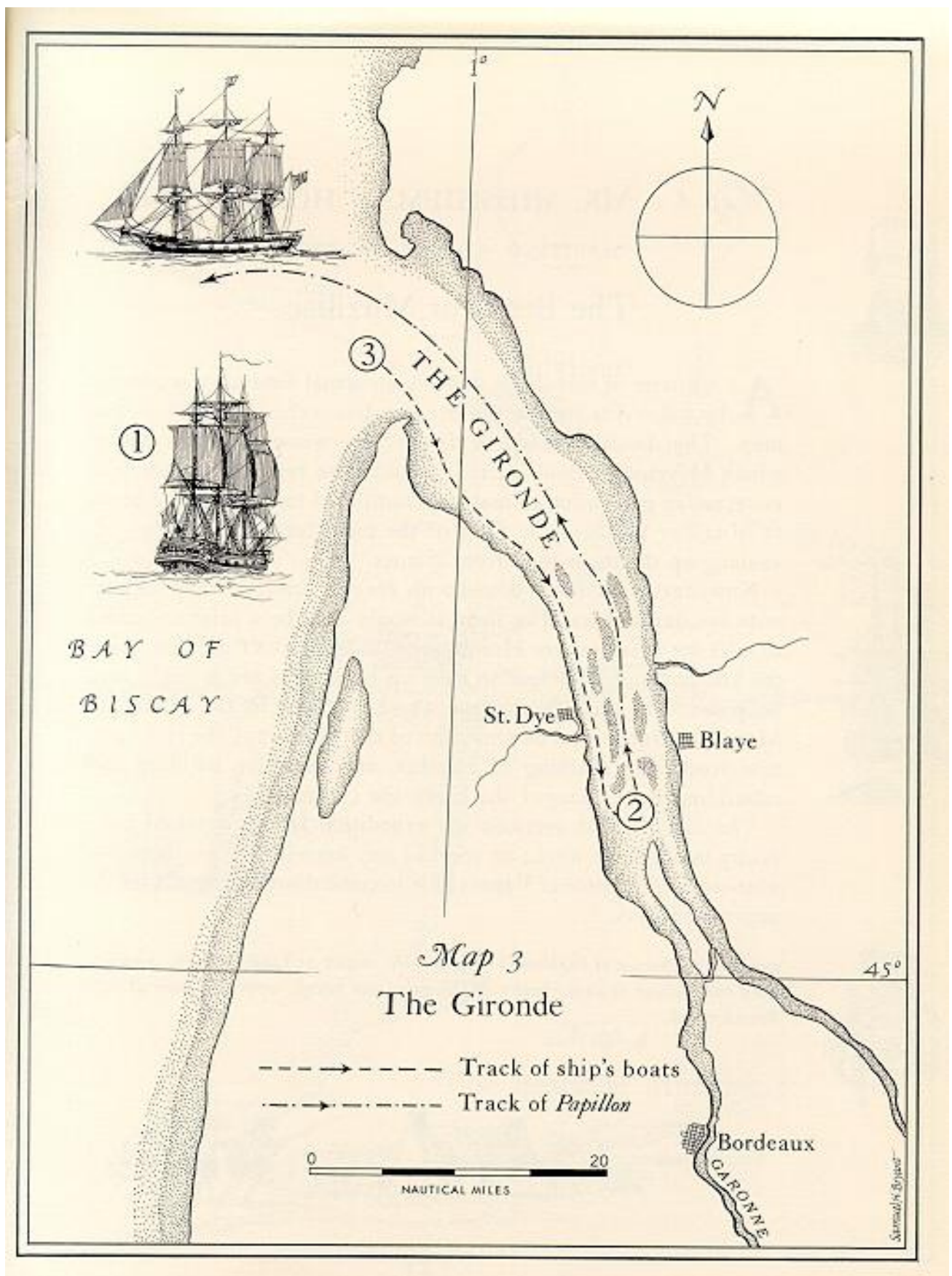


Mr. Midshipman Hornblower Chapters 2, 3 and 5

June 1794

Map 2

- ① Capture of the *Marie Galante*. ② Sinking of the *Marie Galante*. ③ Encounter with the *Pique*.
 ④ Meeting of *Pique* and *Indefatigable*. ⑤ Position of battle in Chapter 5



Mr. Midshipman Hornblower Chapter 4

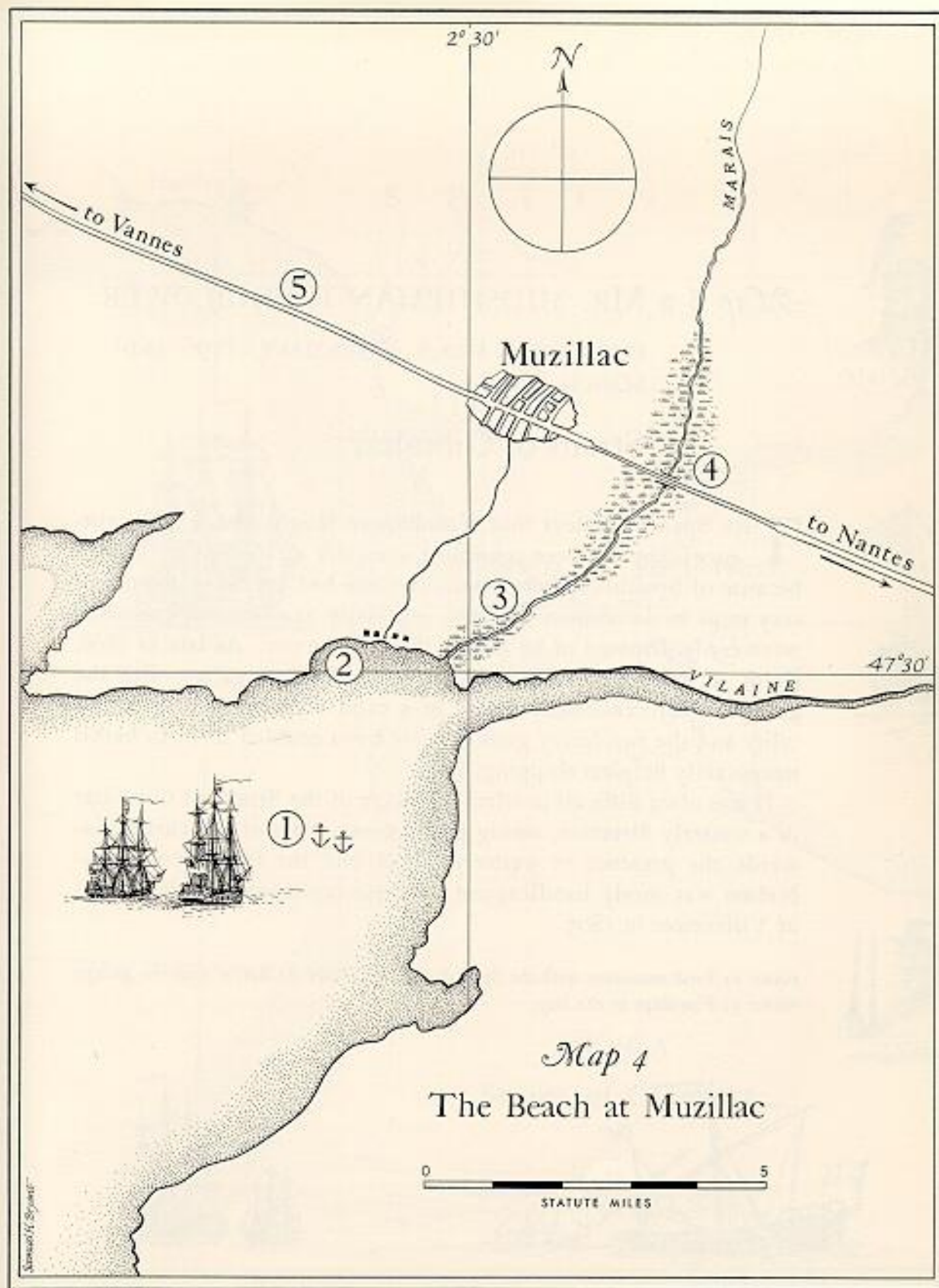
September, 1794

Map 3

① Sunset Position of *Indefatigable*.

② *Papillon* at anchor.

③ Midnight position of *Indefatigable*.



Mr. Midshipman Hornblower Chapter 6

July 20, 1795

Map 4

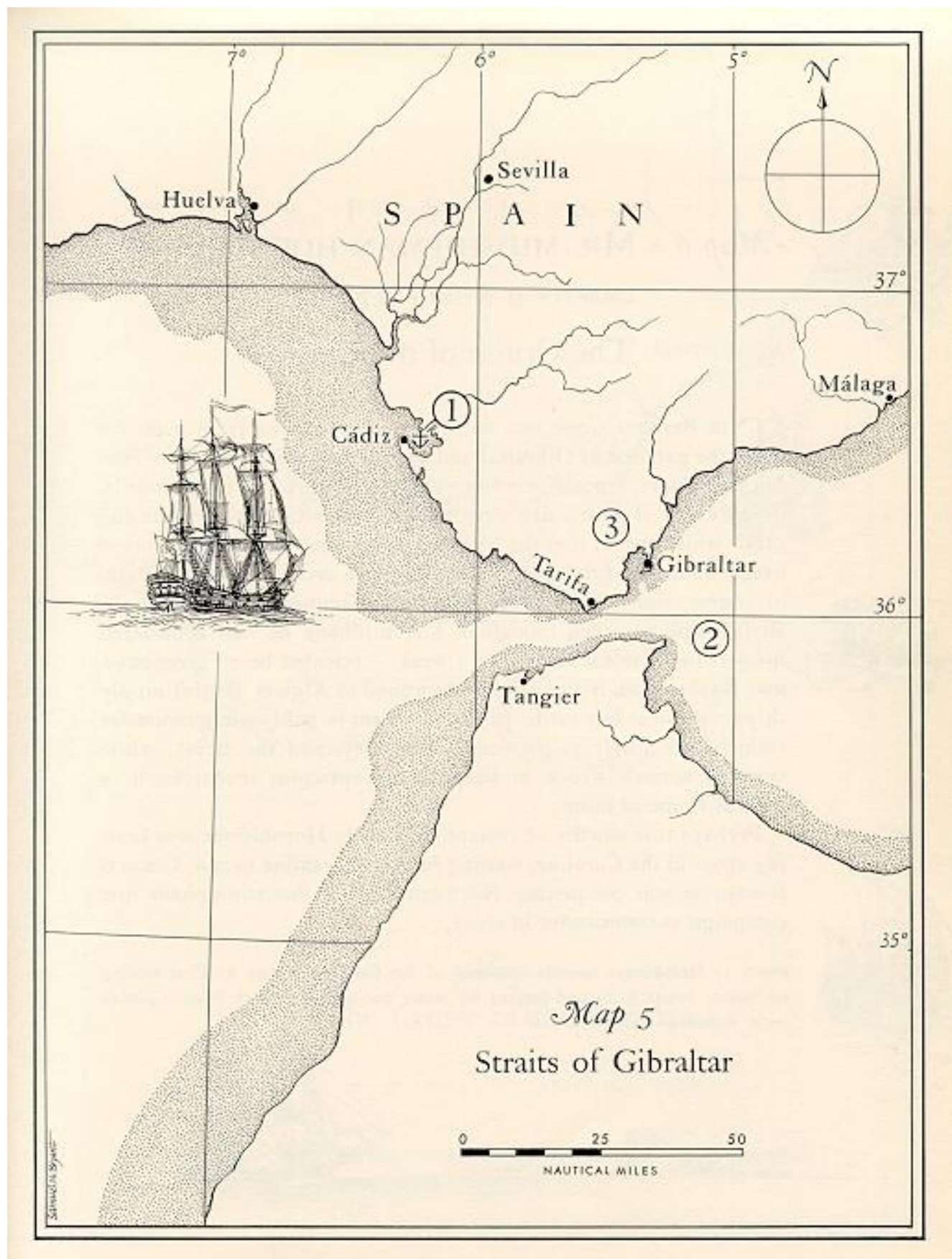
① Anchorage of *Sophia* and *Indefatigable*.

② Landing beach.

③ Ford and position of 43rd.

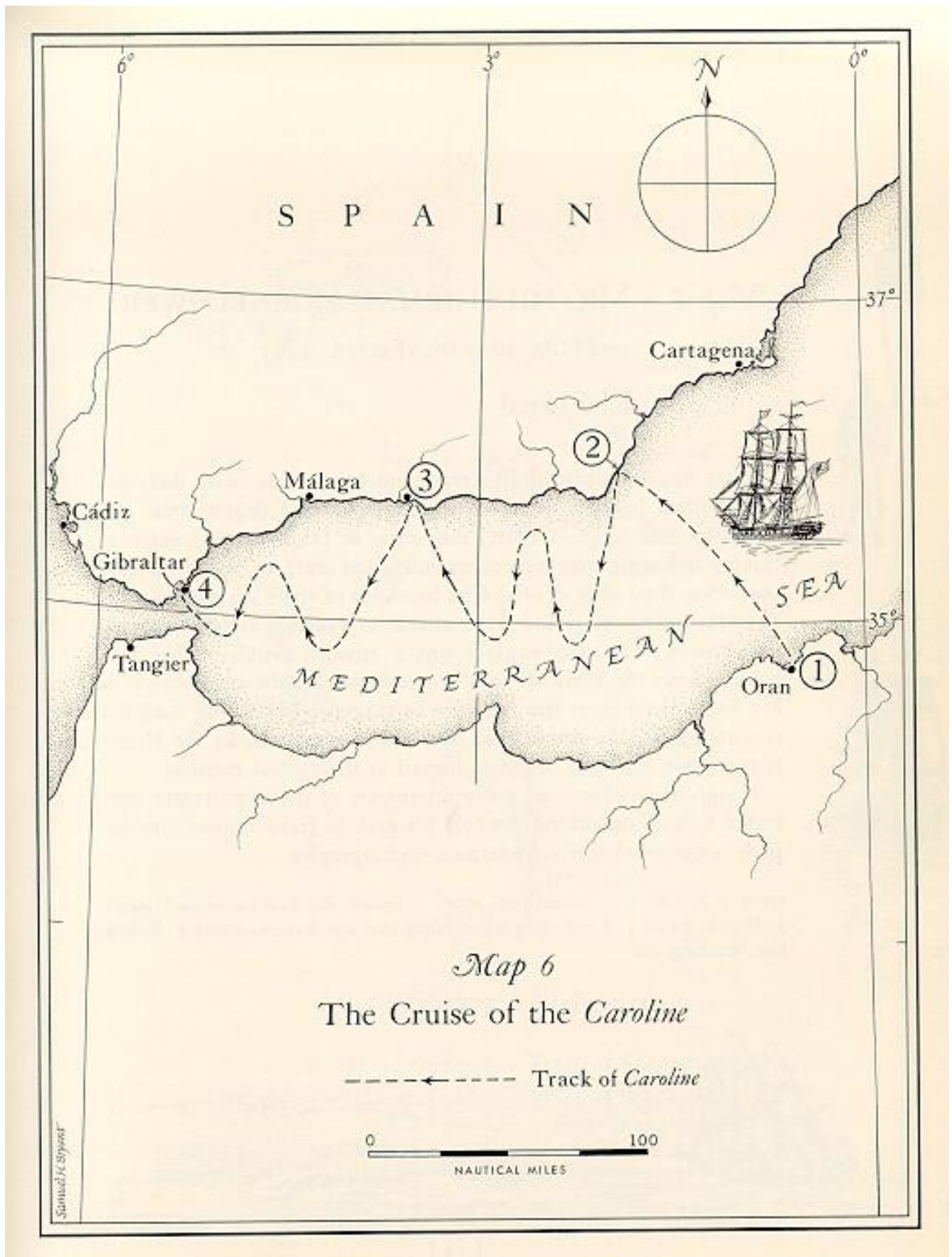
④ Causeway and bridge.

⑤ Start of main French attack.



Mr. Midshipman Hornblower Chapters 7 and 8 Janurary 1796 and March, 1796 Map 5

- ① First encounter with the Spanish galleys. ② Battle with the galleys. ③ Fire ships in the Bay.



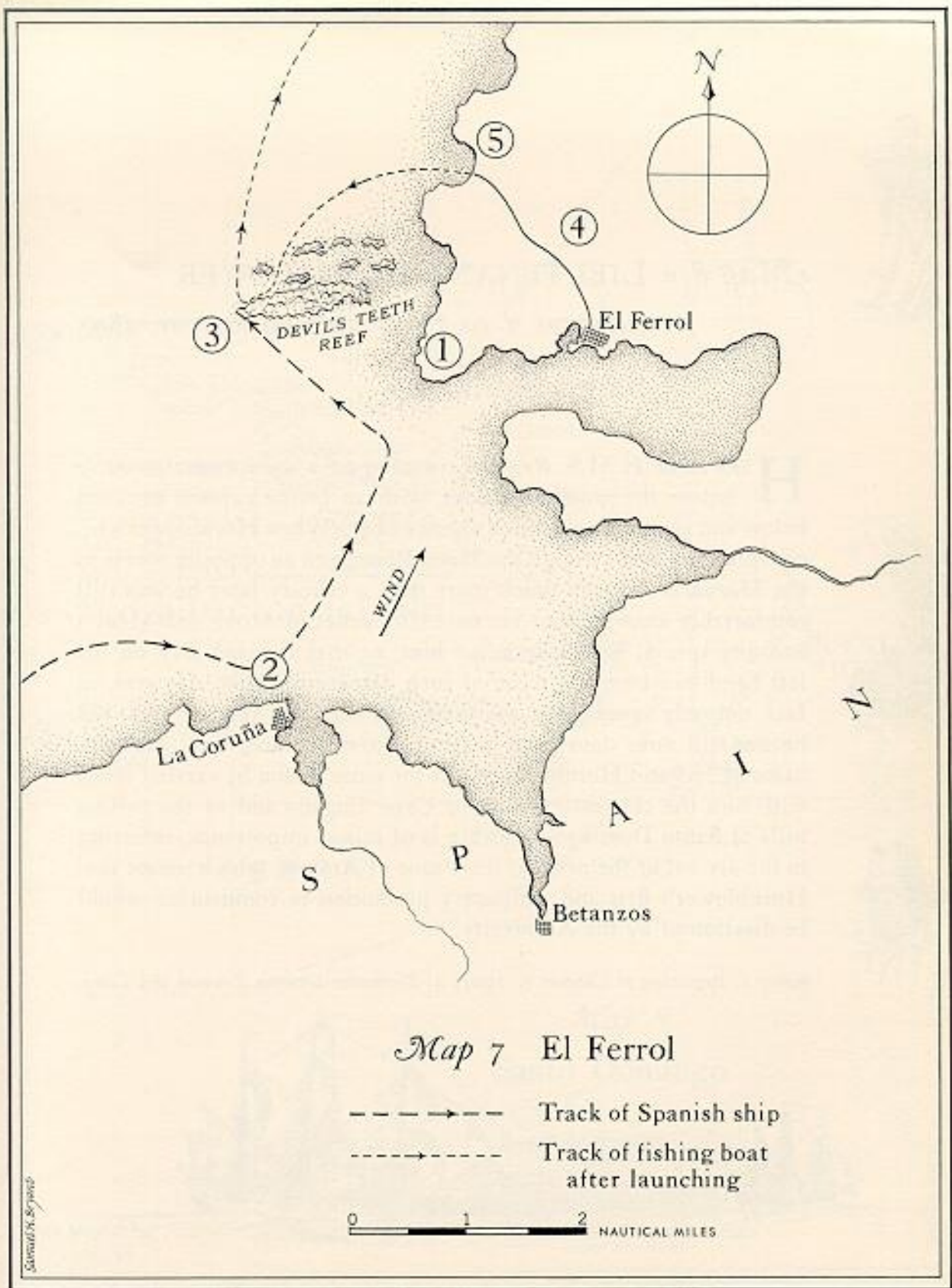
Mr. Midshipman Hornblower Chapter 9

July, 1796

Map 6

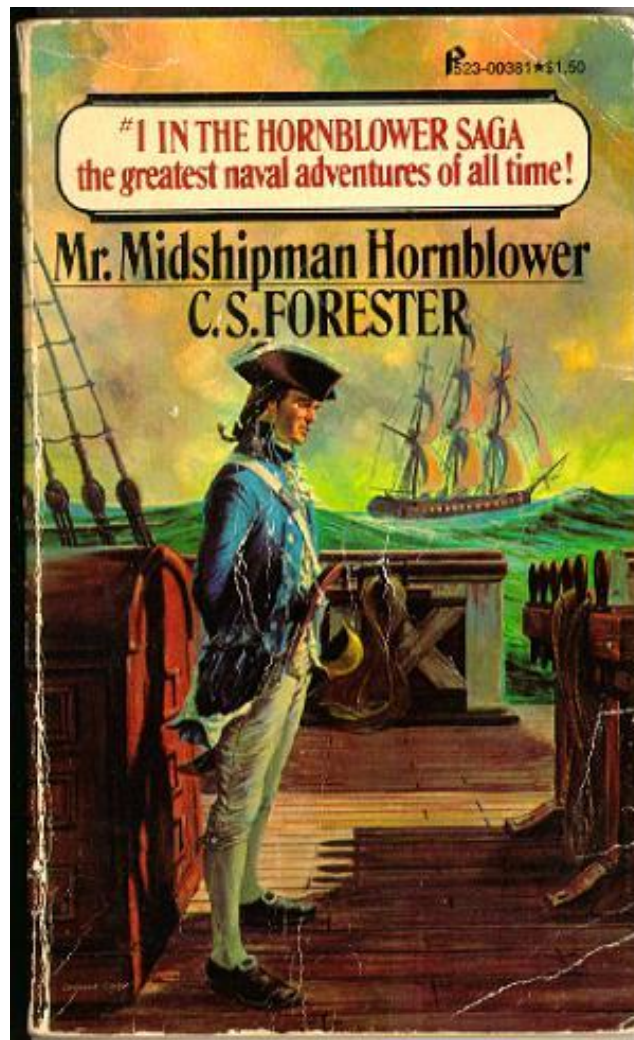
- ① Hornblower assumes command of the *Caroline*.
- ③ Second landing for water and encounter with Spanish *guarda costa*.

- ② First landing for water.
- ④ Cargo delivered.



- ① Hornblower's lookout post.
- ③ Wreck.
- ⑤ Fishing boat launching site.

- ② Spanish ship loses main-topsail.
- ④ Track along which fishing boat was dragged.



Mr Midshipman Hornblower

C. S. Forester
(1950)

CHAPTER ONE — THE EVEN CHANCE

A January gale was roaring up the Channel, blustering loudly, and bearing in its bosom rain squalls whose big drops rattled loudly on the tarpaulin clothing of those among the officers and men whose duties kept them on deck. So hard and so long had the gale blown that even in the sheltered waters of Spithead the battleship moved uneasily at her anchors, pitching a little in the choppy seas, and snubbing herself against the tautened cables with unexpected jerks. A shore boat was on its way out to her, propelled by oars in the hands of two sturdy women; it danced madly on the steep little waves, now and then putting its nose into one and sending a sheet of spray flying aft. The oarswoman in the bow knew her business, and with rapid glances over her shoulder not only kept the boat on its course but turned the bows into the worst of the waves to keep from capsizing. It slowly drew up along the starboard side of the *Justinian*, and as it approached the mainchains the midshipman of the watch hailed it.

"Aye aye" came back the answering hail from the lusty lungs of the woman at the stroke oar; by the curious and ages-old convention of the Navy the reply meant that the boat had an officer on board — presumably the huddled figure in the sternsheets looking more like a heap of trash with a boat-cloak thrown over it. That was as much as Mr Masters, the lieutenant of the watch, could see; he was sheltering as best he could in the lee of the mizzen-mast bitts, and in obedience to the order of the midshipman of the watch the boat drew up towards the mainchains and passed out of his sight. There was a long delay; apparently the officer had some difficulty in getting up the ship's side. At last the boat reappeared in Masters' held of vision; the women had shoved off and were setting a scrap of lugsail, under which the boat, now without its passenger, went swooping back towards Portsmouth, leaping on the waves like a steeplechaser. As it departed Mr Masters became aware of the near approach of someone along the quarterdeck; it was the new arrival under the escort of the midshipman of the watch, who, after pointing Masters out, retired to the mainchains again. Mr Masters had served in the Navy until his hair was white; he was lucky to have received his commission as lieutenant, and he had long known that he would never receive one as captain, but the knowledge had not greatly embittered him, and he diverted his mind by the study of his fellow men.

So he looked with attention at the approaching figure. It was that of a skinny young man only just leaving boyhood behind, something above middle height, with feet whose adolescent proportions to his size were accentuated by the thinness of his legs and his big half-boots. His gawkiness called attention to his hands and elbows. The newcomer was dressed in a badly fitting uniform which was soaked right through by the spray; a skinny neck stuck out of the high stock, and above the neck was a white bony face. A white face was a rarity on the deck of a ship of war, whose crew soon tanned to a deep mahogany, but this face was not merely white; in the hollow cheeks there was a faint shade of green — clearly the newcomer had experienced seasickness in his passage out in the shore boat. Set in the white face were a pair of dark eyes which by contrast looked like holes cut in a sheet of paper; Masters noted with a slight stirring of interest that the eyes, despite their owner's seasickness, were looking about keenly, taking in what were obviously new sights; there was a curiosity and interest there which could not be repressed and which continued to function notwithstanding either seasickness or shyness, and Mr Masters surmised in his far-fetched fashion that this boy had a vein of caution or foresight in his temperament and was already studying his new surroundings with a view to being prepared for his next experiences. So might Daniel have looked about him at the lions when he first entered their den.

The dark eyes met Masters', and the gawky figure came to a halt, raising a hand selfconsciously to the brim of his dripping hat. His mouth opened and tried to say something, but closed again without achieving its object as shyness overcame him, but then the newcomer nerved himself afresh and forced himself to say the formal words he had been coached to utter.

"Come aboard, sir."

"Your name?" asked Masters, after waiting for it for a moment.

"H-Horatio Hornblower, sir. Midshipman," stuttered the boy.

"Very good, Mr Hornblower," said Masters, with the equally formal response. "Did you bring your dunnage aboard with you?"

Hornblower had never heard that word before, but he still had enough of his wits about him to deduce what it meant.

"My sea chest, sir. It's — it's forrard, at the entry port."

Hornblower said these things with the barest hesitation; he knew that at sea they said them, that they pronounced the word 'forward' like that, and that he had come on board through the 'entry port', but it called for a slight effort to utter them himself.

"I'll see that it's sent below," said Masters. "And that's where you'd better go, too. The captain's ashore, and the first lieutenant's orders were that he's not to be called on any account before eight bells, so I advise you, Mr Hornblower, to get out of those wet clothes while you can."

"Yes, sir," said Hornblower; his senses told him, the moment he said it, that he had used an improper expression — the look on Masters' face told him, and he corrected himself (hardly believing that men really said these things off the boards of the stage) before Masters had time to correct him.

"Aye aye, sir," said Hornblower, and as a second afterthought he put his hand to the brim of his hat again.

Masters returned the compliment and turned to one of the shivering messengers cowering in the inadequate shelter of the bulwark. "Boy! Take Mr Hornblower down to the midshipmen's berth."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower accompanied the boy forward to the main hatchway. Seasickness alone would have made him unsteady on his feet, but twice on the short journey he stumbled like a man tripping over a rope as a sharp gust brought the *Justinian* up against her cables with a jerk. At the hatchway the boy slid down the ladder like an eel over a rock; Hornblower had to brace himself and descend far more gingerly and uncertainly into the dim light of the lower gundeck and then into the twilight of the 'tweendecks. The smells that entered his nostrils were as strange and as assorted as the noises that assailed his ears. At the foot of each ladder the boy waited for him with a patience whose tolerance was just obvious. After the last descent, a few steps — Hornblower had already lost his sense of direction and did not know whether it was aft or forward — took them to a gloomy recess whose shadows were accentuated rather than lightened by a tallow dip spiked onto a bit of copper plate on a table round which were seated half a dozen shirt-sleeved men. The boy vanished and left Hornblower standing there, and it was a second or two before the whiskered man at the head of the table looked up at him.

"Speak, thou apparition," said he.

Hornblower felt a wave of nausea overcoming him — the after effects of his trip in the shore boat were being accentuated by the incredible stuffiness and smelliness of the 'tweendecks. It was very hard to speak, and the fact that he did not know how to phrase what he wanted to say made it harder still.

"My name is Hornblower," he quavered at length.

"What an infernal piece of bad luck for you," said a second man at the table, with a complete absence of sympathy.

At that moment in the roaring world outside the ship the wind veered sharply, heeling the *Justinian* a trifle and swinging her round to snub at her cables again. To Hornblower it seemed more as if the world had come loose from its fastenings. He reeled where he stood, and although he was shuddering with cold he felt sweat on his face.

"I suppose you have come," said the whiskered man at the head of the table, "to thrust yourself among your betters. Another soft-headed ignoramus come to be a nuisance to those who have to try to teach you your duties. Look at him" — the speaker with a gesture demanded the attention of everyone at the table — "look at him, I say! The King's latest bad bargain. How old are you?"

"S-seventeen, sir," stuttered Hornblower.

"Seventeen!" the disgust in the speaker's voice was only too evident. "You must start at twelve if you ever wish to be a seaman. Seventeen! Do you know the difference between a head and a halliard?"

That drew a laugh from the group, and the quality of the laugh was just noticeable to Hornblower's whirling brain, so that he guessed that whether he said 'yes' or 'no' he would be equally exposed to ridicule. He groped for a neutral reply.

"That's the first thing I'll look up in Norie's *Seamanship*," he said.

The ship lurched again at that moment, and he clung on to the table.

"Gentlemen," he began pathetically, wondering how to say what he had in mind.

"My God!" exclaimed somebody at the table. "He's seasick!"

"Seasick in Spithead!" said somebody else, in a tone in which amazement had as much place as disgust.

But Hornblower ceased to care; he was not really conscious of what was going on round him for some time after that. The nervous excitement of the last few days was as much to blame, perhaps, as the journey in the shore boat and the erratic behaviour of the *Justinian* at her anchors, but it meant for him that he was labelled at once as the midshipman who was seasick in Spithead, and it was only natural that the label added to the natural misery of the loneliness and homesickness which oppressed him during those days when that part of the Channel Fleet which had not succeeded in completing its crews lay at anchor in the lee of the Isle of Wight. An hour in the hammock into which the messman hoisted him enabled him to recover sufficiently to be able to report himself to the first lieutenant; after a few days on board he was able to find his way round the ship without (as happened at first) losing his sense of direction below decks, so that he did not know whether he was facing forward or aft. During that period his brother officers ceased to have faces which were mere blurs

and came to take on personalities; he came painfully to learn the stations allotted him when the ship was at quarters, when he was on watch, and when hands were summoned for setting or taking in sail. He even came to have an acute enough understanding of his new life to realize that it could have been worse — that destiny might have put him on board a ship ordered immediately to sea instead of one lying at anchor. But it was a poor enough compensation; he was a lonely and unhappy boy. Shyness alone would long have delayed his making friends, but as it happened the midshipmen's berth in the *Justinian* was occupied by men all a good deal older than he; elderly master's mates recruited from the merchant service, and midshipmen in their twenties who through lack of patronage or inability to pass the necessary examination had never succeeded in gaining for themselves commissions as lieutenants. They were inclined, after the first moments of amused interest, to ignore him, and he was glad of it, delighted to shrink into his shell and attract no notice to himself. For the *Justinian* was not a happy ship during those gloomy January days. Captain Keene — it was when he came aboard that Hornblower first saw the pomp and ceremony that surrounds the captain of a ship of the line — was a sick man, of a melancholy disposition. He had not the fame which enabled some captains to fill their ships with enthusiastic volunteers, and he was devoid of the personality which might have made enthusiasts out of the sullen pressed men whom the press gangs were bringing in from day to day to complete the ship's complement. His officers saw little of him, and did not love what they saw. Hornblower, summoned to his cabin for his first interview, was not impressed — a middle-aged man at a table covered with papers, with the hollow and yellow cheeks of prolonged illness.

"Mr Hornblower," he said formally, "I am glad to have this opportunity of welcoming you on board my ship."

"Yes, sir," said Hornblower — that seemed more appropriate to the occasion than "Aye aye, sir", and a junior midshipman seemed to be expected to say one or the other on all occasions.

"You are — let me see — seventeen?" Captain Keene picked up the paper which apparently covered Hornblower's brief official career.

"Yes, sir."

"July 4th, 1776," mused Keene, reading Hornblower's date of birth to himself. "Five years to the day before I was posted as captain. I had been six years as lieutenant before you were born."

"Yes, sir," agreed Hornblower — it did not seem the occasion for any further comment.

"A doctor's son — you should have chosen a lord for your father if you wanted to make a career for yourself."

"Yes, sir."

"How far did your education go?"

"I was a Grecian at school, sir."

"So you can construe Xenophon as well as Cicero?"

"Yes, sir. But not very well, sir."

"Better if you knew something about sines and cosines. Better if you could foresee a squall in time to get t'gallants in. We have no use for ablative absolutes in the Navy."

"Yes, sir," said Hornblower.

He had only just learned what a topgallant was, but he could have told his captain that his mathematical studies were far advanced. He refrained nevertheless; his instincts combined with his recent experiences urged him not to volunteer unsolicited information.

"Well, obey orders, learn your duties, and no harm can come to you. That will do."

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower, retiring.

But the captain's last words to him seemed to be contradicted immediately. Harm began to come to Hornblower from that day forth, despite his obedience to orders and diligent study of his duties, and it stemmed from the arrival in the midshipmen's berth of John Simpson as senior warrant officer. Hornblower was sitting at mess with his colleagues when he first saw him — a brawny good-looking man in his thirties, who came in and stood looking at them just as Hornblower had stood a few days before.

"Hullo!" said somebody, not very cordially.

"Cleveland, my bold friend," said the newcomer, "come out from that seat. I am going to resume my place at the head of the table."

"But —"

"Come out, I said," snapped Simpson.

Cleveland moved along with some show of reluctance, and Simpson took his place, and glowered round the table in reply to the curious glances with which everyone regarded him.

"Yes, my sweet brother officers," he said, "I am back in the bosom of the family. And I am not surprised that nobody is pleased. You will all be less pleased by the time I am done with you, I may add."

"But your commission — ?" asked somebody, greatly daring.

"My commission?" Simpson leaned forward and tapped the table, staring down the inquisitive people on either side of it. "I'll answer that question this once, and the man who asks it again will wish he had never been born. A board of turnip-headed captains has refused me my commission. It decided that my mathematical knowledge was insufficient to make me a reliable navigator. And so Acting-Lieutenant Simpson is once again Mr Midshipman Simpson, at your service. At your service. And may the Lord have mercy on your souls."

It did not seem, as the days went by, that the Lord had any mercy at all, for with Simpson's return life in the midshipmen's berth ceased to be one of passive unhappiness and became one of active misery. Simpson had apparently always been an ingenious tyrant, but now, embittered and humiliated by his failure to pass his examination for his commission, he was a worse tyrant, and his ingenuity had multiplied itself. He may have been weak in mathematics, but he was diabolically clever at making other people's lives a burden to them. As senior officer in the mess he had wide official powers; as a man with a blistering tongue and a morbid sense of mischief he would have been powerful anyway, even if the *Justinian* had possessed an alert and masterful first lieutenant to keep him in check while Mr Clay was neither. Twice midshipmen rebelled against Simpson's arbitrary authority, and each time Simpson thrashed the rebel, pounding him into insensibility with his huge fists, for Simpson would have made a successful prizefighter. Each time Simpson was left unmarked; each time his opponent's blackened eyes and swollen lips called down the penalty of mast heading and extra duty from the indignant first lieutenant. The mess seethed with impotent rage. Even the toadies and lickspittles among the midshipmen — and naturally there were several — hated the tyrant.

Significantly, it was not his ordinary exactions which roused the greatest resentment — his levying toll upon their sea chests for clean shirts for himself, his appropriation of the best cuts of the meat served, nor even his taking their coveted issues of spirits. These things could be excused as understandable, the sort of thing they would do themselves if they had the power. But he displayed a whimsical arbitrariness which reminded Hornblower, with his classical education, of the freaks of the Roman emperors. He forced Cleveland to shave the whiskers which were his inordinate pride; he imposed upon Hether the duty of waking up Mackenzie every half hour, day and night, so that neither of them was able to sleep — and there were toadies ready to tell him if Hether ever failed in his task. Early enough he had discovered Hornblower's most vulnerable points, as he had with everyone else. He knew of Hornblower's shyness; at first it was amusing to compel Hornblower to recite verses from Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' to the assembled mess. The toadies could compel Hornblower to do it; Simpson would lay his dirk-scabbard on the table in front of him with a significant glance, and the toadies would close round Hornblower, who knew that any hesitation on his part would mean that he would be stretched across the table and the dirk-scabbard applied; the flat of the scabbard was painful, the edge of it was agonizing, but the pain was nothing to the utter humiliation of it all. And the torment grew worse when Simpson instituted what he aptly called 'The Proceedings of the Inquisition' when Hornblower was submitted to a slow and methodical questioning regarding his homelife and his boyhood. Every question had to be answered, on pain of the dirk-scabbard; Hornblower could fence and prevaricate, but he had to answer and sooner or later the relentless questioning would draw from him some simple admission which would rouse a peal of laughter from his audience. Heaven knows that in Hornblower's lonely childhood there was nothing to be ashamed of, but boys are odd creatures, especially reticent ones like Hornblower, and are ashamed of things no one else would think twice about. The ordeal would leave him weak and sick; someone less solemn might have clowned his way out of his difficulties and even into popular favour, but Hornblower at seventeen was too ponderous a person to clown. He had to endure the persecution, experiencing all the black misery which only a seventeen-year-old can experience; he never wept in public but at night more than once he shed the bitter tears of seventeen. He often thought about death; he often even thought about desertion; but he realized that desertion would lead to something worse than death, and then his mind would revert to death, savouring the thought of suicide. He came to long for death, friendless as he was, and brutally ill-treated, and lonely as only a boy among men — and a very reserved boy — can be. More and more he

thought about ending it all the easiest way, hugging the secret thought of it to his friendless bosom. If the ship had only been at sea everyone would have been kept busy enough to be out of mischief; even at anchor an energetic captain and first lieutenant would have kept all hands hard enough at work to obviate abuses, but it was Hornblower's hard luck that the *Justinian* lay at anchor all through that fatal January of 1794 under a sick captain and an inefficient first lieutenant. Even the activities which were at times enforced often worked to Hornblower's disadvantage. There was an occasion when Mr Bowles, the master, was holding a class in navigation for his mates and for the midshipmen, and the captain by bad luck happened by and glanced through the results of the problem the class had individually been set to solve. His illness made Keene a man of bitter tongue, and he cherished no liking for Simpson. He took a single glance at Simpson's paper, and chuckled sarcastically.

"Now let us all rejoice," he said, "the sources of the Nile have been discovered at last."

"Pardon, sir?" said Simpson.

"Your ship," said Keene, "as far as I can make out from your illiterate scrawl, Mr Simpson, is in Central Africa. Let us now see what other *terrae incognitae* have been opened up by the remaining intrepid explorers of this class."

It must have been Fate — it was dramatic enough to be art and not an occurrence in real life; Hornblower knew what was going to happen even as Keene picked up the other papers, including his. The result he had obtained was the only one which was correct; everybody else had added the correction for refraction instead of subtracting it, or had worked out the multiplication wrongly, or had, like Simpson, botched the whole problem.

"Congratulations, Mr Hornblower," said Keene. "You must be proud to be alone successful among this crowd of intellectual giants. You are half Mr Simpson's age, I fancy. If you double your attainments while you double your years, you will leave the rest of us far behind. Mr Bowles, you will be so good as to see that Mr Simpson pays even further attention to his mathematical studies."

With that he went off along the 'tweendecks with the halting step resulting from his mortal disease, and Hornblower sat with his eyes cast down, unable to meet the glances he knew were being darted at him, and knowing full well what they portended. He longed for death at that moment; he even prayed for it that night.

Within two days Hornblower found himself on shore, and under Simpson's command. The two midshipmen were in charge of a party of seamen, landed to act along with parties from the other ships of the squadron as a press gang. The West India convoy was due to arrive soon; most of the hands would be pressed as soon as the convoy reached the Channel, and the remainder, left to work the ships to an anchorage, would sneak ashore, using every device to conceal themselves and find a safe hiding-place. It was the business of the landing parties to cut off this retreat, to lay a cordon along the waterfront which would sweep them all up. But the convoy was not yet signalled, and all arrangements were completed.

"All is well with the world," said Simpson.

It was an unusual speech for him, but he was in unusual circumstances. He was sitting in the back room of the Lamb Inn, comfortable in one armchair with his legs on another, in front of a roaring fire and with a pot of beer with gin in it at his elbow.

"Here's to the West India convoy," said Simpson, taking a pull at his beer. "Long may it be delayed."

Simpson was actually genial, activity and beer and a warm fire thawing him into a good humour; it was not time yet for the liquor to make him quarrelsome; Hornblower sat on the other side of the fire and sipped beer without gin in it and studied him, marvelling that for the first time since he had boarded the *Justinian* his unhappiness should have ceased to be active but should have subsided into a dull misery like the dying away of the pain of a throbbing tooth.

"Give us a toast, boy," said Simpson.

"Confusion to Robespierre," said Hornblower lamely.

The door opened and two more officers came in, one a midshipman while the other wore the single epaulette of a lieutenant — it was Chalk of the *Goliath*, the officer in general charge of the press gangs sent ashore. Even Simpson made room for his superior rank before the fire.

"The convoy is still not signalled," announced Chalk. And then he eyed Hornblower keenly. "I don't think I have

the pleasure of your acquaintance."

"Mr Hornblower — Lieutenant Chalk," introduced Simpson. "Mr Hornblower is distinguished as the midshipman who was seasick in Spithead."

Hornblower tried not to writhe as Simpson tied that label on him. He imagined that Chalk was merely being polite when he changed the subject.

"Hey, potman! Will you gentlemen join me in a glass? We have a long wait before us, I fear. Your men are all properly posted, Mr Simpson?"

"Yes, sir."

Chalk was an active man. He paced about the room, stared out of the window at the rain, presented his midshipman — Caldwell — to the other two when the drinks arrived, and obviously fretted at his enforced inactivity.

"A game of cards to pass the time?" he suggested. "Excellent! Hey, potman! Cards and a table and another light."

The table was set before the fire, the chairs arranged, the cards brought in.

"What game shall it be?" asked Chalk, looking round.

He was a lieutenant among three midshipmen, and any suggestion of his was likely to carry a good deal of weight; the other three naturally waited to hear what he had to say.

"Vingt-et-un? That is a game for the half-witted. Loo? That is a game for the wealthier half-witted. But whist, now? That would give us all scope for the exercise of our poor talents. Caldwell, there, is acquainted with the rudiments of the game, I know. Mr Simpson?"

A man like Simpson, with a blind mathematical spot, was not likely to be a good whist player, but he was not likely to know he was a bad one.

"As you wish, sir," said Simpson. He enjoyed gambling, and one game was as good as another for that purpose to his mind.

"Mr Hornblower?"

"With pleasure, sir."

That was more nearly true than most conventional replies. Hornblower had learned his whist in a good school; ever since the death of his mother he had made a fourth with his father and the parson and the parson's wife. The game was already something of a passion with him. He revelled in the nice calculation of chances, in the varying demands it made upon his boldness or caution. There was even enough warmth in his acceptance to attract a second glance from Chalk, who — a good card player himself — at once detected a fellow spirit.

"Excellent!" he said again. "Then we may as well cut at once for places and partners. What shall be the stakes, gentlemen? A shilling a trick and a guinea on the rub, or is that too great? No? Then we are agreed."

For some time the game proceeded quietly. Hornblower cut first Simpson and then Caldwell as his partner. Only a couple of hands were necessary to show up Simpson as a hopeless whist player, the kind who would always lead an ace when he had one, or a singleton when he had four trumps, but he and Hornblower won the first rubber thanks to overwhelming card strength. But Simpson lost the next in partnership with Chalk, cut Chalk again as partner, and lost again. He gloated over good hands and sighed over poor ones; clearly he was one of those unenlightened people who looked upon whist as a social function, or as a mere crude means, like throwing dice, of arbitrarily transferring money. He never thought of the game either as a sacred rite or as an intellectual exercise. Moreover, as his losses grew, and as the potman came and went with liquor, he grew restless, and his face was flushed with more than the heat of the fire. He was both a bad loser and a bad drinker, and even Chalk's punctilious good manners were sufficiently strained so that he displayed a hint of relief when the next cut gave him Hornblower as a partner. They won the rubber easily, and another guinea and several shillings were transferred to Hornblower's lean purse; he was now the only winner, and Simpson was the heaviest loser. Hornblower was lost in the pleasure of playing the game again; the only attention he paid to Simpson's writhings and muttered objurgations was to regard them as a distracting nuisance; he even forgot to think of them as danger signals. Momentarily he was oblivious to the fact that he might pay for his present success by future torment.

Once more they cut, and he found himself Chalk's partner again. Two good hands gave them the first game. Then twice, to Simpson's unconcealed triumph, Simpson and Caldwell made a small score, approaching game,

and in the next hand an overbold finesse by Hornblower left him and Chalk with the odd trick when their score should have been two tricks greater — Simpson laid his knave on Hornblower's ten with a grin of delight which turned to dismay when he found that he and Caldwell had still only made six tricks; he counted them a second time with annoyance. Hornblower dealt and turned the trump, and Simpson led — an ace as usual, assuring Hornblower of his re-entry. He had a string of trumps and a good suit of clubs which a single lead might establish. Simpson glanced muttering at his hand; it was extraordinary that he still had not realized the simple truth that the lead of an ace involved leading a second time with the problem no clearer. He made up his mind at last and led again; Hornblower's king took the trick and he instantly led his knave of trumps. To his delight it took the trick; he led again and Chalk's queen gave them another trick. Chalk laid down the ace of trumps and Simpson with a curse played the king. Chalk led clubs of which Hornblower had five to the king queen — it was significant that Chalk should lead them, as it could not be a singleton lead when Hornblower held the remaining trumps. Hornblower's queen took the trick; Caldwell must hold the ace, unless Chalk did. Hornblower led a small one; everyone followed suit, Chalk playing the knave, and Caldwell played the ace. Eight clubs had been played, and Hornblower had three more headed by the king and ten — three certain tricks, with the last trumps as re-entries. Caldwell played the queen of diamonds, Hornblower played his singleton, and Chalk produced the ace.

"The rest are mine," said Hornblower, laying down his cards.

"What do you mean?" said Simpson, with the king of diamonds in his hand.

"Five tricks," said Chalk briskly. "Game and rubber."

"But don't I take another?" persisted Simpson.

"I trump a lead of diamonds or hearts and make three more clubs," explained Hornblower. To him the situation was as simple as two and two, a most ordinary finish to a hand; it was hard for him to realize that foggy-minded players like Simpson could find difficulty in keeping tally of fifty-two cards. Simpson flung down his hand.

"You know too much about the game," he said. "You know the backs of the cards as well as the fronts." Hornblower gulped. He recognized that this could be a decisive moment if he chose. A second before he had merely been playing cards, and enjoying himself. Now he was faced with an issue of life or death. A torrent of thought streamed through his mind. Despite the comfort of his present surroundings he remembered acutely the hideous misery of the life in the *Justinian* to which he must return. This was an opportunity to end that misery one way or the other. He remembered how he had contemplated killing himself, and into the back of his mind stole the germ of the plan upon which he was going to act. His decision crystallized.

"That is an insulting remark, Mr Simpson," he said. He looked round and met the eyes of Chalk and Caldwell, who were suddenly grave; Simpson was still merely stupid. "For that I shall have to ask satisfaction."

"Satisfaction?" said Chalk hastily. "Come, come. Mr Simpson had a momentary loss of temper. I am sure he will explain."

"I have been accused of cheating at cards," said Hornblower. "That is a hard thing to explain away."

He was trying to behave like a grown man; more than that, he was trying to act like a man consumed with indignation, while actually there was no indignation within him over the point in dispute, for he understood too well the muddled state of mind which had led Simpson to say what he did. But the opportunity had presented itself, he had determined to avail himself of it, and now what he had to do was to play the part convincingly of the man who has received a mortal insult.

"The wine was in and the wit was out," said Chalk, still determined on keeping the peace. "Mr Simpson was speaking in jest, I am sure. Let's call for another bottle and drink it in friendship."

"With pleasure," said Hornblower, fumbling for the words which would set the dispute beyond reconciliation.

"If Mr Simpson will beg my pardon at once before you two gentlemen, and admit that he spoke without justification and in a manner no gentleman would employ."

He turned and met Simpson's eye with defiance as he spoke, metaphorically waving a red rag before the bull, who charged with gratifying fury.

"Apologize to *you*, you little whippersnapper!" exploded Simpson, alcohol and outraged dignity speaking simultaneously. "Never this side of Hell."

"You hear that, gentlemen?" said Hornblower. "I have been insulted and Mr Simpson refuses to apologize

while insulting me further. There is only one way now in which satisfaction can be given."

For the next two days, until the West India convoy came in, Hornblower and Simpson, under Chalk's orders, lived the curious life of two duellists forced into each other's society before the affair of honour. Hornblower was careful — as he would have been in any case — to obey every order given him, and Simpson gave them with a certain amount of self-consciousness and awkwardness. It was during those two days that Hornblower elaborated on his original idea. Pacing through the dockyards with his patrol of seamen at his heels he had plenty of time to think the matter over. Viewed coldly — and a boy of seventeen in a mood of black despair can be objective enough on occasions — it was as simple as the calculations of the chances in a problem at whist. Nothing could be worse than his life in the *Justinian*, not even (as he had thought already) death itself. Here was an easy death open to him, with the additional attraction that there was a chance of Simpson dying instead. It was at that moment that Hornblower advanced his idea one step further — a new development, startling even to him, bringing him to a halt so that the patrol behind him bumped into him before they could stop.

"Beg your pardon, sir," said the petty officer.

"No matter," said Hornblower, deep in his thoughts.

He first brought forward his suggestion in conversation with Preston and Danvers, the two master's mates whom he asked to be his seconds as soon as he returned to the *Justinian*.

"We'll act for you, of course," said Preston, looking dubiously at the weedy youth when he made his request.

"How do you want to fight him? As the aggrieved party you have the choice of weapons."

"I've been thinking about it ever since he insulted me," said Hornblower temporizing. It was not easy to come out with his idea in bald words, after all.

"Have you any skill with the small-sword?" asked Danvers.

"No," said Hornblower. Truth to tell, he had never even handled one.

"Then it had better be pistols," said Preston.

"Simpson is probably a good shot," said Danvers. "I wouldn't care to stand up before him myself."

"Easy now," said Preston hastily. "Don't dishearten the man."

"I'm not disheartened," said Hornblower, "I was thinking the same thing myself."

"You're cool enough about it, then," marvelled Danvers.

Hornblower shrugged.

"Maybe I am. I hardly care. But I've thought that we might make the chances more even."

"How?"

"We could make them exactly even," said Hornblower, taking the plunge. "Have two pistols, one loaded and the other empty. Simpson and I would take our choice without knowing which was which. Then we stand within a yard of each other, and at the word we fire."

"My God!" said Danvers.

"I don't think that would be legal," said Preston. "It would mean one of you would be killed for certain."

"Killing is the object of duelling," said Hornblower. "If the conditions aren't unfair I don't think any objection can be raised."

"But would you carry it out to the end?" marvelled Danvers.

"Mr Danvers —" began Hornblower; but Preston interfered.

"We don't want another duel on our hands," he said. "Danvers only meant he wouldn't care to do it himself. We'll discuss it with Cleveland and Hether, and see what they say."

Within an hour the proposed conditions of the duel were known to everyone in the ship. Perhaps it was to Simpson's disadvantage that he had no real friend in the ship, for Cleveland and Hether, his seconds, were not disposed to take too firm a stand regarding the conditions of the duel, and agreed to the terms with only a show of reluctance. The tyrant of the midshipmen's berth was paying the penalty for his tyranny. There was some cynical amusement shown by some of the officers; some of both officers and men eyed Hornblower and Simpson with the curiosity that the prospect of death excites in some minds, as if the two destined opponents were men condemned to the gallows. At noon Lieutenant Masters sent for Hornblower.

"The captain has ordered me to make inquiry into this duel, Mr Hornblower," he said. "I am instructed to use

my best endeavours to compose the quarrel."

"Yes, sir."

"Why insist on this satisfaction, Mr Hornblower? I understand there were a few hasty words over wine and cards."

"Mr Simpson accused me of cheating, sir, before witnesses who were not officers of this ship."

That was the point. The witnesses were not members of the ship's company. If Hornblower had chosen to disregard Simpson's words as the ramblings of a drunken ill-tempered man, they might have passed unnoticed. But as he had taken the stand he did, there could be no hushing it up now, and Hornblower knew it.

"Even so, there can be satisfaction without a duel, Mr Hornblower."

"If Mr Simpson will make me a full apology before the same gentlemen, I would be satisfied, sir."

Simpson was no coward. He would die rather than submit to such a formal humiliation.

"I see. Now I understand you are insisting on rather unusual conditions for the duel?"

"There are precedents for it, sir. As the insulted party I can choose any conditions which are not unfair."

"You sound like a sea lawyer to me, Mr Hornblower."

The hint was sufficient to tell Hornblower that he had verged upon being too glib, and he resolved in future to bridle his tongue. He stood silent and waited for Masters to resume the conversation.

"You are determined, then, Mr Hornblower, to continue with this murderous business?"

"Yes, sir."

"The captain has given me further orders to attend the duel in person, because of the strange conditions on which you insist. I must inform you that I shall request the seconds to arrange for that."

"Yes, sir."

"Very good, then, Mr Hornblower."

Masters looked at Hornblower as he dismissed him even more keenly than he had done when Hornblower first came on board. He was looking for signs of weakness or wavering — indeed, he was looking for any signs of human feeling at all — but he could detect none. Hornblower had reached a decision, he had weighed all the pros and cons, and his logical mind told him that having decided in cold blood upon a course of action it would be folly to allow himself to be influenced subsequently by untrustworthy emotions. The conditions of the duel on which he was insisting were mathematically advantageous. If he had once considered with favour escaping from Simpson's persecution by a voluntary death it was surely a gain to take an even chance of escaping from it without dying. Similarly, if Simpson were (as he almost certainly was) a better swordsman and a better pistol shot than him, the even chance was again mathematically advantageous. There was nothing to regret about his recent actions.

All very well; mathematically the conclusions were irrefutable, but Hornblower was surprised to find that mathematics were not everything. Repeatedly during that dreary afternoon and evening Hornblower found himself suddenly gulping with anxiety as the realization came to him afresh that to-morrow morning he would be risking his life on the spin of a coin. One chance out of two and he would be dead, his consciousness at an end, his flesh cold, and the world, almost unbelievably, would be going on without him. The thought sent a shiver through him despite himself. And he had plenty of time for these reflections, for the convention that forbade him from encountering his destined opponent before the moment of the duel kept him necessarily in isolation, as far as isolation could be found on the crowded decks of the *Justinian*. He slung his hammock that night in a depressed mood, feeling unnaturally tired; and he undressed in the clammy, stuffy dampness of the 'tweendecks feeling more than usually cold. He hugged the blankets round himself, yearning to relax in their warmth, but relaxation would not come. Time after time as he began to drift off to sleep he woke again tense and anxious, full of thoughts of the morrow. He turned over wearily a dozen times, hearing the ship's bell ring out each half hour, feeling a growing contempt at his cowardice. He told himself in the end that it was as well that his fate to-morrow depended upon pure chance, for if he had to rely upon steadiness of hand and eye he would be dead for certain after a night like this.

That conclusion presumably helped him to go to sleep for the last hour or two of the night, for he awoke with a start to find Danvers shaking him.

"Five bells," said Danvers. "Dawn in an hour. Rise and shine!"

Hornblower slid out of his hammock and stood in his shirt; the 'tweendecks was nearly dark and Danvers was almost invisible.

"Number One's letting us have the second cutter," said Danvers. "Masters and Simpson and that lot are going first in the launch. Here's Preston."

Another shadowy figure loomed up in the darkness.

"Hellish cold," said Preston. "The devil of a morning to turn out. Nelson, where's that tea?"

The mess attendant came with it as Hornblower was hauling on his trousers. It maddened Hornblower that he shivered enough in the cold for the cup to clatter in the saucer as he took it. But the tea was grateful, and Hornblower drank it eagerly.

"Give me another cup," he said, and was proud of himself that he could think about tea at that moment. It was still dark as they went down into the cutter.

"Shove off," said the coxswain, and the boat pushed off from the ship's side. There was a keen cold wind blowing which filled the dipping lug as the cutter headed for the twin lights that marked the jetty.

"I ordered a hackney coach at the George to be waiting for us," said Danvers. "Let's hope it is."

It was there, with the driver sufficiently sober to control his horse moderately well despite his overnight potations. Danvers produced a pocket flask as they settled themselves in with their feet in the straw.

"Take a sip, Hornblower?" he asked, proffering it. "There's no special need for a steady hand this morning."

"No thank you," said Hornblower. His empty stomach revolted at the idea of pouring spirits into it.

"The others will be there before us," commented Preston. "I saw the quarter boat heading back just before we reached the jetty."

The etiquette of the duel demanded that the two opponents should reach the ground separately; but only one boat would be necessary for the return.

"The sawbones is with them," said Danvers. "Though God knows what use he thinks he'll be to-day."

He sniggered, and with overlate politeness tried to cut his snigger off short.

"How are you feeling, Hornblower?" asked Preston.

"Well enough," said Hornblower, forbearing to add that he only felt well enough while this kind of conversation was not being carried on.

The hackney coach levelled itself off as it came over the crest of the hill, and stopped beside the common.

Another coach stood there waiting, its single candle-lamp burning yellow in the growing dawn.

"There they are," said Preston; the faint light revealed a shadowy group standing on frosty turf among the gorse bushes.

Hornblower, as they approached, caught a glimpse of Simpson's face as he stood a little detached from the others. It was pale, and Hornblower noticed that at that moment he swallowed nervously, just as he himself was doing. Masters came towards them, shooting his usual keen inquisitive look at Hornblower as they came together.

"This is the moment," he said, "for this quarrel to be composed. This country is at war. I hope, Mr Hornblower, that you can be persuaded to save a life for the King's service by not pressing this matter."

Hornblower looked across at Simpson, while Danvers answered for him.

"Has Mr Simpson offered the proper redress?" asked Danvers.

"Mr Simpson is willing to acknowledge that he wishes the incident had never taken place."

"That is an unsatisfactory form," said Danvers. "It does not include an apology, and you must agree that an apology is necessary, sir."

"What does your principal say?" persisted Masters.

"It is not for any principal to speak in these circumstances," said Danvers, with a glance at Hornblower, who nodded. All this was as inevitable as the ride in the hangman's cart, and as hideous. There could be no going back now; Hornblower had never thought for one moment that Simpson would apologize, and without an apology the affair must be carried to a bloody conclusion. An even chance that he did not have five minutes longer to live.

"You are determined, then, gentlemen," said Masters. "I shall have to state that fact in my report."

"We are determined," said Preston.

"Then there is nothing for it but to allow this deplorable affair to proceed. I left the pistols in the charge of

Doctor Hepplewhite."

He turned and led them towards the other group — Simpson with Hether and Cleveland, and Doctor Hepplewhite standing with a pistol held by the muzzle in each hand. He was a bulky man with the red face of a persistent drinker; he was actually grinning a spirituous grin at that moment, rocking a little on his feet.

"Are the young fools set in their folly?" he asked; but everyone very properly ignored him as having no business to ask such a question at such a moment.

"Now," said Masters. "Here are the pistols, both primed, as you see, but one loaded and the other unloaded, in accordance with the conditions. I have here a guinea which I propose to spin to decide the allocation of the weapons. Now, gentlemen, shall the spin give your principals one pistol each irrevocably — for instance, if the coin shows heads shall Mr Simpson have this one — or shall the winner of the spin have choice of weapons? It is my design to eliminate all possibility of collusion as far as possible."

Hether and Cleveland and Danvers and Preston exchanged dubious glances.

"Let the winner of the spin choose," said Preston at length.

"Very well, gentlemen. Please call, Mr Hornblower."

"Tails!" said Hornblower as the gold piece spun in the air.

Masters caught it and clapped a hand over it.

"Tails it is," said Masters, lifting his hand and revealing the coin to the grouped seconds. "Please make your choice."

Hepplewhite held out the two pistols to him, death in one hand and life in the other. It was a grim moment. There was only pure chance to direct him; it called for a little effort to force his hand out.

"I'll have this one," he said; as he touched it the weapon seemed icy cold.

"Then now I have done what was required of me," said Masters. "The rest is for you gentlemen to carry out."

"Take this one, Simpson," said Hepplewhite. "And be careful how you handle yours, Mr Hornblower. You're a public danger."

The man was still grinning, gloating over the fact that someone else was in mortal danger while he himself was in none. Simpson took the pistol Hepplewhite offered him and settled it into his hand; once more his eyes met Hornblower's, but there was neither recognition nor expression in them.

"There are no distances to step out," Danvers was saying. "One spot's as good as another. It's level enough here."

"Very good," said Hether. "Will you stand here, Mr Simpson?"

Preston beckoned to Hornblower, who walked over. It was not easy to appear brisk and unconcerned. Preston took him by the arm and stood him up in front of Simpson, almost breast to breast — close enough to smell the alcohol on his breath.

"For the last time, gentlemen," said Masters loudly. "Cannot you be reconciled?"

There was no answer from anybody, only deep silence, during which it seemed to Hornblower that the frantic beating of his heart must be clearly audible. The silence was broken by an exclamation from Hether.

"We haven't settled who's to give the word!" he said. "Who's going to?"

"Let's ask Mr Masters to give it," said Danvers.

Hornblower did not look round. He was looking steadfastly at the grey sky past Simpson's right ear — somehow he could not look him in the face, and he had no idea where Simpson was looking. The end of the world as he knew it was close to him — soon there might be a bullet through his heart.

"I will do it if you are agreed, gentlemen," he heard Masters say.

The grey sky was featureless; for this last look on the world he might as well have been blindfolded. Masters raised his voice again.

"I will say 'one, two, three, fire'," he announced, "with those intervals. At the last word, gentlemen, you can fire as you will. Are you ready?"

"Yes," came Simpson's voice, almost in Hornblower's ear, it seemed.

"Yes," said Hornblower. He could hear the strain in his own voice.

"One," said Masters, and Hornblower felt at that moment the muzzle of Simpson's pistol against his left ribs, and he raised his own.

It was in that second that he decided he could not kill Simpson even if it were in his power, and he went on

lifting his pistol, forcing himself to look to see that it was pressed against the point of Simpson's shoulder. A slight wound would suffice.

"Two," said Masters. "Three. Fire!"

Hornblower pulled his trigger. There was a click and a spurt of smoke from the lock of his pistol. The priming had gone off but no more — his was the unloaded weapon, and he knew what it was to die. A tenth of a second later there was a click and spurt of smoke from Simpson's pistol against his heart. Stiff and still they both stood, slow to realize what had happened.

"A miss-fire, by God!" said Danvers.

The seconds crowded round them.

"Give me those pistols!" said Masters, taking them from the weak hands that held them. "The loaded one might be hanging fire, and we don't want it to go off now."

"Which was the loaded one?" asked Hether, consumed with curiosity.

"That is something it is better not to know," answered Masters, changing the two pistols rapidly from hand to hand so as to confuse everyone.

"What about a second shot?" asked Danvers, and Masters looked up straight and inflexibly at him.

"There will be no second shot," he said. "Honour is completely satisfied. These two gentlemen have come through this ordeal extremely well. No one can now think little of Mr Simpson if he expresses his regret for the occurrence, and no one can think little of Mr Hornblower if he accepts that statement in reparation."

Hepplewhite burst into a roar of laughter.

"Your faces!" he boomed, slapping his thigh. "You ought to see how you all look! Solemn as cows!"

"Mr Hepplewhite," said Masters, "your behaviour is indecorous. Gentlemen, our coaches are waiting on the road, the cutter is at the jetty. And I think all of us would be the better for some breakfast; including Mr Hepplewhite."

That should have been the end of the incident. The excited talk which had gone round the anchored squadron about the unusual duel died away in time, although everyone knew Hornblower's name now, and not as the midshipman who was seasick in Spithead but as the man who was willing to take an even chance in cold blood. But in the *Justinian* herself there was other talk; whispers which were circulated forward and aft.

"Mr Hornblower has requested permission to speak to you, sir," said Mr Clay, the first lieutenant, one morning while making his report to the captain.

"Oh, send him in when you go out," said Keene, and sighed.

Ten minutes later a knock on his cabin door ushered in a very angry young man.

"Sir!" began Hornblower.

"I can guess what you're going to say," said Keene.

"Those pistols in the duel I fought with Simpson were not loaded!"

"Hepplewhite blabbed, I suppose," said Keene.

"And it was by your orders, I understand, sir."

"You are quite correct. I gave those orders to Mr Masters."

"It was an unwarrantable liberty, sir!"

That was what Hornblower meant to say, but he stumbled without dignity over the polysyllables.

"Possibly it was," said Keene patiently, rearranging, as always, the papers on his desk.

The calmness of the admission disconcerted Hornblower, who could only splutter for the next few moments.

"I saved a life for the King's service," went on Keene, when the spluttering died away. "A young life. No one has suffered any harm. On the other hand, both you and Simpson have had your courage amply proved. You both know you can stand fire now, and so does every one else."

"You have touched my personal honour, sir," said Hornblower, bringing out one of his rehearsed speeches, "for that there can only be one remedy."

"Restrain yourself, please, Mr Hornblower." Keene shifted himself in his chair with a wince of pain as he prepared to make a speech. "I must remind you of one salutary regulation of the Navy, to the effect that no junior officer can challenge his superior to a duel. The reasons for it are obvious — otherwise promotion would be too easy. The mere issuing of a challenge by a junior to a senior is a court-martial offence, Mr Hornblower."

"Oh!" said Hornblower feebly.

"Now here is some gratuitous advice," went on Keene. "You have fought one duel and emerged with honour. That is good. Never fight another — that is better. Some people, oddly enough, acquire a taste for duelling, as a tiger acquires a taste for blood. They are never good officers, and never popular ones either."

It was then that Hornblower realized that a great part of the keen excitement with which he had entered the captain's cabin was due to anticipation of the giving of the challenge. There could be a morbid desire for danger — and a morbid desire to occupy momentarily the centre of the stage. Keene was waiting for him to speak, and it was hard to say anything.

"I understand, sir," he said at last.

Keene shifted in his chair again.

"There is another matter I wanted to take up with you, Mr Hornblower. Captain Pellew of the *Indefatigable* has room for another midshipman. Captain Pellew is partial to a game of whist, and has no good fourth on board. He and I have agreed to consider favourably your application for a transfer should you care to make one. I don't have to point out that any ambitious young officer would jump at the chance of serving in a frigate."

"A frigate!" said Hornblower.

Everybody knew of Pellew's reputation and success. Distinction, promotion, prize money — an officer under Pellew's command could hope for all these. Competition for nomination to the *Indefatigable* must be intense, and this was the chance of a lifetime. Hornblower was on the point of making a glad acceptance, when further considerations restrained him.

"That is very good of you, sir," he said. "I do not know how to thank you. But you accepted me as a midshipman here, and of course I must stay with you."

The drawn, apprehensive face relaxed into a smile.

"Not many men would have said that," said Keene. "But I am going to insist on your accepting the offer. I shall not live very much longer to appreciate your loyalty. And this ship is not the place for you — this ship with her useless captain — don't interrupt me — and her worn-out first lieutenant and her old midshipmen. You should be where there may be speedy opportunities of advancement. I have the good of the service in mind, Mr Hornblower, when I suggest you accept Captain Pellew's invitation — and it might be less disturbing for me if you did."

"Aye aye, sir," said Hornblower.

CHAPTER TWO — THE CARGO OF RICE

The wolf was in among the sheep. The tossing grey water of the Bay of Biscay was dotted with white sails as far as the eye could see, and although a strong breeze was blowing every vessel was under perilously heavy canvas. Every ship but one was trying to escape; the exception was His Majesty's frigate *Indefatigable*, Captain Sir Edward Pellew. Farther out in the Atlantic, hundreds of miles away, a great battle was being fought, where the ships of the line were thrashing out the question as to whether England or France should wield the weapon of sea power; here in the Bay the convoy which the French ships were intended to escort was exposed to the attack of a ship of prey at liberty to capture any ship she could overhaul. She had come surging up from leeward, cutting off all chance of escape in that direction, and the clumsy merchant ships were forced to beat to windward; they were all filled with the food which revolutionary France (her economy disordered by the convulsion through which she was passing) was awaiting so anxiously, and their crews were all anxious to escape confinement in an English prison. Ship after ship was overhauled; a shot or two, and the newfangled tricolour came fluttering down from the gaff, and a prize-crew was hurriedly sent on board to conduct the captive to an English port while the frigate dashed after fresh prey.

On the quarterdeck of the *Indefatigable* Pellew fumed over each necessary delay. The convoy, each ship as close to the wind as she would lie, and under all the sail she could carry, was slowly scattering, spreading farther and farther with the passing minutes, and some of these would find safety in mere dispersion if any

time was wasted. Pellew did not wait to pick up his boat; at each surrender he merely ordered away an officer and an armed guard, and the moment the prize-crew was on its way he filled his main-topsail again and hurried off after the next victim. The brig they were pursuing at the moment was slow to surrender. The long nine-pounders in the *Indefatigable's* bows bellowed out more than once; on that heaving sea it was not so easy to aim accurately and the brig continued on her course hoping for some miracle to save her.

"Very well," snapped Pellew. "He has asked for it. Let him have it."

The gunlayers at the bow chasers changed their point of aim, firing at the ship instead of across her bows.

"Not into the hull, damn it," shouted Pellew — one shot had struck the brig perilously close to her waterline.

"Cripple her."

The next shot by luck or by judgement was given better elevation. The slings of the foretopsail yard were shot away, the reefed sail came down, the yard hanging lopsidedly, and the brig came up into the wind for the *Indefatigable* to heave to close beside her, her broadside ready to fire into her. Under that threat her flag came down.

"What brig's that?" shouted Pellew through his megaphone.

"*Marie Galante* of Bordeaux," translated the officer beside Pellew as the French captain made reply.

"Twenty-four days out from New Orleans with rice."

"Rice!" said Pellew. "That'll sell for a pretty penny when we get her home. Two hundred tons, I should say.

Twelve of a crew at most. She'll need a prize-crew of four, a midshipman's command."

He looked round him as though for inspiration before giving his next order.

"Mr Hornblower!"

"Sir!"

"Take four men of the cutter's crew and board that brig. Mr Soames will give you our position. Take her into any English port you can make, and report there for orders."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower was at his station at the starboard quarterdeck carronades — which was perhaps how he had caught Pellew's eye — his dirk at his side and a pistol in his belt. It was a moment for fast thinking, for anyone could see Pellew's impatience. With the *Indefatigable* cleared for action, his sea chest would be part of the surgeon's operating table down below, so that there was no chance of getting anything out of it. He would have to leave just as he was. The cutter was even now clawing up to a position on the *Indefatigable's* quarter, so he ran to the ship's side and hailed her, trying to make his voice sound as big and as manly as he could, and at the word of the lieutenant in command she turned her bows in towards the frigate.

"Here's our latitude and longitude, Mr Hornblower," said Soames, the master, handing a scrap of paper to him.

"Thank you," said Hornblower, shoving it into his pocket.

He scrambled awkwardly into the mizzen-chains and looked down into the cutter. Ship and boat were pitching together, almost bows on to the sea, and the distance between them looked appallingly great; the bearded seaman standing in the bows could only just reach up to the chains with his long boat-hook. Hornblower hesitated for a long second; he knew he was ungainly and awkward — book learning was of no use when it came to jumping into a boat — but he had to make the leap, for Pellew was fuming behind him and the eyes of the boat's crew and of the whole ship's company were on him. Better to jump and hurt himself, better to jump and make an exhibition of himself, than to delay the ship. Waiting was certain failure, while he still had a choice if he jumped. Perhaps at a word from Pellew the *Indefatigable's* helmsman allowed the ship's head to fall off from the sea a little. A somewhat diagonal wave lifted the *Indefatigable's* stern and then passed on, so that the cutter's bows rose as the ship's stern sank a trifle. Hornblower braced himself and leaped. His feet reached the gunwale and he tottered there for one indescribable second. A seaman grabbed the breast of his jacket and he fell forward rather than backward. Not even the stout arm of the seaman, fully extended, could hold him up, and he pitched headforemost, legs in the air, upon the hands on the second thwart. He cannoned onto their bodies, knocking the breath out of his own against their muscular shoulders, and finally struggled into an upright position.

"I'm sorry," he gasped to the men who had broken his fall.

"Never you mind, sir," said the nearest one, a real tarry sailor, tattooed and pigtailed. "You're only a featherweight."

The lieutenant in command was looking at him from the sternsheets.

"Would you go to the brig, please, sir?" he asked, and the lieutenant bawled an order and the cutter swung round as Hornblower made his way aft.

It was a pleasant surprise not to be received with the broad grins of tolerantly concealed amusement.

Boarding a small boat from a big frigate in even a moderate sea was no easy matter; probably every man on board had arrived headfirst at some time or other, and it was not in the tradition of the service, as understood in the *Indefatigable*, to laugh at a man who did his best without shirking.

"Are you taking charge of the brig?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes, sir. The captain told me to take four of your men."

"They had better be topmen, then," said the lieutenant, casting his eyes aloft at the rigging of the brig. The foretopsail yard was hanging precariously, and the jib halliard had slacked off so that the sail was flapping thunderously in the wind. "Do you know these men, or shall I pick 'em for you?"

"I'd be obliged if you would, sir."

The lieutenant shouted four names, and four men replied.

"Keep 'em away from drink and they'll be all right," said the lieutenant. "Watch the French crew. They'll recapture the ship and have you in a French gaol before you can say 'Jack Robinson' if you don't."

"Aye aye, sir," said Hornblower.

The cutter surged alongside the brig, white water creaming between the two vessels. The tattooed sailor hastily concluded a bargain with another man on his thwart and pocketed a lump of tobacco — the men were leaving their possessions behind just like Hornblower — and sprang for the mainchains. Another man followed him, and they stood and waited while Hornblower with difficulty made his way forward along the plunging boat. He stood, balancing precariously, on the forward thwart. The main chains of the brig were far lower than the mizzen-chains of the *Indefatigable*, but this time he had to jump upwards. One of the seamen steadied him with an arm on his shoulder.

"Wait for it, sir," he said. "Get ready. Now jump, sir."

Hornblower hurled himself, all arms and legs, like a leaping frog, at the mainchains. His hands reached the shrouds, but his knee slipped off, and the brig, rolling, lowered him thigh deep into the sea as the shrouds slipped through his hands. But the waiting seamen grabbed his wrists and hauled him on board, and two more seamen followed him. He led the way onto the deck.

The first sight to meet his eyes was a man seated on the hatch cover, his head thrown back, holding to his mouth a bottle, the bottom pointing straight up to the sky. He was one of a large group all sitting round the hatch cover; there were more bottles in evidence; one was passed by one man to another as he looked, and as he approached a roll of the ship brought an empty bottle rolling past his toes to clatter into the scuppers. Another of the group, with white hair blowing in the wind, rose to welcome him, and stood for a moment with waving arms and rolling eyes, bracing himself as though to say something of immense importance and seeking earnestly for the right words to use.

"Goddam English," was what he finally said, and, having said it, he sat down with a bump on the hatch cover and from a seated position proceeded to lie down and compose himself to sleep with his head on his arms.

"They've made the best of their time, sir, by the Holy," said the seaman at Hornblower's elbow.

"Wish we were as happy," said another.

A case still a quarter full of bottles, each elaborately sealed, stood on the deck beside the hatch cover, and the seaman picked out a bottle to look at it curiously. Hornblower did not need to remember the lieutenant's warning; on his shore excursions with press gangs he had already had experience of the British seaman's tendency to drink. His boarding party would be as drunk as the Frenchmen in half an hour if he allowed it. A frightful mental picture of himself drifting in the Bay of Biscay with a disabled ship and a drunken crew rose in his mind and filled him with anxiety.

"Put that down," he ordered.

The urgency of the situation made his seventeen-year-old voice crack like a fourteen-year-old's, and the seaman hesitated, holding the bottle in his hand.

"Put it down, d'ye hear?" said Hornblower, desperate with worry. This was his first independent command; conditions were absolutely novel, and excitement brought out all the passion of his mercurial temperament,

while at the same time the more calculating part of his mind told him that if he were not obeyed now he never would be. His pistol was in his belt, and he put his hand on the butt, and it is conceivable that he would have drawn it and used it (if the priming had not got wet, he said to himself bitterly when he thought about the incident later on), but the seaman with one more glance at him put the bottle back into the case. The incident was closed, and it was time for the next step.

"Take these men forrard," he said, giving the obvious order. "Throw 'em into the forecastle."

"Aye aye, sir."

Most of the Frenchmen could still walk, but three were dragged by their collars, while the British herded the others before them.

"Come alongee," said one of the seamen. "Thisa waya."

He evidently believed a Frenchman would understand him better if he spoke like that. The Frenchman who had greeted their arrival now awakened and suddenly realizing he was being dragged forward, broke away and turned back to Hornblower.

"I officer," he said, pointing to himself. "I not go wit' zem."

"Take him away!" said Hornblower. In his tense condition he could not stop to debate trifles.

He dragged the case of bottles down to the ship's side and pitched them overboard two at a time — obviously it was wine of some special vintage which the Frenchmen had decided to drink before the English could get their hands on it, but that weighed not at all with Hornblower, for a British seaman could get drunk on vintage claret as easily as upon service rum. The task was finished before the last of the Frenchmen disappeared into the forecastle, and Hornblower had time to look about him. The strong breeze blew confusingly round his ears, and the ceaseless thunder of the flapping jib made it hard to think as he looked at the ruin aloft. Every sail was flat aback, the brig was moving jerkily, gathering sternway for a space before her untended rudder threw her round to spill the wind and bring her up again like a jibbing horse. His mathematical mind had already had plenty of experience with a well-handled ship, with the delicate adjustment between after sails and headsails. Here the balance had been disturbed, and Hornblower was at work on the problem of forces acting on plane surfaces when his men came trooping back to him. One thing at least was certain, and that was that the precariously hanging foretopsail yard would tear itself free to do all sorts of unforeseeable damage if it were tossed about much more. This ship must be properly hove to, and Hornblower could guess how to set about it, and he formulated the order in his mind just in time to avoid any appearance of hesitation.

"Brace the after yards to larboard," he said. "Man the braces, men."

They obeyed him, while he himself went gingerly to the wheel; he had served a few tricks as helmsman, learning his professional duties under Pellew's orders, but he did not feel happy about it. The spokes felt foreign to his fingers as he took hold; he spun the wheel experimentally but timidly. But it was easy. With the after yards braced round the brig rode more comfortably at once, and the spokes told their own story to his sensitive fingers as the ship became a thing of logical construction again. Hornblower's mind completed the solution of the problem of the effect of the rudder at the same time as his senses solved it empirically. The wheel could be safely lashed, he knew, in these conditions, and he slipped the becket over the spoke and stepped away from the wheel, with the *Marie Galante* riding comfortably and taking the seas on her starboard bow.

The seaman took his competence gratifyingly for granted, but Hornblower, looking at the tangle on the foremast, had not the remotest idea of how to deal with the next problem. He was not even sure about what was wrong. But the hands under his orders were seamen of vast experience, who must have dealt with similar emergencies a score of times. The first — indeed the only — thing to do was to delegate his responsibility.

"Who's the oldest seaman among you?" he demanded — his determination not to quaver made him curt.

"Matthews, sir," said someone at length, indicating with his thumb the pigtailed and tattooed seaman upon whom he had fallen in the cutter.

"Very well, then. I'll rate you petty officer, Matthews. Get to work at once and clear that raffle away forrard. I'll be busy here aft."

It was a nervous moment for Hornblower, but Matthews put his knuckles to his forehead.

"Aye aye, sir," he said, quite as a matter of course.

"Get that jib in first, before it flogs itself to pieces," said Hornblower, greatly emboldened.

"Aye aye, sir."

"Carry on, then."

The seaman turned to go forward, and Hornblower walked aft. He took the telescope from its becket on the poop, and swept the horizon. There were a few sails in sight; the nearest ones he could recognize as prizes, which, with all sail set that they could carry, were heading for England as fast as they could go. Far away to windward he could see the *Indefatigable's* topsails as she clawed after the rest of the convoy — she had already overhauled and captured all the slower and less weatherly vessels, so that each succeeding chase would be longer. Soon he would be alone on this wide sea, three hundred miles from England. Three hundred miles — two days with a fair wind; but how long if the wind turned foul?

He replaced the telescope; the men were already hard at work forward, so he went below and looked round the neat cabins of the officers; two single ones for the captain and the mate, presumably, and a double one for the bos'un and the cook or the carpenter. He found the lazarette, identifying it by the miscellaneous stores within it; the door was swinging to and fro with a bunch of keys dangling. The French captain, faced with the loss of all he possessed, had not even troubled to lock the door again after taking out the case of wine. Hornblower locked the door and put the keys in his pocket and felt suddenly lonely — his first experience of the loneliness of the man in command at sea. He went on deck again, and at sight of him Matthews hurried aft and knuckled his forehead.

"Beg pardon, sir, but we'll have to use the jeers to sling that yard again."

"Very good."

"We'll need more hands than we have, sir. Can I put some o' they Frenchies to work?"

"If you think you can. If any of them are sober enough."

"I think I can, sir. Drunk or sober."

"Very good."

It was at this moment that Hornblower remembered with bitter self-reproach that the priming of his pistol was probably wet, and he had not scorn enough for himself at having put his trust in a pistol without re-priming after evolutions in a small boat. While Matthews went forward he dashed below again. There was a case of pistols which he remembered having seen in the captain's cabin, with a powder flask and bullet bag hanging beside it. He loaded both weapons and reprimed his own, and came on deck again with three pistols in his belt just as his men appeared from the forecastle herding half a dozen Frenchmen. He posed himself in the poop, straddling with his hands behind his back, trying to adopt an air of magnificent indifference and understanding. With the jeers taking the weight of yard and sail, an hour's hard work resulted in the yard being slung again and the sail reset.

When the work was advancing towards completion, Hornblower came to himself again to remember that in a few minutes he would have to set a course, and he dashed below again to set out the chart and the dividers and parallel rulers. From his pocket he extracted the crumpled scrap of paper with his position on it — he had thrust it in there so carelessly a little while back, at a time when the immediate problem before him was to transfer himself from the *Indefatigable* to the cutter. It made him unhappy to think how cavalierly he had treated that scrap of paper then; he began to feel that life in the Navy, although it seemed to move from one crisis to another, was really one continuous crisis, that even while dealing with one emergency it was necessary to be making plans to deal with the next. He bent over the chart, plowed his position, and laid off his course. It was a queer uncomfortable feeling to think that what had up to this moment been an academic exercise conducted under the reassuring supervision of Mr Soames was now something on which hinged his life and his reputation. He checked his working, decided on his course, and wrote it down on a scrap of paper for fear he should forget it.

So when the foretopsail yard was re-slung, and the prisoners herded back into the forecastle, and Matthews looked to him for further orders he was ready.

"We'll square away," he said. "Matthews, send a man to the wheel."

He himself gave a hand at the braces; the wind had moderated and he felt his men could handle the brig under her present sail.

"What course, sir?" asked the man at the wheel, and Hornblower dived into his pocket for his scrap of paper.

"Nor'-east by north," he said, reading it out.

"Nor'-east by north, sir," said the helmsman; and the *Marie Galante*, running free, set her course for England. Night was closing in by now, and all round the circle of the horizon there was not a sail in sight. There must be plenty of ships just over the horizon, he knew, but that did not do much to ease his feeling of loneliness as darkness came on. There was so much to do, so much to bear in mind, and all the responsibility lay on his unaccustomed shoulders. The prisoners had to be battened down in the forecabin, a watch had to be set — there was even the trivial matter of hunting up flint and steel to light the binnacle lamp. A hand forward as a lookout, who could also keep an eye on the prisoners below; a hand aft at the wheel. Two hands snatching some sleep — knowing that to get in any sail would be an all-hands job — a hasty meal of water from the scuttle-butt and of biscuit from the cabin stores in the lazarette — a constant eye to be kept on the weather. Hornblower paced the deck in the darkness.

"Why don't you get some sleep, sir?" asked the man at the wheel.

"I will, later on, Hunter," said Hornblower, trying not to allow his tone to reveal the fact that such a thing had never occurred to him.

He knew it was sensible advice, and he actually tried to follow it, retiring below to fling himself down on the captain's cot; but of course he could not sleep. When he heard the lookout bawling down the companionway to rouse the other two hands to relieve the watch (they were asleep in the next cabin to him) he could not prevent himself from getting up again and coming on deck to see that all was well. With Matthews in charge he felt he should not be anxious, and he drove himself below again, but he had hardly fallen onto the cot again when a new thought brought him to his feet again, his skin cold with anxiety, and a prodigious self-contempt vying with anxiety for first glance in his emotions. He rushed on deck and walked forward to where Matthews was squatting by the knightheads.

"Nothing has been done to see if the brig is taking in any water," he said — he had hurriedly worked out the wording of that sentence during his walk forward, so as to cast no aspersion on Matthews and yet at the same time, for the sake of discipline, attributing no blame to himself.

"That's so, sir," said Matthews.

"One of those shots fired by the *Indefatigable* hulled her," went on Hornblower. "What damage did it do?"

"I don't rightly know, sir," said Matthews. "I was in the cutter at the time."

"We must look as soon as it's light," said Hornblower. "And we'd better sound the well now."

Those were brave words; during his rapid course in seamanship aboard the *Indefatigable* Hornblower had had a little instruction everywhere, working under the orders of every head of department in rotation. Once he had been with the carpenter when he sounded the well — whether he could find the well in this ship and sound it he did not know.

"Aye aye, sir," said Matthews, without hesitation, and strolled aft to the pump. "You'll need a light, sir. I'll get one."

When he came back with the lantern he shone it on the coiled sounding line hanging beside the pump, so that Hornblower recognized it at once. He lifted it down, inserted the three-foot weighted rod into the aperture of the well, and then remembered in time to take it out again and make sure it was dry. Then he let it drop, paying out the line until he felt the rod strike the ship's bottom with a satisfactory thud. He hauled out the line again, and Matthews held the lantern as Hornblower with some trepidation brought out the timber to examine it.

"Not a drop, sir!" said Matthews. "Dry as yesterday's pannikin."

Hornblower was agreeably surprised. Any ship he had ever heard of leaked to a certain extent; even in the well-found *Indefatigable* pumping had been necessary every day. He did not know whether this dryness was a remarkable phenomenon or a very remarkable one. He wanted to be both noncommittal and imperturbable.

"H'm," was the comment he eventually produced. "Very good, Matthews. Coil that line again."

The knowledge that the *Marie Galante* was making no water at all might have encouraged him to sleep, if the wind had not chosen to veer steadily and strengthen itself somewhat soon after he retired again. It was Matthews who came down and pounded on his door with the unwelcome news.

"We can't keep the course you set much longer, sir," concluded Matthews. "And the wind's coming gusty-like."

"Very good, I'll be up. Call all hands," said Hornblower, with a testiness that might have been the result of a sudden awakening if it had not really disguised his inner quaverings.

With such a small crew he dared not run the slightest risk of being taken by surprise by the weather. Nothing could be done in a hurry, as he soon found. He had to take the wheel while his four hands laboured at reefing topsails and snugging the brig down; the task took half the night, and by the time it was finished it was quite plain that with the wind veering northerly the *Marie Galante* could not steer north-east by north any longer. Hornblower gave up the wheel and went below to the chart, but what he saw there only confirmed the pessimistic decision he had already reached by mental calculation. As close to the wind as they could lie on this tack they could not weather Ushant. Shorthanded as he was he did not dare continue in the hope that the wind might back; all his reading and all his instruction had warned him of the terrors of a lee shore. There was nothing for it but to go about; he returned to the deck with a heavy heart.

"All hands wear ship," he said, trying to bellow the order in the manner of Mr Bolton, the third lieutenant of the *Indefatigable*.

They brought the brig safely round, and she took up her new course, close hauled on the starboard tack. Now she was heading away from the dangerous shores of France, without a doubt, but she was heading nearly as directly away from the friendly shores of England — gone was all hope of an easy two days' run to England; gone was any hope of sleep that night for Hornblower.

During the year before he joined the Navy Hornblower had attended classes given by a penniless French émigré in French, music, and dancing. Early enough the wretched émigré had found that Hornblower had no ear for music whatever, which made it almost impossible to teach him to dance, and so he had endeavoured to earn his fee by concentrating on French. A good deal of what he had taught Hornblower had found a permanent resting place in Hornblower's tenacious memory. He had never thought it would be of much use to him, but he discovered the contrary when the French captain at dawn insisted on an interview with him. The Frenchman had a little English, but it was a pleasant surprise to Hornblower to find that they actually could get along better in French, as soon as he could fight down his shyness sufficiently to produce the halting words. The captain drank thirstily from the scuttlebutt; his cheeks were of course unshaven and he wore a bleary look after twelve hours in a crowded forecabin, where he had been battened down three parts drunk.

"My men are hungry," said the captain; he did not look hungry himself.

"Mine also," said Hornblower. "I also."

It was natural when one spoke French to gesticulate, to indicate his men with a wave of the hand and himself with a tap on the chest.

"I have a cook," said the captain.

It took some time to arrange the terms of a truce. The Frenchmen were to be allowed on deck, the cook was to provide food for everyone on board, and while these amenities were permitted, until noon, the French would make no attempt to take the ship.

"Good," said the captain at length; and when Hornblower had given the necessary orders permitting the release of the crew he shouted for the cook and entered into an urgent discussion regarding dinner. Soon smoke was issuing satisfactorily from the galley chimney.

Then the captain looked up at the grey sky, at the close reefed topsails, and glanced into the binnacle at the compass.

"A foul wind for England," he remarked.

"Yes," said Hornblower shortly. He did not want this Frenchman to guess at his trepidation and bitterness. The captain seemed to be feeling the motion of the brig under his feet with attention.

"She rides a little heavily, does she not?" he said.

"Perhaps," said Hornblower. He was not familiar with the *Marie Galante*, nor with ships at all, and he had no opinion on the subject, but he was not going to reveal his ignorance.

"Does she leak?" asked the captain.

"There is no water in her," said Hornblower.

"Ah!" said the captain. "But you would find none in the well. We are carrying a cargo of rice, you must remember."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

He found it very hard at that moment to remain outwardly unperturbed, as his mind grasped the implications of what was being said to him. Rice would absorb every drop of water taken in by the ship, so that no leak

would be apparent on rounding the well — and yet every drop of water taken in would deprive her of that much buoyancy, all the same.

"One shot from your cursed frigate struck us in the hull," said the captain. "Of course you have investigated the damage?"

"Of course," said Hornblower, lying bravely.

But as soon as he could he had a private conversation with Matthews on the point, and Matthews instantly looked grave.

"Where did the shot hit her, sir?" he asked.

"Somewhere on the port side, forward, I should judge."

He and Matthews craned their necks over the ship's side.

"Can't see nothin', sir," said Matthews. "Lower me over the side in a bowline and I'll see what I can find, sir." Hornblower was about to agree and then changed his mind.

"I'll go over the side myself," he said.

He could not analyse the motives which impelled him to say that. Partly he wanted to see things with his own eyes; partly he was influenced by the doctrine that he should never give an order he was not prepared to carry out himself — but mostly it must have been the desire to impose a penance on himself for his negligence.

Matthews and Carson put a bowline round him and lowered him over. He found himself dangling against the ship's side, with the sea bubbling just below him; as the ship pitched the sea came up to meet him, and he was wet to the waist in the first five seconds; and as the ship rolled he was alternately swung away from the side and bumped against it. The men with the line walked steadily aft, giving him the chance to examine the whole side of the brig above water, and there was not a shot hole to be seen. He said as much to Matthews when they hauled him on deck.

"Then it's below the waterline, sir," said Matthews, saying just what was in Hornblower's mind. "You're sure the shot hit her, sir?"

"Yes, I'm sure," snapped Hornblower.

Lack of sleep and worry and a sense of guilt were all shortening his temper, and he had to speak sharply or break down in tears. But he had already decided on the next move — he had made up his mind about that while they were hauling him up.

"We'll heave her to on the other tack and try again," he said.

On the other tack the ship would incline over to the other side, and the shot-hole, if there was one, would not be so deeply submerged. Hornblower stood with the water dripping from his clothes as they wore the brig round; the wind was keen and cold, but he was shivering with expectancy rather than cold. The heeling of the brig laid him much more definitely against the side, and they lowered him until his legs were scraping over the marine growths which she carried there between wind and water. They then walked aft with him, dragging him along the side of the ship, and just abaft the foremast he found what he was seeking.

"Avast, there!" he yelled up to the deck, mastering the sick despair that he felt. The motion of the bowline along the ship ceased. "Lower away! Another two feet!"

Now he was waist-deep in the water, and when the brig swayed the water closed briefly over his head, like a momentary death. Here it was, two feet below the waterline even with the brig hove to on this tack — a splintered, jagged hole, square rather than round, and a foot across. As the sea boiled round him Hornblower even fancied he could hear it bubbling into the ship, but that might be pure fancy.

He hailed the deck for them to haul him up again, and they stood eagerly listening for what he had to say.

"Two feet below the waterline, sir?" said Matthews. "She was close hauled and heeling right over, of course, when we hit her. But her bows must have lifted just as we fired. And of course she's lower in the water now."

That was the point. Whatever they did now, however much they heeled her, that hole would be under water. And on the other tack it would be far under water, with much additional pressure; yet on the present tack they were headed for France. And the more water they took in, the lower the brig would settle, and the greater would be the pressure forcing water in through the hole. Something must be done to plug the leak, and Hornblower's reading of the manuals of seamanship told him what it was.

"We must fother a sail and get it over that hole," he announced. "Call those Frenchmen over."

To fother a sail was to make something like a vast hairy doormat out of it, by threading innumerable lengths of

half-unravelling line through it. When this was done the sail would be lowered below the ship's bottom and placed against the hole. The inward pressure would then force the hairy mass so tightly against the hole that the entrance of water would be made at least much more difficult.

The Frenchmen were not quick to help in the task; it was no longer their ship, and they were heading for an English prison, so that even with their lives at stake they were somewhat apathetic. It took time to get out a new topgallant sail — Hornblower felt that the stouter the canvas the better — and to set a party to work cutting lengths of line, threading them through, and unravelling them. The French captain looked at them squatting on the deck all at work.

"Five years I spent in a prison hulk in Portsmouth during the last war," he said. "Five years."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

He might have felt sympathy, but he was not only preoccupied with his own problems but he was numb with cold. He not only had every intention if possible of escorting the French captain to England and to prison again but he also at that very moment intended to go below and appropriate some of his spare clothing.

Down below it seemed to Hornblower as if the noises all about him — the creaks and groans of a wooden ship at sea — were more pronounced than usual. The brig was riding easily enough hove-to, and yet the bulkheads down below were cracking and creaking as if the brig were racking herself to pieces in a storm. He dismissed the notion as a product of his over-stimulated imagination but by the time he had towelled himself into something like warmth and put on the captain's best suit it recurred to him; the brig was groaning as if in stress.

He came on deck again to see how the working party was progressing. He had hardly been on deck two minutes when one of the Frenchmen, reaching back for another length of line, stopped in his movement to stare at the deck. He picked at a deck seam, looked up and caught Hornblower's eye, and called to him. Hornblower made no pretence of understanding the words; the gestures explained themselves. The deck seam was opening a little; the pitch was bulging out of it. Hornblower looked at the phenomenon without understanding it — only a foot or two of the seam was open, and the rest of the deck seemed solid enough. No! Now that his attention was called to it, and he looked further, there were one or two other places in the deck where the pitch had risen in ridges from out of the seams. It was something beyond his limited experience, even beyond his extensive reading. But the French captain was his side staring at the deck too.

"My God!" he said. "The rice! The rice!"

The French word 'riz' that he used was unknown to Hornblower, but he stamped his foot on the deck and pointed down through it.

"The cargo!" he said in explanation. "It — it grows bigger."

Matthews was with them now, and without knowing a word of French he understood.

"Didn't I hear this brig was full of rice, sir?" he asked.

"Yes."

"That's it, then. The water's got into it and it's swelling."

So it would. Dry rice soaked in water would double or treble its volume. The cargo was swelling and bursting the seams of the ship open. Hornblower remembered the unnatural creaks and groans below. It was a black moment; he looked round at the unfriendly sea for inspiration and support, and found neither. Several seconds passed before he was ready to speak, and ready to maintain the dignity of a naval officer in face of difficulties.

"The sooner we get that sail over that hole the better, then," he said. It was too much to be expected that his voice should sound quite natural. "Hurry those Frenchmen up."

He turned to pace the deck, so as to allow his feelings to subside and to set his thoughts running in an orderly fashion again, but the French captain was at his elbow, voluble as a Job's comforter.

"I said I thought the ship was riding heavily," he said. "She is lower in the water."

"Go to the devil," said Hornblower, in English — he could not think up the French for that phrase.

Even as he stood he felt a sudden sharp shock beneath his feet, as if someone had hit the deck underneath them with a mallet. The ship was springing apart bit by bit.

"Hurry with that sail!" he yelled, turning back to the working party, and then was angry with himself because the tone of his voice must have betrayed undignified agitation.

At last an area five feet square of the sail was fothered, lines were rove through the grommets, and the working party hurried forward to work the sail under the brig and drag it aft to the hole. Hornblower was taking off his clothes, not out of regard for the captain's property but so as to keep them dry for himself.

"I'll go over and see that it's in place," he said. "Matthews, get a bowline ready for me."

Naked and wet, it seemed to him as if the wind blew clear through him; rubbing against the ship's side as she rolled he lost a good deal of skin, and the waves passing down the ship smacked at him with a boisterous lack of consideration. But he saw the fothered sail placed against the hole, and with intense satisfaction he saw the hairy mass suck into position, dimpling over the hole to form a deep hollow so that he could be sure that the hole was plugged solid. They hauled him up again when he hailed, and awaited his orders; he stood naked, stupid with cold and fatigue and lack of sleep, struggling to form his next decision.

"Lay her on the starboard tack," he said at length.

If the brig were going to sink, it hardly mattered if it were one hundred or two hundred miles from the French coast; if she were to stay afloat he wanted to be well clear of that lee shore and the chance of recapture. The shot hole with its fothered sail would be deeper under water to increase the risk, but it seemed to be the best chance. The French captain saw them making preparations to wear the brig round, and turned upon Hornblower with voluble protests. With this wind they could make Bordeaux easily on the other tack. Hornblower was risking all their lives, he said. Into Hornblower's numb mind crept, uninvited, the translation of something he had previously wanted to say. He could use it now.

"Allez au diable," he snapped, as he put the Frenchman's stout woollen shirt on over his head.

When his head emerged the Frenchman was still protesting volubly, so violently indeed that a new doubt came into Hornblower's mind. A word to Matthews sent him round the French prisoners to search for weapons. There was nothing to be found except the sailors' knives, but as a matter of precaution Hornblower had them all impounded, and when he had dressed he went to special trouble with his three pistols, drawing the charges from them and reloading and repriming afresh. Three pistols in his belt looked piratical, as though he were still young enough to be playing imaginative games, but Hornblower felt in his bones that there might be a time when the Frenchmen might try to rise against their captors, and three pistols would not be too many against twelve desperate men who had makeshift weapons ready to hand, belaying pins and the like.

Matthews was awaiting him with a long face.

"Sir," he said, "begging your pardon, but I don't like the looks of it. Straight, I don't. I don't like the feel of her. She's settlin' down and she's opening up, I'm certain sure. Beg your pardon, sir, for saying so."

Down below Hornblower had heard the fabric of the ship continuing to crack and complain; up here the deck seams were gaping more widely. There was a very likely explanation; the swelling of the rice must have forced open the ship's seams below water, so that plugging the shot-hole would have only eliminated what would be by now only a minor leak. Water must still be pouring in, the cargo still swelling, opening up the ship like an overblown flower. Ships were built to withstand blows from without, and there was nothing about their construction to resist an outward pressure. Wider and wider would gape the seams, and faster and faster the sea would gain access to the cargo.

"Look'e there, sir!" said Matthews suddenly.

In the broad light of day a small grey shape was hurrying along the weather scuppers; another one followed it and another after that. Rats! Something convulsive must be going on down below to bring them on deck in daytime, from out of their comfortable nests among the unlimited food of the cargo. The pressure must be enormous. Hornblower felt another small shock beneath his feet at that moment, as something further parted beneath them. But there was one more card to play, one last line of defence that he could think of.

"I'll jettison the cargo," said Hornblower. He had never uttered that word in his life, but he had read it. "Get the prisoners and we'll start."

The battened-down hatch cover was domed upwards curiously and significantly; as the wedges were knocked out one plank tore loose at one end with a crash, pointing diagonally upwards, and as the working party lifted off the cover a brown form followed it upwards — a bag of rice, forced out by the underlying pressure until it jammed in the hatchway.

"Tail onto those tackles and sway it up," said Hornblower.

Bag by bag the rice was hauled up from the hold; sometimes the bags split, allowing a torrent of rice to pour

onto the deck, but that did not matter. Another section of the working party swept rice and bags to the lee side and into the ever-hungry sea. After the first three bags the difficulties increased, for the cargo was so tightly jammed below that it called for enormous force to tear each bag out of its position. Two men had to go down the hatchway to pry the bags loose and adjust the slings. There was a momentary hesitation on the part of the two Frenchmen to whom Hornblower pointed — the bags might not all be jammed and the hold of a tossing ship was a dangerous place wherein a roll might bury them alive — but Hornblower had no thought at that moment for other people's human fears. He scowled at the brief check and they hastened to lower themselves down the hatchway. The labour was enormous as it went on hour after hour; the men at the tackles were dripping with sweat and drooping with fatigue, but they had to relieve periodically the men below, for the bags had jammed themselves in tiers, pressed hard against the ship's bottom below and the deck beams above, and when the bags immediately below the hatchway had been swayed up the surrounding ones had to be pried loose, out of each tier. Then when a small clearance had been made in the neighbourhood of the hatchway, and they were getting deeper down into the hold, they made the inevitable discovery. The lower tiers of bags had been wetted, their contents had swelled, and the bags had burst. The lower half of the hold was packed solid with damp rice which could only be got out with shovels and a hoist. The still intact bags of the upper tiers, farther away from the hatchway, were still jammed tight, calling for much labour to free them and to manhandle them under the hatchway to be hoisted out. Hornblower, facing the problem, was distracted by a touch on his elbow when Matthews came up to speak to him.

"It ain't no go, sir," said Matthews. "She's lower in the water an' settlin' fast."

Hornblower walked to the ship's side with him and looked over. There could be no doubt about it. He had been over the side himself and could remember the height of the waterline, and he had for a more exact guide the level of the fothered sail under the ship's bottom. The brig was a full six inches lower in the water — and this after fifty tons of rice at least had been hoisted out and flung over the side. The brig must be leaking like a basket, with water pouring in through the gaping seams to be sucked up immediately by the thirsty rice. Hornblower's left hand was hurting him, and he looked down to discover that he was gripping the rail with it so tightly as to cause him pain, without knowing he was doing so. He released his grip and looked about him, at the afternoon sun, at the tossing sea. He did not want to give in and admit defeat. The French captain came up to him.

"This is folly," he said. "Madness, sir. My men are overcome by fatigue."

Over by the hatchway, Hornblower saw, Hunter was driving the French seamen to their work with a rope's end, which he was using furiously. There was not much more work to be got out of the Frenchmen; and at that moment the *Marie Galante* rose heavily to a wave and wallowed down the further side. Even his inexperience could detect the sluggishness and ominous deadness of her movements. The brig had not much longer to float, and there was a good deal to do.

"I shall make preparations for abandoning the ship, Matthews," he said.

He poked his chin upwards as he spoke; he would not allow either a Frenchman or a seaman to guess at his despair.

"Aye aye, sir," said Matthews.

The *Marie Galante* carried a boat on chocks abaft the mainmast; at Matthews' summons the men abandoned their work on the cargo and hurried to the business of putting food and water in her.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," said Hunter aside to Hornblower, "but you ought to see you have warm clothes, sir. I been in an open boat ten days once, sir."

"Thank you, Hunter," said Hornblower.

There was much to think of Navigating instruments, Charts, compass — would he be able to get a good observation with his sextant in a tossing little boat? Common prudence dictated that they should have all the food and water with them that the boat could carry; but — Hornblower eyed the wretched craft dubiously — seventeen men would kill it to overflowing anyway. He would have to leave much to the judgement of the French captain and of Matthews.

The tackles were manned and the boat was swayed up from the chocks and lowered into the water in the tiny lee afforded on the lee quarter. The *Marie Galante* put her nose into a wave, refusing to rise to it; green water

came over the starboard bow and poured aft along the deck before a sullen wallow on the part of the brig sent it into the scuppers. There was not much time to spare — a rending crash from below told that the cargo was still swelling and forcing the bulkheads. There was a panic among the Frenchmen, who began to tumble down into the boat with loud cries. The French captain took one look at Hornblower and then followed them; two of the British seamen were already over the side fending off the boat.

"Go along," said Hornblower to Matthews and Carson, who still lingered. He was the captain; it was his place to leave the ship last.

So waterlogged was the brig now that it was not at all difficult to step down into the boat from the deck; the British seamen were in the sternsheets and made room for him.

"Take the tiller, Matthews," said Hornblower; he did not feel he was competent to handle that over-loaded boat. "Shove off, there!"

The boat and the brig parted company; the *Marie Galante*, with her helm lashed, poked her nose into the wind and hung there. She had acquired a sudden list, with the starboard side scuppers nearly under water. Another wave broke over her deck, pouring up to the open hatchway. Now she righted herself, her deck nearly level with the sea, and then she sank, on an even keel, the water closing over her, her masts slowly disappearing. For an instant her sails even gleamed under the green water.

"She's gone," said Matthews.

Hornblower watched the disappearance of his first command. The *Marie Galante* had been entrusted to him to bring into port, and he had failed, failed on his first independent mission. He looked very hard at the setting sun, hoping no one would notice the tears that were filling his eyes.

CHAPTER THREE — THE PENALTY OF FAILURE

Daylight crept over the tossing waters of the Bay of Biscay to reveal a small boat riding on its wide expanses. It was a very crowded boat; in the bows huddled the French crew of the sunken brig *Marie Galante*, amidships sat the captain and his mate, and in the sternsheets sat Midshipman Horatio Hornblower and the four English seamen who had once constituted the prize-crew of the brig. Hornblower was seasick, for his delicate stomach, having painfully accustomed itself to the motion of the *Indefatigable*, rebelled at the antics of the small boat as she pitched jerkily to her sea-anchor. He was cold and weary as well as seasick after his second night without sleep — he had been vomiting spasmodically all through the hours of darkness, and in the depression which seasickness brings he had thought gloomily about the loss of the *Marie Galante*. If he had only remembered earlier to plug that shot-hole! Excuses came to his mind only to be discarded. There had been so much to do, and so few men to do it with — the French crew to guard, the damage aloft to repair, the course to set. The absorbent qualities of the cargo of rice which the *Marie Galante* carried had deceived him when he had remembered to sound the well. All this might be true, but the fact remained that he had lost his ship, his first command. In his own eyes there was no excuse for his failure.

The French crew had wakened with the dawn and were chattering like a nest of magpies; Matthews and Carson beside him were moving stiffly to ease their aching joints.

"Breakfast, sir?" said Matthews.

It was like the games Hornblower had played as a lonely little boy, when he had sat in the empty pig-trough and pretended he was cast away in an open boat. Then he had parcelled out the bit of bread or whatever it was which he had obtained from the kitchen into a dozen rations, counting them carefully, each one to last a day. But a small boy's eager appetite had made those days very short, not more than five minutes long; after standing up in the pig-trough and shading his eyes and looking round the horizon for the succour that he could not discover, he would sit down again, tell himself that the life of a castaway was hard, and then decide that another night had passed and that it was time to eat another ration from his dwindling supply. So here under Hornblower's eye the French captain and mate served out a biscuit of hard bread to each person in the boat, and filled the pannikin for each man in turn from the water breakers under the thwarts. But Hornblower when

he sat in the pig-trough, despite his vivid imagination, never thought of this hideous seasickness, of the cold and the cramps, nor of how his skinny posterior would ache with its constant pressure against the hard timbers of the sternsheets; nor, in the sublime self-confidence of childhood, had he ever thought how heavy could be the burden of responsibility on the shoulders of a senior naval officer aged seventeen.

He dragged himself back from the memories of that recent childhood to face the present situation. The grey sky, as far as his inexperienced eye could tell, bore no presage of deterioration in the weather. He wetted his finger and held it up, looking in the boat's compass to gauge the direction of the wind.

"Backing westerly a little, sir," said Matthews, who had been copying his movements.

"That's so," agreed Hornblower, hurriedly going through in his mind his recent lessons in boxing the compass. His course to weather Ushant was nor'-east by north, he knew, and the boat close hauled would not lie closer than eight points off the wind — he had lain-to to the sea-anchor all night because the wind had been coming from too far north to enable him to steer for England. But now the wind had backed. Eight points from nor'-east by north was nor'-west by west, and the wind was even more westerly than that. Close hauled he could weather Ushant and even have a margin for contingencies, to keep him clear of the lee shore, which the seamanship books and his own common sense told him was so dangerous.

"We'll make sail, Matthews," he said; his hand was still grasping the biscuit which his rebellious stomach refused to accept.

"Aye aye, sir."

A shout to the Frenchmen crowded in the bows drew their attention; in the circumstances it hardly needed Hornblower's halting French to direct them to carry out the obvious task of getting in the sea-anchor. But it was not too easy, with the boat so crowded and hardly a foot of freeboard. The mast was already stepped, and the lug sail bent ready to hoist. Two Frenchmen, balancing precariously, tailed onto the halliard and the sail rose up the mast.

"Hunter, take the sheet," said Hornblower. "Matthews, take the tiller. Keep her close hauled on the port tack."

"Close hauled on the port tack, sir."

The French captain had watched the proceedings with intense interest from his seat amidships. He had not understood the last, decisive order, but he grasped its meaning quickly enough when the boat came round and steadied on the port tack, heading for England. He stood up, spluttering angry protests.

"The wind is fair for Bordeaux," he said, gesticulating with clenched fists. "We could be there by to-morrow. Why do we go north?"

"We go to England," said Hornblower.

"But — but — it will take us a week! A week even if the wind stays fair. This boat — it is too crowded. We cannot endure a storm. It is madness."

Hornblower had guessed at the moment the captain stood up what he was going to say, and he hardly bothered to translate the expostulations to himself. He was too tired and too seasick to enter into an argument in a foreign language. He ignored the captain. Not for anything on earth would he turn the boat's head towards France. His naval career had only just begun, and even if it were to be blighted on account of the loss of the *Marie Galante* he had no intention of rotting for years in a French prison.

"Sir!" said the French captain.

The mate who shared the captain's thwart was protesting too, and now they turned to their crew behind them and told them what was going on. An angry movement stirred the crowd.

"Sir!" said the captain again. "I insist that you head towards Bordeaux."

He showed signs of advancing upon them; one of the crew behind him began to pull the boat-hook clear, and it would be a dangerous weapon. Hornblower pulled one of the pistols from his belt and pointed it at the captain, who, with the muzzle four feet from his breast, fell back before the gesture. Without taking his eyes off him Hornblower took a second pistol with his left hand.

"Take this, Matthews," he said.

"Aye aye, sir," said Matthews, obeying; and then, after a respectful pause, "Beggin' your pardon, sir, but hadn't you better cock your pistol, sir?"

"Yes," said Hornblower, exasperated at his own forgetfulness.

He drew the hammer back with a click, and the menacing sound made more acute still the French captain's

sense of his own danger, with a cocked and loaded pistol pointed at his stomach in a heaving boat. He waved his hands desperately.

"Please," he said, "point it some other way, sir."

He drew farther back, huddling against the men behind him.

"Hey, avast there, you," shouted Matthews loudly — a French sailor was trying to let go the halliard unobserved.

"Shoot any man who looks dangerous, Matthews," said Hornblower.

He was so intent on enforcing his will upon these men, so desperately anxious to retain his liberty, that his face was contracted into a beast-like scowl. No one looking at him could doubt his determination for a moment. He would allow no human life to come between him and his decisions. There was still a third pistol in his belt, and the Frenchmen could guess that if they tried a rush a quarter of them at least would meet their deaths before they overpowered the Englishmen, and the French captain knew he would be the first to die. His expressive hands, waving out from his sides — he could not take his eyes from the pistol — told his men to make no further resistance. Their murmurings died away, and the captain began to plead.

"Five years I was in an English prison during the last war," he said. "Let us reach an agreement. Let us go to France. When we reach the shore — anywhere you choose, sir — we will land and you can continue on your journey. Or we can all land, and I will use all my influence to have you and your men sent back to England under cartel, without exchange or ransom. I swear I will."

"No," said Hornblower.

England was far easier to reach from here than from the French Biscay coast; as for the other suggestion, Hornblower knew enough about the new government washed up by the revolution in France to be sure that they would never part with prisoners on the representation of a merchant captain. And trained seamen were scarce in France, it was his duty to keep these dozen from returning.

"No," he said again, in reply to the captain's fresh protests.

"Shall I clout 'im on the jaw, sir?" asked Hunter, at Hornblower's side.

"No," said Hornblower again; but the Frenchman saw the gesture and guessed at the meaning of the words, and subsided into sullen silence.

But he was roused again at the sight of Hornblower's pistol on his knee, still pointed at him. A sleepy finger might press that trigger.

"Sir," he said, "put that pistol away, I beg of you. It is dangerous."

Hornblower's eye was cold and unsympathetic.

"Put it away, please. I will do nothing to interfere with your command of this boat. I promise you that."

"Do you swear it?"

"I swear it."

"And these others?"

The captain looked round at his crew with voluble explanations, and grudgingly they agreed.

"They swear it too."

"Very well, then."

Hornblower started to replace the pistol in his belt, and remembered to put it on half-cock in time to save himself from shooting himself in the stomach. Everyone in the boat relaxed into apathy. The boat was rising and swooping rhythmically now, a far more comfortable motion than when it had jerked to a sea-anchor, and Hornblower's stomach lost some of its resentment. He had been two nights without sleep. His head lowered on his chest, and then he leaned sideways against Hunter, and slept peacefully, while the boat, with the wind nearly abeam, headed steadily for England. What woke him late in the day was when Matthews, cramped and weary, was compelled to surrender the tiller to Arson, and after that they kept watch and watch, a hand at the sheet and a hand at the tiller and the others trying to rest. Hornblower took his turn at the sheet, but he would not trust himself with the tiller, especially when night fell; he knew he had not the knack of keeping the boat on her course by the feel of the wind on his cheek and the tiller in his hand.

It was not until long after breakfast the next day — almost noon in fact — that they sighted the sail. It was a Frenchman who saw it first, and his excited cry roused them all. There were three square topsails coming up over the horizon on their weather bow, nearing them so rapidly on a converging course that each time the

boat rose on a wave a considerably greater area of canvas was visible.

"What do you think she is, Matthews?" asked Hornblower, while the boat buzzed with the Frenchmen's excitement.

"I can't tell, sir, but I don't like the looks of her," said Matthews doubtfully. "She ought to have her t'gallants set in this breeze — and her courses too, an' she hasn't. An' I don't like the cut of her jib, sir. She — she might be a Frenchie to me, sir."

Any ship travelling for peaceful purposes would naturally have all possible sail set. This ship had not. Hence she was engaged in some belligerent design, but there were more chances that she was British than that she was French, even in here in the Bay. Hornblower took a long look at her; a smallish vessel, although ship-rigged. Flush-decked, with a look of speed about her — her hull was visible at intervals now, with a line of gunports. "She looks French all over to me, sir," said Hunter. "Privateer, seemly."

"Stand by to jibe," said Hornblower.

They brought the boat round before the wind, heading directly away from the ship. But in war as in the jungle, to fly is to invite pursuit and attack. The ship set courses and topgallants and came tearing down upon them, passed them at half a cable's length and then hove-to, having cut off their escape. The ship's rail was lined with a curious crowd — a large crew for a vessel that size. A hail came across the water to the boat, and the words were French. The English seamen subsided into curses, while the French captain cheerfully stood up and replied, and the French crew brought the boat alongside the ship.

A handsome young man in a plum-coloured coat with a lace stock greeted Hornblower when he stepped on the deck.

"Welcome, sir, to the *Pique*," he said in French "I am Captain Neuville, of this privateer. And you are — ?"

"Midshipman Hornblower, of His Britannic Majesty's ship *Indefatigable*," growled Hornblower.

"You seem to be in evil humour," said Neuville. "Please do not be so distressed at the fortunes of war. You will be accommodated in this ship, until we return to port, with every comfort possible at sea. I beg of you to consider yourself quite at home. For instance, those pistols in your belt must discommode you more than a little. Permit me to relieve you of their weight."

He took the pistols neatly from Hornblower's belt as he spoke, looked Hornblower keenly over, and then went on.

"That dirk that you wear at your side, sir. Would you oblige me by the loan of it? I assure you that I will return it to you when we part company. But while you are on board here I fear that your impetuous youth might lead you into some rash act while you are wearing a weapon which a credulous mind might believe to be lethal. A thousand thanks. And now might I show you the berth that is being prepared for you?"

With a courteous bow he led the way below. Two decks down, presumably at the level of a foot or two below the water line, was a wide bare 'tweendecks, dimly lighted and scantily ventilated by the hatchways.

"Our slave deck," explained Neuville carelessly.

"Slave deck?" asked Hornblower.

"Yes. It is here that the slaves were confined during the middle passage."

Much was clear to Hornblower at once. A slave ship could be readily converted into a privateer. She would already be armed with plenty of guns to defend herself against treacherous attacks while making her purchases in the African rivers; she was faster than the average merchant ship both because of the lack of need of hold space and because with a highly perishable cargo such as slaves speed was a desirable quality, and she was constructed to carry large numbers of men and the great quantities of food and water necessary to keep them supplied while at sea in search of prizes.

"Our market in San Domingo has been closed to us by recent events, of which you must have heard, sir," went on Neuville, "and so that the *Pique* could continue to return dividends to me I have converted her into a privateer. Moreover, seeing that the activities of the Committee of Public Safety at present make Paris a more unhealthy spot even than the West Coast of Africa, I decided to take command of my vessel myself. To say nothing of the fact that a certain resolution and hardihood are necessary to make a privateer a profitable investment."

Neuville's face hardened for a moment into an expression of the grimmest determination, and then softened at once into its previous meaningless politeness.

"This door in this bulkhead," he continued, "leads to the quarters I have set aside for captured officers. Here, as you see, is your cot. Please make yourself at home here. Should this ship go into action — as I trust she will frequently do — the hatches above will be battened down. But except on those occasions you will of course be at liberty to move about the ship at your will. Yet I suppose I had better add that any harebrained attempt on the part of prisoners to interfere with the working or wellbeing of this ship would be deeply resented by the crew. They serve on shares, you understand, and are risking their lives and their liberty. I would not be surprised if any rash person who endangered their dividends and freedom were dropped over the side into the sea."

Hornblower forced himself to reply; he would not reveal that he was almost struck dumb by the calculating callousness of this last speech.

"I understand," he said.

"Excellent! Now is there anything further you may need, sir?"

Hornblower looked round the bare quarters in which he was to suffer lonely confinement, lit by a dim glimmer of light from a swaying slush lamp.

"Could I have something to read?" he asked.

Neuville thought for a moment.

"I fear there are only professional books," he said. "But I can let you have Grandjean's *Principles of Navigation*, and Lebrun's *Handbook on Seamanship* and some similar volumes, if you think you can understand the French in which they are written."

"I'll try," said Hornblower.

Probably it was as well that Hornblower was provided with the materials for such strenuous mental exercise. The effort of reading French and of studying his profession at one and the same time kept his mind busy during the dreary days while the *Pique* cruised in search of prizes. Most of the time the Frenchmen ignored him — he had to force himself upon Neuville once to protest against the employment of his four British seamen on the menial work of pumping out the ship, but he had to retire worsted from the argument, if argument it could be called, when Neuville icily refused to discuss the question. Hornblower went back to his quarters with burning cheeks and red ears, and, as ever, when he was mentally disturbed, the thought of his guilt returned to him with new force.

If only he had plugged that shot-hole sooner! A clearer-headed officer, he told himself, would have done so. He had lost his ship, the *Indefatigable's* precious prize, and there was no health in him. Sometimes he made himself review the situation calmly. Professionally, he might not — probably would not — suffer for his negligence. A midshipman with only four for a prize-crew, put on board a two-hundred-ton brig that had been subjected to considerable taring from a frigate's guns, would not be seriously blamed when she sank under him. But Hornblower knew at the same time that he was at least partly at fault. If it was ignorance — there was no excuse for ignorance. If he had allowed his multiple cares to distract him from the business of plugging the shot-hole immediately, that was incompetence, and there was no excuse for incompetence. When he thought along those lines he was overwhelmed by waves of despair and of self-contempt, and there was no one to comfort him. The day of his birthday, when he looked at himself at the vast age of eighteen, was the worst of all. Eighteen and a discredited prisoner in the hands of a French privateersman! His self-respect was at its lowest ebb.

The *Pique* was seeking her prey in the most frequented waters in the world, the approaches to the Channel, and there could be no more vivid demonstration of the vastness of the ocean than the fact that she cruised day after day without glimpsing a sail. She maintained a triangular course, reaching to the north-west, tacking to the south, running under easy sail north-easterly again, with lookouts at every masthead, with nothing to see but the tossing waste of water. Until the morning when a high-pitched yell from the foretopgallant masthead attracted the attention of everybody on deck, including Hornblower, standing lonely in the waist. Neuville, by the wheel, bellowed a question to the lookout, and Hornblower, thanks to his recent studies, could translate the answer. There was a sail visible to windward, and next moment the lookout reported that it had altered course and was running down towards them.

That meant a great deal. In wartime any merchant ship would be suspicious of strangers and would give them as wide a berth as possible; and especially when she was to windward and therefore far safer. Only someone

prepared to fight or possessed of a perfectly morbid curiosity would abandon a windward position. A wild and unreasonable hope filled Hornblower's breast; a ship of war at sea — thanks to England's maritime mastery — would be far more probably English than French. And this was the cruising ground of the *Indefatigable*, his own ship, stationed there specially to fulfil the double function of looking out for French commerce-destroyers and intercepting French blockade-runners. A hundred miles from here she had put him and his prize crew on board the *Marie Galante*. It was a thousand to one, he exaggerated despairingly to himself, against any ship sighted being the *Indefatigable*. But — hope reasserted itself — the fact that she was coming down to investigate reduced the odds to ten to one at most. Less than ten to one.

He looked over at Neuville, trying to think his thoughts. The *Pique* was fast and handy, and there was a clear avenue of escape to leeward. The fact that the stranger had altered course towards them was a suspicious circumstance, but it was known that Indiamen, the richest prizes of all, had sometimes traded on the similarity of their appearance to that of ships of the line, and by showing a bold front had scared dangerous enemies away. That would be a temptation to a man eager to make a prize. At Neuville's orders all sail was set, ready for instant flight or pursuit, and, close-hauled, the *Pique* stood towards the stranger. It was not long before Hornblower, on the deck, caught a glimpse of a gleam of white, like a tiny grain of rice, far away on the horizon as the *Pique* lifted on a swell. Here came Matthews, red-faced and excited, running aft to Hornblower's side. "That's the old *Indefatigable*, sir," he said. "I swear it!" He sprang onto the rail, holding on by the shrouds, and stared under his hand.

"Yes! There she is, sir! She's loosing her royals now, sir. We'll be back on board of her in time for grog!"

A French petty officer reached up and dragged Matthews by the seat of his trousers from his perch, and with a blow and a kick drove him forward again, while a moment later Neuville was shouting the orders that wore the ship round to head away directly from the *Indefatigable*. Neuville beckoned Hornblower over to his side.

"Your late ship, I understand, Mr Hornblower?"

"Yes."

"What is her best point of sailing?"

Hornblower's eyes met Neuville's.

"Do not look so noble," said Neuville, smiling with thin lips. "I could undoubtedly induce you to give me the information. I know of ways. But it is unnecessary, fortunately for you. There is no ship on earth — especially none of His Britannic Majesty's clumsy frigates — that can outsail the *Pique* running before the wind. You will soon see that."

He strolled to the taffrail and looked aft long and earnestly through his glass, but no more earnestly than did Hornblower with his naked eye.

"You see?" said Neuville, proffering the glass.

Hornblower took it, but more to catch a closer glimpse of his ship than to confirm his observations. He was homesick, desperately homesick, at that moment, for the *Indefatigable*. But there could be no denying that she was being left fast behind. Her topgallants were out of sight again now, and only her royals were visible.

"Two hours and we shall have run her mastheads under," said Neuville, taking back the telescope and shutting it with a snap.

He left Hornblower standing sorrowful at the taffrail while he turned to berate the helmsman for not steering a steadier course; Hornblower heard the explosive words without listening to them, the wind blowing into his face and ruffling his hair over his ears, and the wake of the ship's passage boiling below him. So might Adam have looked back at Eden; Hornblower remembered the stuffy dark midshipmen's berth, the smells and the creakings, the bitter cold nights, turning out in response to the call for all hands, the weevilly bread and the wooden beef, and he yearned for them all, with the sick feeling of hopeless longing. Liberty was vanishing over the horizon. Yet it was not these personal feelings that drove him below in search of action. They may have quickened his wits, but it was a sense of duty which inspired him.

The slave-deck was deserted, as usual, with all hands at quarters. Beyond the bulkhead stood his cot with the books upon it and the slush lamp swaying above it. There was nothing there to give him any inspiration. There was another locked door in the after bulkhead. That opened into some kind of boatswain's store; twice he had seen it unlocked and paint and similar supplies brought out from it. Paint! That gave him an idea; he looked from the door up to the slush lamp and back again, and as he stepped forward he took his claspknife out of his

pocket. But before very long he recoiled again, sneering at himself. The door was not panelled, but was made of two solid slabs of wood, with the cross-beams on the inside. There was the keyhole of the lock, but it presented no point of attack. It would take him hours and hours to cut through that door with his knife, at a time when minutes were precious.

His heart was beating feverishly — but no more feverishly than his mind was working — as he looked round again. He reached up to the lamp and shook it; nearly full. There was a moment when he stood hesitating, nerving himself, and then he threw himself into action. With a ruthless hand he tore the pages out of Grandjean's *Principes de la Navigation*, crumpling them up in small quantities into little loose balls which he laid at the foot of the door. He threw off his uniform coat and dragged his blue woollen jersey over his head; his long powerful fingers tore it across and plucked eagerly at it to unravel it. After starting some loose threads he would not waste more time on it, and dropped the garment onto the paper and looked round again. The mattress of the cot! It was stuffed with straw, by God! A slash of his knife tore open the ticking, and he scooped the stuff out by the armful; constant pressure had almost solidified it, but he shook it and handled it so that it bulked out far larger in a mass on the deck nearly up to his waist. That would give him the intense blaze he wanted. He stood still, compelling himself to think clearly and logically — it was impetuosity and lack of thought which had occasioned the loss of the *Marie Galante*, and now he had wasted time on his jersey. He worked out the successive steps to take. He made a long spill out of a page of the *Manuel de Matelotage*, and lighted it at the lamp. Then he poured out the grease — the lamp was hot and the grease liquid — over his balls of paper, over the deck, over the base of the door. A touch from his taper lighted one ball, the flame travelled quickly. He was committed now. He piled the straw upon the flames, and in a sudden access of insane strength he tore the cot from its fastenings, smashing it as he did so, and piled the fragments on the straw. Already the flames were racing through the straw. He dropped the lamp upon the pile grabbed his coat and walked out. He thought of closing the door, but decided against it — the more air the better. He wriggled into his coat and ran up the ladder.

On deck he forced himself to lounge nonchalantly against the rail, putting his shaking hands into his pockets. His excitement made him weak, nor was it lessened as he waited. Every minute before the fire could be discovered was important. A French officer said something to him with a triumphant laugh and pointed aft over the taffrail, presumably speaking about leaving the *Indefatigable* behind. Hornblower smiled bleakly at him; that was the first gesture that occurred to him, and then he thought that a smile was out of place, and he tried to assume a sullen scowl. The wind was blowing briskly, so that the *Pique* could only just carry all plain sail; Hornblower felt it on his cheeks, which were burning. Everyone on deck seemed unnaturally busy and preoccupied; Neuville was watching the helmsman with occasional glances aloft to see that every sail was doing its work; the men were at the guns, two hands and a petty officer heaving the log. God, how much longer would he have?

Look there! The coaming of the after hatchway appeared distorted, wavering in the shimmering air. Hot air must be coming up through it. And was that, or was it not, the ghost of a wreath of smoke? It was! In that moment the alarm was given. A loud cry, a rush of feet, an instant bustle, the loud beating of a drum, high-pitched shouts — "Au feu! Au feu!"

The four elements of Aristotle, thought Hornblower insanely — earth, air, water, and fire — were the constant enemies of the seaman, but the lee shore, the gale, and the wave, were none of them as feared in wooden ships as fire. Timbers many years old and coated thick with paint burnt fiercely and readily. Sails and tarry rigging would burn like fireworks. And within the ship were tons and tons of gunpowder waiting its chance to blast the seamen into fragments. Hornblower watched the fire parties flinging themselves into their work, the pumps being dragged over the decks, the hoses rigged. Someone came racing aft with a message for Neuville, presumably to report the site of the fire. Neuville heard him, and darted a glance at Hornblower against the rail before he hurled orders back at the messenger. The smoke coming up through the after hatchway was dense now; at Neuville's orders the after guard flung themselves down the opening through the smoke. And there was more smoke, and more smoke; smoke caught up by the following wind and blown forward in wisps — smoke must be pouring out of the sides of the ship at the waterline.

Neuville took a stride towards Hornblower, his face working with rage, but a cry from the helmsman checked him. The helmsman, unable to take his hands from the wheel, pointed with his foot to the cabin skylight. There

was a flickering of flame below it. A side pane fell in as they watched, and a rush of flame came through the opening. That store of paint, Hornblower calculated — he was calmer now, with a calm that would astonish him later, when he came to look back on it — must be immediately under the cabin, and blazing fiercely. Melville looked round him, at the sea and the sky, and put his hands to his head in a furious gesture. For the first time in his life Hornblower saw a man literally tearing his hair. But his nerve held. A shout brought up another portable pump; four men set to work on the handles, and the clank-clank, clank-clank made an accompaniment that blended with the roar of the fire. A thin jet of water was squirted down the gaping skylight. More men formed a bucket chain, drawing water from the sea and passing it from hand to hand to pour in the skylight, but those buckets of water were less effective ever than the stream from the pumps. From below came the dull thud of an explosion, and Hornblower caught his breath as he expected the ship to be blown to pieces. But no further explosion followed; either a gun had been set off by the flames or a cask had burst violently in the heat. And then the bucket line suddenly disintegrated; beneath the feet of one of the men a seam had gaped in a broad red smile from which came a rush of flame. Some officer had seized Neuville by the arm and was arguing with him vehemently, and Hornblower could see Neuville yield in despair. Hands went scurrying aloft to get in the foretopsail and forecourse, and other hands went to the main braces. Over went the wheel, and the *Pique* came up into the wind.

The change was dramatic, although at first more apparent than real; with the wind blowing in the opposite direction the roar of the fire did not come so clearly to the ears of those forward of it. But it was an immense gain, all the same; the flames, which had started in the steerage in the farthest after-part of the ship, no longer were blown forward, but were turned back upon timber already half consumed. Yet the after-part of the deck was fully alight; the helmsman was driven from the wheel, and in a flash the flames took hold of the driver and consumed it utterly — one moment the sail was there, and the next there were only charred fragments hanging from the gaff. But, head to wind, the other sails did not catch, and a mizzen-trysail hurriedly set kept the ship bows on.

It was then that Hornblower, looking forward, saw the *Indefatigable* again. She was tearing down towards them with all sail set; as the *Pique* lifted he could see the white bow wave foaming under her bowsprit. There was no question about surrender, for under the menace of that row of guns no ship of the *Pique*'s force, even if uninjured, could resist. A cable's length to windward the *Indefatigable* rounded-to, and she was hoisting out her boats before even she was fully round. Pellew had seen the smoke, and had deduced the reason for the *Pique*'s heaving to, and had made his preparations as he came up. Longboat and launch had each a pump in their bows where sometimes they carried a carronade; they dropped down to the stern of the *Pique* to cast their jets of water up into the flaming stern without more ado. Two gigs full of men ran straight aft to join in the battle with the flames, but Bolton, the third lieutenant, lingered for a moment as he caught Hornblower's eye.

"Good God, it's you!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

Yet he did not stay for an answer. He picked out Neuville as the captain of the *Pique*, strode aft to receive his surrender, cast his eyes aloft to see that all was well there, and then took up the task of combating the fire. The flames were overcome in time, more because they had consumed everything within reach of them than for any other reason; the *Pique* was burnt from the taffrail forward for some feet of her length right to the water's edge, so that she presented a strange spectacle when viewed from the deck of the *Indefatigable*. Nevertheless, she was in no immediate danger; given even moderate good fortune and a little hard work she could be sailed to England to be repaired and sent to sea again.

But it was not her salvage that was important, but rather the fact that she was no longer in French hands, would no longer be available to prey on English commerce. That was the point that Sir Edward Pellew made in conversation with Hornblower, when the latter came on board to report himself. Hornblower had begun, at Pellew's order, by recounting what had happened to him from the time he had been sent as prize master on board the *Marie Galante*. As Hornblower had expected — perhaps as he had even feared — Pellew had passed lightly over the loss of the brig. She had been damaged by gunfire before surrendering, and no one now could establish whether the damage was small or great. Pellew did not give the matter a second thought. Hornblower had tried to save her and had been unsuccessful with his tiny crew — and at that moment the *Indefatigable* could not spare him a larger crew. He did not hold Hornblower culpable. Once again, it was more

important that France should be deprived of the *Marie Galante's* cargo than that England should benefit by it. The situation was exactly parallel to that of the salvaging of the *Pique*.

"It was lucky she caught fire like that," commented Pellew, looking across to where the *Pique* lay, still hove-to with the boats clustering about her but with only the thinnest trail of smoke drifting from her stern. "She was running clean away from us, and would have been out of sight in an hour. Have you any idea how it happened, Mr Hornblower?"

Hornblower was naturally expecting that question and was ready for it. Now was the time to answer truthfully and modestly, to receive the praise he deserved, a mention in the *Gazette*, perhaps even appointment as acting-lieutenant. But Pellew did not know the full details of the loss of the brig, and might make a false estimate of them even if he did.

"No, sir," said Hornblower. "I think it must have been spontaneous combustion in the paint-locker. I can't account for it otherwise."

He alone knew of his remissness in plugging that shot-hole, he alone could decide on his punishment, and this was what he had chosen. This alone could re-establish him in his own eyes, and when the words were spoken he felt enormous relief, and not one single twinge of regret.

"It was fortunate, all the same," mused Pellew.

CHAPTER FOUR — THE MAN WHO FELT QUEER

This time the wolf was prowling round outside the sheepfold. H.M. frigate *Indefatigable* had chased the French corvette *Papillon* into the mouth of the Gironde, and was seeking a way of attacking her where she lay at anchor in the stream under the protection of the batteries at the mouth. Captain Pellew took his ship into shoal water as far as he dared, until in fact the batteries fired warning shots to make him keep his distance, and he stared long and keenly through his glass at the corvette. Then he shut his telescope and fumed on his hem to give the order that worked the *Indefatigable* away from the dangerous lee shore — out of sight of land, in fact. His departure might lull the French into a sense of security which, he hoped, would prove unjustified. For he had no intention of leaving them undisturbed. If the corvette could be captured or sunk not only would she be unavailable for raids on British commerce, but also the French would be forced to increase their coastal defences at this point and lessen the effort that could be put out elsewhere. War is a matter of savage blow and counter blow, and even a forty-gun frigate could strike shrewd blows if shrewdly handled. Midshipman Hornblower was walking the lee side of the quarterdeck, as became his lowly station as the junior officer of the watch, in the afternoon, when Midshipman Kennedy approached him. Kennedy took off his hat with a flourish and bowed low as his dancing master had once taught him, left foot advanced, hat down by the right knee. Hornblower entered into the spirit of the game, laid his hat against his stomach, and bent himself in the middle three times in quick succession. Thanks to his physical awkwardness he could parody ceremonial solemnity almost without trying.

"Most grave and reverend Signor," said Kennedy, "I bear the compliments of Captain Sir Ed'ard Pellew, who humbly solicits Your Gravity's attendance at dinner at eight bells in the afternoon watch."

"My respects to Sir Edward," replied Hornblower, bowing to his knees at the mention of the name, "and I shall condescend to make a brief appearance."

"I am sure the captain will be both relieved and delighted," said Kennedy. "I will convey him my felicitations along with your most flattering acceptance."

Both hats flourished with even greater elaboration than before, but at that moment both young men noticed Mr Bolton, the officer of the watch, looking at them from the windward side, and they hurriedly put their hats on and assumed attitudes more consonant with the dignity of officers holding their warrants from King George.

"What's in the captain's mind?" asked Hornblower.

Kennedy laid one finger alongside his nose.

"If I knew that I should rate a couple of epaulettes," he said. "Something's brewing, and I suppose one of these days we shall know what it is. Until then all that we little victims can do is to play unconscious of our doom. Meanwhile, be careful not to let the ship fall overboard."

There was no sign of anything brewing while dinner was being eaten in the great cabin of the *Indefatigable*. Pellew was a courtly host at the head of the table. Conversation flowed freely and along indifferent channels among the senior officers present — the two lieutenants, Eccles and Chadd, and the sailing master, Soames. Hornblower and the other junior officer — Mallory, a midshipman of over two years' seniority — kept silent, as midshipmen should, thereby being able to devote their undivided attention to the food, so vastly superior to what was served in the midshipmen's berth.

"A glass of wine with you, Mr Hornblower," said Pellew, raising his glass.

Hornblower tried to bow gracefully in his seat while raising his glass. He sipped cautiously, for he had early found that he had a weak head, and he disliked feeling drunk.

The table was cleared and there was a brief moment of expectancy as the company awaited Pellew's next move.

"Now, Mr Soames," said Pellew, "let us have that chart."

It was a map of the mouth of the Gironde with the soundings; somebody had pencilled in the positions of the shore batteries.

"The *Papillon*," said Sir Edward (he did not condescend to pronounce it French-fashion), "lies just here. Mr Soames took the bearings."

He indicated a pencilled cross on the chart, far up the channel.

"You gentlemen," went on Pellew, "are going in with the boats to fetch her out."

So that was it. A cutting-out expedition.

"Mr Eccles will be in general command. I will ask him to tell you his plan."

The gray-haired first lieutenant with the surprisingly young blue eyes looked round at the others.

"I shall have the launch," he said, "and Mr Soames the cutter. Mr Chadd and Mr Mallory will command the first and second gigs. And Mr Hornblower will command the jolly boat. Each of the boats except Mr Hornblower's will have a junior officer second in command."

That would not be necessary for the jolly boat with its crew of seven. The launch and cutter would carry from thirty to forty men each, and the gigs twenty each; it was a large force that was being despatched — nearly half the ship's company.

"She's a ship of war," explained Eccles, reading their thoughts. "No merchantman. Ten guns a side, and full of men."

Nearer two hundred men than a hundred, certainly — plentiful opposition for a hundred and twenty British seamen.

"But we will be attacking her by night and taking her by surprise," said Eccles, reading their thoughts again.

"Surprise," put in Pellew, "is more than half the battle, as you know, gentlemen — please pardon The interruption, Mr Eccles."

"At the moment," went on Eccles, "we are out of sight of land. We are about to stand in again. We have never hung about this part of the coast, and the Frogs'll think we've gone for good. We'll make the land after nightfall, stand in as far as possible, and then the boats will go in. High water to-morrow morning is at four-fifty; dawn is at five-thirty. The attack will be delivered at four-thirty so that the watch below will have had time to get to sleep. The launch will attack on the starboard quarter, and the cutter on the larboard quarter. Mr Mallory's gig will attack on the larboard bow, and Mr Chadd's on the starboard bow. Mr Chadd will be responsible for cutting the corvette's cable as soon as he has mastered the forecable, and the other boats' crews have at least reached the quarterdeck."

Eccles looked round at the other three commanders of the large boats, and they nodded understanding. Then he went on.

"Mr Hornblower with the jolly boat will wait until the attack has gained a foothold on the deck. He will then board at the main chains, either to starboard or larboard as he sees fit, and he will at once ascend the main rigging, paying no attention to whatever fighting is going on on deck. He will see to it that the maintopsail is loosed and he will sheet it home on receipt of further orders. I myself, or Mr Soames in the event of my being

killed or wounded, will send two hands to the wheel and will attend to steering the corvette as soon as she is under way. The tide will take us out and the *Indefatigable* will be awaiting us just out of gunshot from the shore batteries."

"Any comments, gentlemen?" asked Pellew.

That was the moment when Hornblower should have spoken up — the only moment when he could. Eccles' orders had set in motion sick feelings of apprehension in his stomach. Hornblower was no maintopman, and Hornblower knew it. He hated heights, and he hated going aloft. He knew he had none of the monkey-like agility and self-confidence of the good seaman. He was unsure of himself aloft in the dark even in the *Indefatigable*, and he was utterly appalled at the thought of going aloft in an entirely strange ship and finding his way among strange rigging. He felt himself quite unfitted for the duty assigned to him, and he should have raised a protest at once on account of his unfitness. But he let the opportunity pass, for he was overcome by the matter-of-fact way in which the other officers accepted the plan. He looked round at the unmoved faces; nobody was paying any attention to him, and he jibbed at making himself conspicuous. He swallowed; he even got as far as opening his mouth, but still no one looked at him, and his protest died stillborn.

"Very well, then, gentlemen," said Pellew. "I think you had better go into the details, Mr Eccles."

Then it was too late. Eccles, with the chart before him, was pointing out the course to be taken through the shoals and mudbanks of the Gironde, and expatiating on the position of the shore batteries and on the influence of the lighthouse of Cordouan upon the distance to which the *Indefatigable* could approach in daylight. Hornblower listened, trying to concentrate despite his apprehensions. Eccles finished his remarks and Pellew closed the meeting.

"Since you all know your duties, gentlemen, I think you should start your preparations. The sun is about to set and you will find you have plenty to do."

The boats crews had to be told off; it was necessary to see that the men were armed and that the boats were provisioned in case of emergency. Every man had to be instructed in the duties expected of him. And Hornblower had to rehearse himself in ascending the main shrouds and laying out along the main topsail yard. He did it twice, forcing himself to make the difficult climb up the futtock shrouds, which, projecting outwards from the mainmast, made it necessary to climb several feet while hanging back downwards, locking fingers and toes into the ratlines. He could just manage it, moving slowly and carefully, although clumsily. He stood on the footrope and worked his way out to the yardarm — the footrope was attached along the yard so as to hang nearly four feet below it. The principle was to set his feet on the rope with his arms over the yard, then, holding the yard in his armpits, to shuffle sideways along the footrope to cast off the gaskets and loose the sail. Twice Hornblower made the whole journey, battling with the disquiet of his stomach at the thought of the hundred-foot drop below him. Finally, gulping with nervousness, he transferred his grip to the brace and forced himself to slide down it to the deck — that would be his best route when the time came to sheet the topsail home. It was a long perilous descent; Hornblower told himself — as indeed he had said to himself when he had first seen men go aloft — that similar feats in a circus at home would be received with 'ohs' and 'ahs' of appreciation. He was by no means satisfied with himself even when he reached the deck, and at the back of his mind was a vivid mental picture of his missing his hold when the time came for him to repeat the performance in the *Papillon*, and falling headlong to the deck — a second or two of frightful fear while rushing through the air, and then a shattering crash. And the success of the attack hinged on him, as much as on anyone — if the topsail were not promptly set to give the corvette steerage way she would run aground on one of the innumerable shoals in the river mouth to be ignominiously recaptured, and half the crew of the *Indefatigable* would be dead or prisoners.

In the waist the jolly boat's crew was formed up for his inspection. He saw to it that the oars were properly muffled, that each man had pistol and cutlass, and made sure that every pistol was at half cock so that there was no fear of a premature shot giving warning of the attack. He allocated duties to each man in the loosening of the top sail, laying stress on the possibility that casualties might necessitate unrehearsed changes in the scheme.

"I will mount the rigging first," said Hornblower.

That had to be the case. He had to lead — it was expected of him. More than that; if he had given any other order it would have excited comment — and contempt.

"Jackson," went on Hornblower, addressing the coxswain, "you will quit the boat last and take command if I fall."

"Aye aye, sir."

It was usual to use the poetic expression 'fall' for 'die', and it was only after Hornblower had uttered the word that he thought about its horrible real meaning in the present circumstances.

"Is that all understood?" asked Hornblower harshly; it was his mental stress that made his voice grate so. Everyone nodded except one man.

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Hales, the young man who pulled stroke oar, "I'm feeling a bit queer-like." Hales was a lightly built young fellow of swarthy countenance. He put his hand to his forehead with a vague gesture as he spoke.

"You're not the only one to feel queer," snapped Hornblower.

The other men chuckled. The thought of running the gauntlet of the shore batteries, of boarding an armed corvette in the teeth of opposition, might well raise apprehension in the breast of a coward. Most of the men detailed for the expedition must have felt qualms to some extent.

"I don't mean that, sir," said Hales indignantly. "'Course I don't."

But Hornblower and the others paid him no attention

"You just keep your mouth shut," growled Jackson. There could be nothing but contempt for a man who announced himself sick after being told off on a dangerous duty. Hornblower felt sympathy as well as contempt. He himself had been too much of a coward even to give voice to his apprehensions — too much afraid of what people would say about him.

"Dismiss," said Hornblower. "I'll pass the word for all of you when you are wanted."

There were some hours yet to wait while the *Indefatigable* crept inshore, with the lead going steadily and Pellew himself attending to the course of the frigate. Hornblower, despite his nervousness and his miserable apprehensions, yet found time to appreciate the superb seamanship displayed as Pellew brought the big frigate in through these tricky waters on that dark night. His interest was so caught by the procedure that the little tremblings which had been assailing him ceased to manifest themselves; Hornblower was of the type that would continue to observe and to learn on his deathbed. By the time the *Indefatigable* had reached the point off the mouth of the river where it was desirable to launch the boats, Hornblower had learned a good deal about the practical application of the principles of coastwise navigation and a good deal about the organization of a cutting-out expedition — and by self analysis he had learned even more about the psychology of a raiding party before a raid.

He had mastered himself to all outside appearance by the time he went down into the jolly boat as she heaved on the inky-black water, and he gave the command to shove off in a quiet steady voice. Hornblower took the tiller — the feel of that solid bar of wood was reassuring, and it was old habit now to sit in the stern sheets with hand and elbow upon it, and the men began to pull slowly over the dark shapes of the four big boats; there was plenty of time, and the flowing tide would take them up the estuary. That was just as well, for on one side of them lay the batteries of St Dye, and inside the estuary on the other side was the fortress of Blaye; forty big guns trained to sweep the channel, and none of the five boats — certainly not the jolly boat — could withstand a single shot from one of them.

He kept his eyes attentively on the cutter ahead of him. Soames had the dreadful responsibility of taking the boats up the channel, while all he had to do was to follow in her wake — all, except to loose that maintopsail. Hornblower found himself shivering again.

Hales, the man who had said he felt queer, was pulling stroke oar; Hornblower could just see his dark form moving rhythmically back and forward at each slow stroke. After a single glance Hornblower paid him no more attention, and was staring after the cutter when a sudden commotion brought his mind back into the boat. Someone had missed his stroke; someone had thrown all six oars into confusion as a result. There was even a slight clatter.

"Mind what you're doing, blast you, Hales," whispered Jackson, the coxswain, with desperate urgency.

For answer there was a sudden cry from Hales, loud but fortunately not too loud, and Hales pitched forward against Hornblower's and Jackson's legs, kicking and writhing.

"The bastard's having a fit," growled Jackson.

The kicking and writhing went on. Across the water through the darkness came a sharp scornful whisper. "Mr Hornblower," said the voice — it was Eccles putting a world of exasperation into his *sotto voce* question — "cannot you keep your men quiet?"

Eccles had brought the launch round almost alongside the oily boat to say this to him, and the desperate need for silence was dramatically demonstrated by the absence of any of the usual blasphemy; Hornblower could picture the cutting reprimand that would be administered to him to-morrow publicly on the quarterdeck. He opened his mouth to make an explanation, but he fortunately realized that raiders in open boats did not make explanations when under the guns of the fortress of Blaye.

"Aye aye, sir," was all he whispered back, and the launch continued on its mission of shepherding the flotilla in the tracks of the cutter,

"Take his oar, Jackson," he whispered furiously to the coxswain, and he stooped and with his own hands dragged the writhing figure towards him and out of Jackson's way.

"You might try pouring water on 'im, sir," suggested Jackson hoarsely, as he moved to the afterthwart.

"There's the baler 'andy."

Seawater was the seaman's cure for every ill, his panacea; seeing how often sailors had not merely wet jackets but wet bedding as well they should never have a day's illness. But Hornblower let the sick man lie. His struggles were coming to an end, and Hornblower wished to make no noise with the baler. The lives of more than a hundred men depended on silence. Now that they were well into the actual estuary they were within easy reach of cannon shot from the shore — and a single cannon shot would rouse the crew of the *Papillon*, ready to man the bulwarks to beat off the attack, ready to drop cannon balls into the boats alongside, ready to shatter approaching boats with a tempest of grape.

Silently the boats glided up the estuary; Soames in the cutter was setting a slow pace, with only an occasional stroke at the oars to maintain steerage way. Presumably he knew very well what he was doing; the channel he had selected was an obscure one between mudbanks, impracticable for anything except small boats, and he had a twenty-foot pole with him with which to take the soundings — quicker and much more silent than using the lead. Minutes were passing fast, and yet the night was still utterly dark, with no hint of approaching dawn. Strain his eyes as he would Hornblower could not be sure that he could see the flat shores on either side of him. It would call for sharp eyes on the land to detect the little boats being carried up by the tide.

Hales at his feet stirred and then stirred again. His hand, feeling round in the darkness, found Hornblower's ankle and apparently examined it with curiosity. He muttered something, the words dragging out into a moan. "Shut up!" whispered Hornblower, trying, like the saint of old, to make a tongue of his whole body, that he might express the urgency of the occasion without making a sound audible at any distance. Hales set his elbow on Hornblower's knee and levered himself up into a sitting position, and then levered himself further until he was standing, swaying with bent knees and supporting himself against Hornblower.

"Sit down, damn you!" whispered Hornblower, shaking with fury and anxiety.

"Where's Mary?" asked Hales in a conversational tone.

"Shut up!"

"Mary!" said Hales, lurching against him. "Mary!"

Each successive word was louder. Hornblower felt instinctively that Hales would soon be speaking in a loud voice, that he might even soon be shouting. Old recollections of conversations with his doctor father stirred at the back of his mind; he remembered that persons emerging from epileptic fits were not responsible for their actions, and might be, and often were, dangerous.

"Mary!" said Hales again.

Victory and the lives of a hundred men depended on silencing Hales, and silencing him instantly. Hornblower thought of the pistol in his belt, and of using the butt, but there was another weapon more conveniently to his hand. He unshipped the tiller, a three-foot bar of solid oak, and he swung it with all the venom and fury of despair. The tiller crashed down on Hales' head, and Hales, an unuttered word cut short in his throat, fell silent in the bottom of the boat. There was no sound from the boat's crew, save for something like a sigh from Jackson, whether approving or disapproving Hornblower neither knew nor cared. He had done his duty, and he was certain of it. He had struck down a helpless idiot; most probably he had killed him, but the surprise upon which the success of the expedition depended had not been imperilled. He reshipped the tiller and resumed

the silent task of keeping in the wake of the gigs.

Far away ahead — in the darkness it was impossible to estimate the distance — there was a nucleus of greater darkness, close on the surface of the black water. It might be the corvette. A dozen more silent strokes, and Hornblower was sure of it. Soames had done a magnificent job of pilotage, leading the boats straight to that objective. The cutter and launch were diverging now from the two gigs. The four boats were separating in readiness to launch their simultaneous converging attack.

"Easy!" whispered Hornblower, and the jolly boat's crew ceased to pull.

Hornblower had his orders. He had to wait until the attack had gained a foothold on the deck. His hand clenched convulsively on the tiller; the excitement of dealing with Hales had driven the thought of having to ascend strange rigging in the darkness clear out of his head, and now it recurred with redoubled urgency. Hornblower was afraid.

Although he could see the corvette, the boats had vanished from his sight, had passed out of his field of vision. The corvette rode to her anchor, her spars just visible against the night sky — that was where he had to climb! She seemed to tower up hugely. Close by the corvette he saw a splash in the dark water — the boats were closing in fast and someone's stroke had been a little careless. At the same moment came a shout from the corvette's deck, and when the shout was repeated it was echoed a hundred fold from the boats rushing alongside. The yelling was lusty and prolonged, of set purpose. A sleeping enemy would be bewildered by the din, and the progress of the shouting would tell each boat's crew of the extent of the success of the others. The British seamen were yelling like madmen. A flash and a bang from the corvette's deck told of the firing of the first shot; soon pistols were popping and muskets banging from several points of the deck.

"Give way!" said Hornblower. He uttered the order as if it had been torn from him by the rack.

The jolly boat moved forward, while Hornblower fought down his feelings and tried to make out what was going on on board. He could see no reason for choosing either side of the corvette in preference to the other, and the larboard side was the nearer, and so he steered the boat to the larboard main chains. So interested was he in what he was doing that he only remembered in the nick of time to give the order, "In oars." He put the tiller over and the boat swirled round and the bowman hooked on. From the deck just above came a noise exactly like a tinker hammering on a cooking-pot — Hornblower noted the curious noise as he stood up in the stern sheets. He felt the cutlass at his side and the pistol in his belt, and then he sprang for the chains. With a mad leap he reached them and hauled himself up. The shrouds came into his hands, his feet found the ratlines beneath them, and he began to climb. As his head cleared the bulwark and he could see the deck the flash of a pistol shot illuminated the scene momentarily, fixing the struggle on the deck in a static moment, like a picture. Before and below him a British seaman was fighting a furious cutlass duel with a French officer, and he realized with vague astonishment that the kettle-mending noise he had heard was the sound of cutlass against cutlass — that clash of steel against steel that poets wrote about. So much for romance.

The realization carried him far up the shrouds. At his elbow he felt the futtock shrouds and he transferred himself to them, hanging back downward with his toes hooked into the ratlines and his hands clinging like death. That only lasted for two or three desperate seconds, and then he hauled himself onto the topmast shrouds and began the final ascent, his lungs bursting with the effort. Here was the topsail yard, and Hornblower flung himself across it and felt with his feet for the footrope. Merciful God! There was no footrope — his feet searching in the darkness met only unresisting air. A hundred feet above the deck he hung, squirming and kicking like a baby held up at arm's length in its father's hands. There was no footrope; it may have been with this very situation in mind that the Frenchmen had removed it. There was no footrope, so that he could not make his way out to the yardarm. Yet the gaskets must be cast off and the sail loosed — everything depended on that. Hornblower had seen daredevil seamen run out along the yards standing upright, as though walking a tightrope. That was the only way to reach the yardarm now.

For a moment he could not breathe as his weak flesh revolted against the thought of walking along that yard above the black abyss. This was fear, the fear that stripped a man of his manhood, turning his bowels to water and his limbs to paper. Yet his furiously active mind continued to work. He had been resolute enough in dealing with Hales. Where he personally was not involved he had been brave enough; he had not hesitated to strike down the wretched epileptic with all the strength of his arm. That was the poor sort of courage he was capable of displaying. In the simple vulgar matter of physical bravery he was utterly wanting. This was

cowardice, the sort of thing that men spoke about behind their hands to other men. He could not bear the thought of that in himself — it was worse (awful though the alternative might be) than the thought of falling through the night to the deck. With a gasp he brought his knee up onto the yard, heaving himself up until he stood upright. He felt the rounded, canvas-covered timber under his feet, and his instincts told him not to dally there for a moment.

"Come on, men!" he yelled, and he dashed out along the yard.

It was twenty feet to the yardarm, and he covered the distance in a few frantic strides. Utterly reckless by now, he put his hands down on the yard, clasped it, and laid his body across it again, his hands seeking the gaskets. A thump on the yard told him that Oldroyd, who had been detailed to come after him, had followed him out along the yard — he had six feet less to go. There could be no doubt that the other members of the jolly boat's crew were on the yard, and that Clough had led the way to the starboard yardarm. It was obvious from the rapidity with which the sail came loose. Here was the brace beside him. Without any thought of danger now, for he was delirious with excitement and triumph, he grasped it with both hands and jerked himself off the yard. His waving legs found the rope and twined about it, and he let himself slide down it. Fool that he was! Would he never learn sense and prudence? Would he never remember that vigilance and precaution must never be relaxed? He had allowed himself to slide so fast that the rope seared his hands, and when he tried to tighten his grip so as to slow down his progress it caused him such agony that he had to relax it again and slide on down with the rope stripping the skin from his hands as though peeling off a glove. His feet reached the deck and he momentarily forgot the pain as he looked round him.

There was the faintest grey light beginning to show now, and there were no sounds of battle. It had been a well-worked surprise — a hundred men flung suddenly on the deck of the corvette had swept away the anchor watch and mastered the vessel in a single rush before the watch below could come up to offer any resistance. Chadd's stentorian voice came pealing from the forecastle.

"Cable's cut, sir!"

Then Eccles bellowed from aft.

"Mr Hornblower!"

"Sir!" yelled Hornblower.

"Man the halliards!"

A rush of men came to help — not only his own boat's crew but every man of initiative and spirit. Halliards, sheets and braces; the sail was trimmed round and was drawing full in the light southerly air, and the *Papillon* swung round to go down with the first of the ebb. Dawn was coming up fast, with a trifle of mist on the surface of the water.

Over the starboard quarter came a sullen bellowing roar, and then the misty air was torn by a series of infernal screams, supernaturally loud. The first cannon balls Hornblower ever heard were passing him by.

"Mr Chadd! Set the headsails! Loose the foretops'l. Get aloft, some of you, and set the mizzen tops'l."

From the port bow came another salvo — Blaye was firing at them from one side, St Dye from the other, now they could guess what had happened on board the *Papillon*. But the corvette was moving fast with wind and tide, and it would be no easy matter to cripple her in the half light. It had been a very near-run thing; a few seconds' delay could have been fatal. Only one shot from the next salvo passed within hearing, and its passage was marked by a loud snap overhead.

"Mr Mallory, get that forestay spliced!"

"Aye aye, sir!"

It was light enough to look round the deck now; he could see Eccles at the break of the poop, directing the handling of the corvette, and Soames beside the wheel conning her down the channel. Two groups of red-coated marines, with bayonets fixed, stood guard over the hatchways. There were four or five men lying on the deck in curiously abandoned attitudes. Dead men; Hornblower could look at them with the callousness of youth. But there was a wounded man, too, crouched groaning over his shattered thigh — Hornblower could not look at him as disinterestedly, and he was glad, maybe only for his own sake, when at that moment a seaman asked for and received permission from Mallory to leave his duties and attend to him.

"Stand by to go about!" shouted Eccles from the poop; the corvette had reached the tip of the middle ground shoal and was about to make the turn that would carry her into the open sea.

The men came running to the braces, and Hornblower tailed on along with them. But the first contact with the harsh rope gave him such pain that he almost cried out. His hands were like raw meat, and fresh-killed at that, for blood as running from them. Now that his attention was called to them they smarted unbearably.

The headsail sheets came over, and the corvette went handily about.

"There's the old *Indy*!" shouted somebody,

The *Indefatigable* was plainly visible now, lying-to just out of shot from the shore batteries, ready to rendezvous with her prize. Somebody cheered, and the cheering was taken up by everyone, even while the last shots from St Dye, fired at extreme range, pitched sullenly into the water alongside. Hornblower had gingerly extracted his handkerchief from his pocket and was trying to wrap it round his hand.

"Can I help you with that, sir?" asked Jackson.

Jackson shook his head as he looked at the raw surface.

"You was careless, sir. You ought to 'a gone down 'and over 'and," he said, when Hornblower explained to him how the injury had been caused. "Very careless, you was, beggin' your pardon for saying so, sir. But you young gennelmen often is. You don't 'ave no thought for your necks, nor your 'ides, sir."

Hornblower looked up at the maintopsail yard high above his head, and remembered how he had walked along that slender stick of timber out to the yardarm in the dark. At the recollection of it, even here with the solid deck under his feet, he shuddered a little.

"Sorry, sir. Didn't mean to 'urt you," said Jackson, tying the knot. "There, that's done, as good as I can do it, sir."

"Thank you, Jackson," said Hornblower.

"We got to report the jolly boat as lost, sir," went on Jackson.

"Lost?"

"She ain't towing alongside, sir. You see, we didn't leave no boatkeeper in 'er. Wells, 'e was to be boatkeeper, you remember, sir. But I sent 'im up the rigging a'head o' me, seeing that 'Ales couldn't go. We wasn't too many for the job. So the jolly boat must 'a come adrift, sir, when the ship went about."

"What about Hales, then?" asked Hornblower.

"'E was still in the boat, sir."

Hornblower looked back up the estuary of the Gironde. Somewhere up there the jolly boat was drifting about, and lying in it was Hales, probably dead, possibly alive. In either case the French would find him, surely enough, but a cold wave of regret extinguished the warm feeling of triumph in Hornblower's bosom when he thought about Hales back there. If it had not been for Hales he would never have nerved himself (so at least he thought) to run out to the maintopsail yardarm; he would at this moment be ruined and branded as a coward instead of basking in the satisfaction of having capably done his duty.

Jackson saw the bleak look in his face.

"Don't you take on so, sir," he said. "They won't 'old the loss of the jolly boat agin you, not the captain and Mr Eccles, they won't."

"I wasn't thinking about the jolly boat," said Hornblower. "I was thinking about Hales."

"Oh, 'im?" said Jackson. "Don't you fret about 'im, sir. 'E wouldn't never 'ave made no seaman, not no 'ow."

CHAPTER FIVE — THE MAN WHO SAW GOD

Winter had come to the Bay of Biscay. With the passing of the Equinox the gales began to increase in violence, adding infinitely to the labours and dangers of the British Navy watching over the coast of France; easterly gales, bitter cold, which the storm-tossed ships had to endure as best they could, when the spray froze on the rigging and the labouring hulls leaked like baskets; westerly gales, when the ships had to claw their way to safety from a lee shore and make a risky compromise between gaining sufficient sea-room and maintaining a position from which they could pounce on any French vessel venturing out of harbour. The storm-tossed ships, we speak about. But those ships were full of storm-tossed men, who week by week and month by month had

to endure the continual cold and the continual wet, the salt provisions, the endless toil, the boredom and misery of life in the blockading fleet. Even in the frigates, the eyes and claws of the blockaders, boredom had to be endured, the boredom of long periods with the hatches battened down, with the deck seams above dripping water on the men below, long nights and short days, broken sleep and yet not enough to do. Even in the *Indefatigable* there was a feeling of restlessness in the air, and even a mere midshipman like Hornblower could be aware of it as he was looking over the men of his division before the captain's regular weekly inspection.

"What's the matter with your face, Styles?" he asked.

"Boils, sir. Awful bad."

On Styles' cheeks and lips there were half a dozen dabs of sticking plaster.

"Have you done anything about them?"

"Surgeon's mate, sir, 'e give me plaister for 'em, an' 'e says they'll soon come right, sir."

"Very well."

Now was there, or was there not, something strained about the expressions on the faces of the men on either side of Styles? Did they look like men smiling secretly to themselves? Laughing up their sleeves? Hornblower did not want to be an object of derision; it was bad for discipline — and it was worse for discipline if the men shared some secret unknown to their officers. He glanced sharply along the line again. Styles was standing like a block of wood, with no expression at all on his swarthy face; the black ringlets over his ears were properly combed, and no fault could be found with him. But Hornblower sensed that the recent conversation was a source of amusement to the rest of his division, and he did not like it.

After divisions he tackled Mr Low the surgeon, in the gunroom.

"Boils?" said Low. "Of course the men have boils. Salt pork and split peas for nine weeks on end — what d'you expect but boils? Boils — gurry sores — blains — all the plagues of Egypt."

"On their faces?"

"That's one locality for boils. You'll find out others from your own personal experience."

"Does your mate attend to them?" persisted Hornblower.

"Of course."

"What's he like?"

"Muggridge?"

"Is that his name?"

"He's a good surgeon's mate. Get him to compound a black draught for you and you'll see. In fact, I'd prescribe one for you — you seem in a mighty bad temper, young man."

Mr Low finished his glass of rum and pounded on the table for the steward. Hornblower realized that he was lucky to have found Low sober enough to give him even this much information, and turned away to go aloft so as to brood over the question in the solitude of the mizzen-top. This was his new station in action; when the men were not at their quarters a man might find a little blessed solitude there — something hard to find in the crowded *Indefatigable*. Bundled up in his peajacket, Hornblower sat in the mizzen-top; over his head the mizzen-topmast drew erratic circles against the grey sky; beside him the topmast shrouds sang their high-pitched note in the blustering gale, and below him the life of the ship went on as she rolled and pitched, standing to the northward under close reefed topsails. At eight bells she would wear to the southward again on her incessant patrol. Until that time Hornblower was free to meditate on the boils on Styles' face and the covert grins on the faces of the other men of the division.

Two hands appeared on the stout wooden barricade surrounding the top, and as Hornblower looked up with annoyance at having his meditations interrupted a head appeared above them. It was Finch, another man in Hornblower's division, who also had his station in action here in the mizzen-top. He was a frail little man with wispy hair and pale blue eyes and a foolish smile, which lit up his face when, after betraying some disappointment at finding the mizzen-top already occupied, he recognized Hornblower.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said. "I didn't know as how you was up here."

Finch was hanging on uncomfortably, back downwards, in the act of transferring himself from the futtock shrouds to the top, and each roll threatened to shake him loose.

"Oh come here if you want to," said Hornblower, cursing himself for his soft heartedness. A taut officer, he

felt, would have told Finch to go back whence he came and not bother him.

"Thank 'ee, sir. Thank 'ee," said Finch, bringing his leg over the barricade and allowing the ship's roll to drop him into the top.

He crouched down to peer under the foot of the mizzen-topsail forward to the mainmast head, and then turned back to smile disarmingly at Hornblower like a child caught in moderate mischief. Hornblower knew that Finch was a little weak in the head — the all embracing press swept up idiots and landsmen to help man the fleet — although he was a trained seaman who could hand, reef and steer. That smile betrayed him.

"It's better up here than down below, sir," said Finch, apologetically.

"You're right," said Hornblower, with a disinterested intonation which would discourage conversation.

He turned away to ignore Finch, settled his bark again comfortably, and allowed the steady swing of the top to mesmerize him into dreamy thought that might deal with his problem. Yet it was not easy, for Finch was as restless almost as a squirrel in a cage, peering forward, changing his position, and so continually breaking in on Hornblower's train of thought, wasting the minutes of his precious half-hour of freedom.

"What the devil's the matter with you, Finch?" he rasped at last, patience quite exhausted.

"The Devil, sir?" said Finch. "It isn't the Devil. He's not up here, begging your pardon, sir."

That weak mysterious grin again, like a mischievous child. A great depth of secrets lay in those strange blue eyes. Finch peered under the topsail again; it was a gesture like a baby's playing peep-bo.

"There!" said Finch. "I saw him that time, sir. God's come back to the maintop, sir."

"God?"

"Aye indeed, sir. Sometimes He's in the maintop. More often than not, sir. I saw Him that time, with His beard all a-blowing in the wind. 'Tis only from here that you can see Him, sir."

What could be said to a man with that sort of delusion? Hornblower racked his brains for an answer, and found none. Finch seemed to have forgotten his presence, and was playing peep-bo again under the foot of the mizzen-topsail.

"There He is!" said Finch to himself. "There He is again! God's in the maintop, and the Devil's in the cable tier."

"Very appropriate," said Hornblower cynically, but to himself. He had no thought of laughing at Finch's delusions.

"The Devil's in the cable tier during the dog watches," said Finch again to no one at all. "God stays in the maintop for ever."

"A curious timetable," was Hornblower's *sotto voce* comment.

From down on the deck below came the first strokes of eight bells, and at the same moment the pipes of the bosun's mates began to twitter, and the bellow of Waldron the bos'un made itself heard.

"Turn out the watch below! All hands wear ship! All hands! All hands! You, master-at-arms, take the name of the last man up the hatchway. All hands!"

The interval of peace, short as it was, and broken by Finch's disturbing presence, was at an end. Hornblower dived over the barricade and gripped the futtock shrouds; not for him was the easy descent through the lubber's hole, not when the first lieutenant might see him and reprimand him for unseamanlike behaviour. Finch waited for him to quit the top, but even with this length start Hornblower was easily outfaced in the descent to the deck, for Finch, like the skilled seaman he was, ran down the shrouds as lightly as a monkey. Then the thought of Finch's curious illusions was temporarily submerged in the business of laying the ship on her new course.

But later in the day Hornblower's mind reverted inevitably to the odd things Finch had been saying. There could be no doubt that Finch firmly believed he saw what he said he saw. Both his words and his expression made that certain. He had spoken about God's beard — it was a pity that he had not spared a few words to describe the Devil in the cable tier. Horns, cloven hoof, and pitchfork? Hornblower wondered. And why was the Devil only loose in the cable tier during the dog watches? Strange that he should keep to a timetable. Hornblower caught his breath as the sudden thought came to him that perhaps there might be some worldly explanation. The Devil might well be loose in the cable tier in a metaphorical fashion during the dog watches. Devil's work might be going on there. Hornblower had to decide on what was his duty; and he had to decide further on what was expedient. He could report his suspicions to Eccles, the first lieutenant; but after a year of service Hornblower was under no illusions about what might happen to a junior midshipman who worried a

first lieutenant with unfounded Suspicions. It would be better to see for himself first, as far as that went. But he did not know what he would find — if he should find anything at all — and he did not know how he should deal with it if he found anything. Much worse than that, he did not know if he would be able to deal with it in officer-like fashion. He could make a fool of himself. He might mishandle whatever situation he found, and bring down obloquy and derision upon his head, and he might imperil the discipline of the ship — weaken the slender thread of allegiance that bound officers and men together, the discipline which kept three hundred men at the bidding of their captain suffering untold hardship without demur; which made them ready to face death at the word of command. When eight bells told the end of the afternoon watch and the beginning of the first dog watch it was with trepidation that Hornblower went below to put a candle in a lantern and make his way forward to the cable tier.

It was dark down here, stuffy, odorous; and as the ship heaved and rolled he found himself stumbling over the various obstacles that impeded his progress. Yet forward there was a faint light, a murmur of voices. Hornblower choked down his fear that perhaps mutiny was being planned. He put his hand over the horn window of the lantern, so as to obscure its light, and crept forward. Two lanterns swung from the low deck-beams, and crouching under them were a score or more of men — more than that, even — and the buzz of their talk came loudly but indistinguishably to Hornblower's ears. Then the buzz increased to a roar, and someone in the centre of the circle rose suddenly to as near his full height as the deck-beams allowed. He was shaking himself violently from side to side for no apparent reason; his face was away from Hornblower, who saw with a gasp that his hands were tied behind him. The men roared again, like spectators at a prizefight, and the man with his hands tied swung round so that Hornblower could see his face. It was Styles, the man who suffered from boils; Hornblower knew him at once. But that was not what made the most impression on Hornblower. Clinging to the man's face, weird in the shifting meagre light, was a grey writhing shape, and it was to shake this off that Styles was flinging himself about so violently. It was a rat; Hornblower's stomach turned over with horror.

With a wild jerk of his head Styles broke the grip of the rat's teeth and flung the creature down, and then instantly pinged down on his knees, with his hands still bound behind him, to pursue it with his own teeth. "Time!" roared a voice at that moment — the voice of Partridge, bosun's mate. Hornblower had been roused by it often enough to recognize it at once.

"Five dead," said another voice. "Pay all bets of evens or better."

Hornblower plunged forward. Part of the cable had been coiled down to make a rat pit ten feet across in which knelt Styles with dead and living rats about his knees. Partridge squatted beside the ring with a sandglass — used for timing the casting of the log — in front of him.

"Six dead," protested someone. "that 'un's dead."

"No, he ain't."

"'Is back's broken. 'E's a dead 'un."

"'E ain't a dead 'un," said Partridge.

The man who had protested looked up at that moment and caught sight of Hornblower, and his words died away unspoken; at his silence the others followed his glance and stiffened into rigidity, and Hornblower stepped forward. He was still wondering what he should do; he was still fighting down the nausea excited by the horrible things he had seen. Desperately he mastered his horror, and, thinking fast, took his stand on discipline.

"Who's in charge here?" he demanded.

He ran his eye round the circle. Petty officers and secondclass warrant officers, mainly; bosun's mates, carpenter's mates. Muggridge, the surgeon's mate — his presence explained much. But his own position was not easy. A midshipman of scant service depended for his authority on board largely on the force of his own personality. He was only a warrant officer himself; when all was said and done a midshipman was not nearly as important to the ship's economy — and was far more easily replaced — than, say, Washburn, the cooper's mate over there, who knew all about the making and storage of the ship's water barrels.

"Who's in charge here?" he demanded again, and once more received no direct reply.

"We ain't on watch," said a voice in the background.

Hornblower by now had mastered his horror; his indignation still flared within him, but he could appear

outwardly calm.

"No, you're not on watch," he said coldly. "You're gambling."

Muggridge took up the defence at that.

"Gambling, Mr Hornblower?" he said. "That's a very serious charge. Just a gentlemanly competition. You'll find it hard to sub — substantiate any charges of gambling."

Muggridge had been drinking, quite obviously, following perhaps the example of the head of his department. There was always brandy to be got in the medical stores. A surge of wrath made Hornblower tremble; the effort necessary to keep himself standing stock still was almost too much for him. But the rise in internal pressure brought him inspiration.

"Mr Muggridge," he said icily, "I advise you not to say too much. There are other charges possible, Mr Muggridge. A member of His Majesty's forces can be charged with rendering himself unfit for service, Mr Muggridge. And similarly there might be charges of aiding and abetting which might include you. I should consult the Articles of War if I were you, Mr Muggridge. The punishment for such an offence is flogging round the fleet I believe."

Hornblower pointed to Styles, with the blood streaming from his bitten face, and gave more force to his argument by the gesture. He had met the men's arguments with a more effective one along the same lines; they had taken up a legalistic defence and he had legalistically beaten it down. He had the upper hand now and could give vent to his moral indignation.

"I could bring charges against every one of you," he roared. "You could be court martialled — disgraced — flogged — every man Jack of you. By God, one more look like that from you, Partridge, and I'll do it. You'd all be in irons five minutes after I spoke to Mr Eccles. I'll have no more of these filthy games. Let those rats loose, there you, Oldroyd, and you, Lewis. Styles, get your face plastered up again. You, Partridge, take these men and coil this cable down properly again before Mr Waldron sees it. I'll keep my eye on all of you in future. The next hint I have of misbehaviour and you'll all be at the gratings. I've said it, and by God I mean it!"

Hornblower was surprised both at his own volubility and at his self possession. He had not known himself capable of carrying off matters with such a high hand. He sought about in his mind for a final salvo with which to make his retirement dignified, and it came to him as he turned away so that he turned back to deliver it.

"After this I want to see you in the dog watches skylarking on deck, not skulking in the cable tiers like a lot of Frenchmen."

That was the sort of speech to be expected of a pompous old captain, not a junior midshipman, but it served to give dignity to his retirement. There was a feverish buzz of voices as he left the group. Hornblower went up on deck, under the cheerless grey sky dark with premature night, to walk the deck to keep himself warm while the *Indefatigable* slashed her way to windward in the teeth of a roaring westerly, the spray flying in sheets over her bows, the straining seams leaking and her fabric groaning; the end of a day like all the preceding ones and the predecessor probably of innumerable more.

Yet the days passed, and with them came at last a break in the monotony. In the sombre dawn a hoarse bellow from the lookout turned every eye to windward, to where a dull blotch on the horizon marked the presence of a ship. The watch came running to the braces as the *Indefatigable* was laid as close to the wind as she would lie. Captain Pellew came on deck with a peajacket over his nightshirt, his wigless head comical in a pink nightcap; he trained his glass on the strange sail — a dozen glasses were pointing in that direction.

Hornblower, looking through the glass reserved for the junior officer of the watch saw the grey rectangle split into three, saw the three grow narrow, and then broaden again to coalesce into a single rectangle again.

"She's gone about," said Pellew. "Hands 'bout ship!"

Round came the *Indefatigable* on the other tack; the watch raced aloft to shake out a reef from the topsails while from the deck the officers looked up at the straining canvas to calculate the chances of the gale which howled round their ears splitting the sails or carrying away a spar. The *Indefatigable* lay over until it was hard to keep one's footing on the streaming deck; everyone without immediate duties clung to the weather rail and peered at the other ship.

"Fore- and maintopmasts exactly equal," said Lieutenant Bolton to Hornblower, his telescope to his eye.

"Topsails white as milady's fingers. She's a Frenchie all right."

The sails of British ships were darkened with long service in all weathers; when a French ship escaped from

harbour to run the blockade her spotless unweathered canvas disclosed her nationality without real need to take into consideration less obvious technical characteristics.

"We're weathering on her," said Hornblower; his eye was aching with staring through the glass, and his arms even were weary with holding the telescope to his eye, but in the excitement of the chase he could not relax.

"Not as much as I'd like," growled Bolton.

"Hands to the mainbrace!" roared Pellew at that moment.

It was a matter of the most vital concern to trim the sails so as to lie as close as possible to the wind; a hundred yards gained to windward would count as much as a mile gained in a stern chase. Pellew was looking up at the sails, back at the fleeting wake, across at the French ship, gauging the strength of the wind, estimating the strain on the rigging, doing everything that a lifetime of experience could suggest to close the gap between the two ships. Pellew's next order sent all hands to run out the guns on the weather side; that would in part counteract the heel and give the *Indefatigable* more grip upon the water.

"Now we're walking up to her," said Bolton with grudging optimism.

"Beat to quarters!" shouted Pellew.

The ship had been expecting that order. The roar of the marine bandsmen's drums echoed through the ship; the pipes twittered as the bosun's mates repeated the order, and the men ran in disciplined fashion to their duties. Hornblower, jumping for the weather mizzen shrouds, saw the eager grins on half a dozen faces — battle and the imminent possibility of death were a welcome change from the eternal monotony of the blockade. Up in the mizzen-top he looked over his men. They were uncovering the locks of their muskets and looking to the priming; satisfied with their readiness for action Hornblower turned his attention to the swivel gun. He took the tarpaulin from the breech and the tampion from the muzzle, cast off the lashings which secured it, and saw that the swivel moved freely in the socket and the trunnions freely in the crotch. A jerk of the lanyard showed him that the lock was sparkling well and there was no need for a new flint. Finch came climbing into the top with the canvas belt over his shoulder containing the charges for the gun; the bags of musket balls lay handy in a garland fixed to the barricade. Finch rammed home a cartridge down the short muzzle; Hornblower had ready a bag of balls to ram down onto it. Then he took a priming-quill and forced it down the touchhole, feeling sensitively to make sure the sharp point pierced the thin serge bag of the cartridge. Priming-quill and flintlock were necessary up here in the top, where no slow match or port-fire could be used with the danger of fire so great and where fire would be so difficult to control in the sails and the rigging. Yet musketry and swivel-gun fire from the tops were an important tactical consideration. With the ships laid yardarm to yardarm Hornblower's men could clear the hostile quarterdeck where centred the brains and control of the enemy.

"Stop that, Finch!" said Hornblower irritably; turning, he had caught sight of him peering up at the maintop and at this moment of tension Finch's delusions annoyed him.

"Beg your pardon, sir," said Finch, resuming his duties.

But a moment later Hornblower heard Finch whispering to himself.

"Mr Bracegirdle's there," whispered Finch, "an' Oldroyd's there, an' all those others. But *He's* there too, so He is."

"Hands wear ship!" came the shouted order from the deck below.

The old *Indefatigable* was spinning round on her heel, the yards groaning as the braces swung them round. The French ship had made a bold attempt to rake her enemy as she clawed up to her, but Pellew's prompt handling defeated the plan. Now the ships were broadside to broadside, running free before the wind at long cannon shot.

"Just look at 'im!" roared Douglas, one of the musket men in the top. "Twenty guns a side. Looks brave enough, doesn't he?"

Standing beside Douglas Hornblower could look down on the Frenchman's deck, her guns run out with the guns' crews clustering round them, officers in white breeches and blue coats walking up and down, the spray flying from her bows as she drove headlong before the wind.

"She'll look braver still when we take her into Plymouth Sound," said the seaman on the far side of Hornblower.

The *Indefatigable* was slightly the faster ship; an occasional touch of starboard helm was working her in closer

to the enemy, into decisive range, without allowing the Frenchman to headreach upon her. Hornblower was impressed by the silence on both sides; he had always understood that the French were likely to open fire at long range and to squander ineffectively the first carefully loaded broadside.

"When's he goin' to fire?" asked Douglas, echoing Hornblower's thoughts.

"In his own good time," piped Finch.

The gap of tossing water between the two ships was growing narrower. Hornblower swung the swivel gun round and looked along the sights. He could aim well enough at the Frenchman's quarter-deck, but it was much too long a range for a bag of musket balls — in any case he dared not open fire until Pellew gave permission.

"Them's the men for us!" said Douglas, pointing to the Frenchman's mizzen-top.

It looked as if there were soldiers up there, judging by the blue uniforms and the crossbelts; the French often eked out their scanty crews of trained seamen by shipping soldiers; in the British Navy the marines were never employed aloft. The French soldiers saw the gesture and shook their fists, and a young officer among them drew his sword and brandished it over his head. With the ships parallel to each other like this the French mizzen-top would be Hornblower's particular objective should he decide on trying to silence the firing there instead of sweeping the quarter-deck. He gazed curiously at the men it was his duty to kill. So interested was he that the bang of a cannon took him by surprise; before he could look down the rest of the Frenchman's broadside had gone off in straggling fashion, and a moment later the *Indefatigable* lurched as all her guns went off together. The wind blew the smoke forward, so that in the mizzen-top they were not troubled by it at all. Hornblower's glance showed him dead men flung about on the *Indefatigable's* deck, dead men falling on the Frenchman's deck. Still the range was too great — very long musket shot, his eye told him.

"They're shootin' at us, sir," said Herbert.

"Let 'em," said Hornblower.

No musket fired from a heaving masthead at that range could possibly score a hit; that was obvious — so obvious that even Hornblower, madly excited as he was, could not help but be aware of it, and his certainty was apparent in his tone. It was interesting to see how the two calm words steadied the men. Down below the guns were roaring away continuously, and the ships were nearing each other fast.

"Open fire now, men!" said Hornblower. "Finch!"

He stared down the short length of the swivel gun. In the coarse V of the notch on the muzzle he could see the Frenchman's wheel, the two quartermasters standing behind it, the two officers beside it. He jerked the lanyard. A tenth of a second's delay, and then the gun roared out. He was conscious, before the smoke whirled round him, of the firing quill, blown from the touchhole, flying past his temple. Finch was already sponging out the gun. The musket balls must have spread badly; only one of the helmsmen was down and someone else was already running to take his place. At that moment the whole top lurched frightfully; Hornblower felt it but he could not explain it. There was too much happening at once. The solid timbers under his feet jarred him as he stood — perhaps a shot had hit the mizzen-mast. Finch was ramming in the cartridge; something struck the breech of the gun a heavy blow and left a bright splash of metal there — a musket bullet from the Frenchman's mizzen-top. Hornblower tried to keep his head; he took out another sharpened quill and coaxed it down into the touchhole. It had to be done purposefully and yet gently; a quill broken off in the touchhole was likely to be a maddening nuisance. He felt the point of the quill pierce the cartridge; Finch rammed home the wad on top of the musket balls. A bullet struck the barricade beside him as Hornblower trained the gun down, but he gave it no thought. Surely the top was swaying more even than the heavy sea justified? No matter. He had a clear shot at the enemy's quarterdeck. He tugged at the lanyard. He saw men fall. He actually saw the spokes of the wheel spin round as it was left untended. Then the two ships came together with a shattering crash and his world dissolved into chaos compared with which what had gone before was orderly. The mast was falling. The top swung round in a dizzy arc so that only his fortunate grip on the swivel saved him from being flung out like a stone from a sling. It wheeled round. With the shrouds on one side shot away and two cannon balls in its heart the mast tottered and rolled. Then the tug of the mizzen-stays inclined it forward, the tug of the other shrouds inclined it to starboard, and the wind in the mizzen-topsail took charge when the back stays parted. The mast crashed forward; the topmast caught against the mainyard and the whole structure hung there before it could dissolve into its constituent parts. The severed butt-end of the mast must

be resting on the deck for the moment; mast and topmast were still united at the cap and the trestle-trees into one continuous length, although why the topmast had not snapped at the cap was hard to say. With the lower end of the mast resting precariously on the deck and the topmast resting against the mainyard, Hornblower and Finch still had a chance of life but the ship's motion, another shot from the Frenchman, or the parting of the over-strained material could all end that chance. The mast could slip outwards, the topmast could break, the butt-end of the mast could slip along the deck — they had to save themselves if they could before any one of these imminent events occurred. The maintopmast and everything above it was involved in the general ruin. It too had fallen and was dangling, sails spars and ropes in one frightful tangle. The mizzen-topsail had torn itself free. Hornblower's eyes met Finch's; Finch and he were clinging to the swivel gun, and there was no one else in the steeply inclined top.

The starboard side mizzen-topmast shrouds still survived; they, as well as the topmast, were resting across the mainyard, strained taut as fiddle strings, the mainyard tightening them just as the bridge tightens the strings of a fiddle. But along those shrouds lay the only way to safety — a sloping path from the peril of the top to the comparative safety of the mainyard.

The mast began to slip, to roll, out towards the end of the yard. Even if the mainyard held, the mizzen-mast would soon fall into the sea alongside. All about them were thunderous noises — spars smashing, ropes parting; the guns were still bellowing and everyone below seemed to be yelling and screaming.

The top lurched again, frightfully. Two of the shrouds parted with the strain, with a noise clearly audible through the other din, and as they parted the mast twisted with a jerk, swinging further round the mizzen-top, the swivel gun, and the two wretched beings who clung to it. Finch's staring blue eyes rolled with the movement of the top. Later Hornblower knew that the whole period of the fall of the mast was no longer than a few seconds, but at this time it seemed as if he had at least long minutes in which to think. Like Finch's, his eyes stared round him, saw the chance of safety.

"The mainyard!" he screamed.

Finch's face bore its foolish smile. Although instinct or training kept him gripping the swivel gun he seemingly had no fear, no desire to gain the safety of the mainyard.

"Finch, you fool!" yelled Hornblower.

He locked a desperate knee round the swivel so as to free a hand with which to gesticulate, but still Finch made no move.

"Jump, damn you!" raved Hornblower. "The shrouds — the yard. Jump!"

Finch only smiled.

"Jump and get to the maintop! Oh, Christ — !" Inspiration came in that frightful moment. "The maintop! God's there, Finch! Go along to God, quick!"

Those words penetrated into Finch's addled brain. He nodded with sublime unworldliness. Then he let go of the swivel and seemed to launch himself into the air like a frog. His body fell across the mizzen-topmast shrouds and he began to scramble along them. The mast rolled again, so that when Hornblower launched himself at the shrouds it was a longer jump. Only his shoulders reached the outermost shroud. He swung off, clung, nearly lost his grip, but regained it as a counterlurch of the leaning mast came to his assistance. Then he was scrambling along the shrouds, mad with panic. Here was the precious mainyard, and he threw himself across it, grappling its welcome solidity with his body, his feet feeling for the footrope. He was safe and steady on the yard just as the outward roll of the *Indefatigable* gave the balancing spars their final impetus, and the mizzen-topmast parted company from the broken mizzen-mast and the whole wreck fell down into the sea alongside. Hornblower shuffled along the yard, whither Finch had preceded him, to be received with rapture in the maintop by Midshipman Bracegirdle. Bracegirdle was not God, but as Hornblower leaned across the breastwork of the maintop he thought to himself that if he had not spoken about God being in the maintop Finch would never have made that leap.

"Thought we'd lost you," said Bracegirdle, helping him in and thumping him on the back. "Midshipman Hornblower, our flying angel."

Finch was in the top, too, smiling his fool's smile and surrounded by the crew of the top. Everything seemed mad and exhilarating. It was a shock to remember that they were in the midst of a battle, and yet the firing had ceased, and even the yelling had almost died away. He staggered to the side of the top — strange how

difficult it was to walk — and looked over. Bracegirdle came with him. Foreshortened by the height he could make out a crowd of figures on the Frenchman's deck. Those check shirts must surely be worn by British sailors. Surely that was Eccles, the *Indefatigable's* first lieutenant on the quarterdeck with a speaking trumpet. "What has happened?" he asked Bracegirdle, bewildered.

"What has happened?" Bracegirdle stared for a moment before he understood. "We carried her by boarding. Eccles and the boarders were over the ship's side the moment we touched. Why, man, didn't you see?"

"No, I didn't see it," said Hornblower. He forced himself to joke. "Other matters demanded my attention at that moment."

He remembered how the mizzen-top had lurched and swung, and he felt suddenly sick. But he did not want Bracegirdle to see it.

"I must go on deck and report," he said.

The descent of the main shrouds was a slow, ticklish business, for neither his hands nor his feet seemed to wish to go where he tried to place them. Even when he reached the deck he still felt insecure. Bolton was on the quarterdeck supervising the clearing away of the wreck of the mizzenmast. He gave a start of surprise as Hornblower approached.

"I thought you were overside with Davy Jones," he said. He glanced aloft. "You reached the mainyard in time?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent. I think you're born to be hanged, Hornblower." Bolton turned away to bellow at the men. "'Vast heaving, there! Clynes, get down into the chains with that tackle! Steady, now, or you'll lose it."

He watched the labours of the men for some moments before he turned back to Hornblower.

"No more trouble with the men for a couple of months," he said. "We'll work 'em 'til they drop, refitting. Prize crew will leave us shorthanded, to say nothing of our butcher's bill. It'll be a long time before they want something new. It'll be a long time for you, too, I fancy, Hornblower."

"Yes, sir," said Hornblower.

CHAPTER SIX — THE FROGS AND THE LOBSTERS

"They're coming," said Midshipman Kennedy.

Midshipman Hornblower's unmusical ear caught the raucous sounds of a military band, and soon, with a gleam of scarlet and white and gold, the head of the column came round the corner. The hot sunshine was reflected from the brass instruments; behind them the regimental colour flapped from its staff, borne proudly by an ensign with the colour guard round him. Two mounted officers rode behind the colour, and after them came the long red serpent of the half-battalion, the fixed bayonets flashing in the sun, while all the children of Plymouth, still not sated with military pomp, ran along with them.

The sailors standing ready on the quay looked at the soldiers marching up curiously, with something of pity and something of contempt mingled with their curiosity. The rigid drill, the heavy clothing, the iron discipline, the dull routine of the soldier were in sharp contrast with the far more flexible conditions in which the sailor lived. The sailors watched as the band ended with a flourish, and one of the mounted officers wheeled his horse to face the column. A shouted order turned every man to face the quayside, the movements being made so exactly together that five hundred boot-heels made a single sound. A huge sergeant-major, his sash gleaming on his chest, and the silver mounting of his cane winking in the sun, dressed the already perfect line. A third order brought down every musket-butt to earth.

"Unfix — bayonets!" roared the mounted officer, uttering the first words Hornblower had understood.

Hornblower positively goggled at the ensuing formalities, as the fuglemen strode their three paces forward, all exactly to time like marionettes worked by the same strings, turned their heads to look down the line, and gave the time for detaching the bayonets, for sheathing them, and for returning the muskets to the men's sides. The fuglemen fell back into their places, exactly to time again as far as Hornblower could see, but not exactly enough apparently, as the sergeant-major bellowed his discontent and brought the fuglemen out and

sent them back again.

"I'd like to see him laying aloft on a stormy night," muttered Kennedy. "D'ye think he could take the maintops'l earring?"

"These lobsters!" said Midshipman Bracegirdle.

The scarlet lines stood rigid, all five companies, the sergeants with their halberds indicating the intervals — from halberd to halberd the line of faces dipped down and then up again, with the men exactly sized off, the tallest men at the flanks and the shortest men in the centre of each company. Not a finger moved, not an eyebrow twitched. Down every back hung rigidly a powdered pigtail.

The mounted officer trotted down the line to where the naval party waited, and Lieutenant Bolton, in command, stepped forward with his hand to his hat rim.

"My men are ready to embark, sir," said the army officer. "The baggage will be here immediately."

"Aye aye, major," said Bolton — the army title and the navy reply in strange contrast.

"It would be better to address me as 'My lord'," said the major.

"Aye aye, sir — my lord," replied Bolton, caught quite off his balance.

His Lordship, the Earl of Edrington, major commanding this wing of the 43rd Foot, was a heavily built young man in his early twenties. He was a fine soldierly figure in his well-fitting uniform, and mounted on a magnificent charger, but he seemed a little young for his present responsible command. But the practice of the purchase of commissions was liable to put very young men in high command, and the Army seemed satisfied with the system.

"The French auxiliaries have their orders to report here," went on Lord Edrington. "I suppose arrangements have been made for their transport as well?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Not one of the beggars can speak English, as far as I can make out. Have you got an officer to interpret?"

"Yes, sir. Mr Hornblower!"

"Sir!"

"You will attend to the embarkation of the French troops."

"Aye aye, sir."

More military music — Hornblower's tone-deaf ear distinguished it as making a thinner noise than the British infantry band — heralded the arrival of the Frenchmen farther down the quay by a side road, and Hornblower hastened there. This was the Royal, Christian, and Catholic French Army, or a detachment of it at least — a battalion of the force raised by the émigré French nobles to fight against the Revolution. There was the white flag with the golden lilies at the head of the column, and a group of mounted officers to whom Hornblower touched his hat. One of them acknowledged his salute.

"The Marquis of Pouzauges, Brigadier General in the service of His Most Christian Majesty Louis XVII," said this individual in French by way of introduction. He wore a glittering white uniform with a blue ribbon across it. Stumbling over the French words, Hornblower introduced himself as an aspirant of his Britannic Majesty's Marine, deputed to arrange the embarkation of the French troops.

"Very good," said Pouzauges. "We are ready."

Hornblower looked down the French column. The men were standing in all attitudes, gazing about them. They were all well enough dressed, in blue uniforms which Hornblower guessed had been supplied by the British government, but the white crossbelts were already dirty, the metalwork tarnished, the arms dull. Yet doubtless they could fight.

"Those are the transports allotted to your men, sir," said Hornblower, pointing. "The *Sophia* will take three hundred, and the *Dumbarton* — that one over there — will take two hundred and fifty. Here at the quay are the lighters to ferry the men out."

"Give the orders, M. de Moncoutant," said Pouzauges to one of the officers beside him.

The hired baggage carts had now come creaking up along the column, piled high with the men's kits, and the column broke into chattering swarms as the men hunted up their possessions. It was some time before the men were reassembled, each with his own kit-bag; and then there arose the question of detailing a fatigue party to deal with the regimental baggage, and the men who were given the task yielded up their bags with obvious reluctance to their comrades, clearly in despair of ever seeing any of the contents again. Hornblower

was still giving out information.

"All horses must go to the *Sophia*," he said. "She has accommodation for six chargers. The regimental baggage —"

He broke off short, for his eye had been caught by a singular jumble of apparatus lying in one of the carts.

"What is that, if you please?" he asked, curiosity overpowering him.

"That, sir," said Pouzauges, "is a guillotine."

"A guillotine?"

Hornblower had read much lately about this instrument. The Red Revolutionaries had set one up in Paris and kept it hard at work. The King of France, Louis XVI himself, had died under it. He did not expect to find one in the train of a counter-revolutionary army.

"Yes," said Pouzauges, "we take it with us to France. It is in my mind to give those anarchists a taste of their own medicine."

Hornblower did not have to make reply, fortunately, as a bellow from Bolton interrupted the conversation.

"What the hell's all this delay for, Mr Hornblower? D'you want us to miss the tide?"

It was of course typical of life in any service that Hornblower should be reprimanded for the time wasted by the inefficiency of the French arrangements — that was the sort of thing he had already come to expect, and he had already learned that it was better to submit silently to reprimand than to offer excuses. He addressed himself again to the task of getting the French aboard their transports. It was a weary midshipman who at last reported himself to Bolton with his tally sheets and the news that the last Frenchman and horse and pieces of baggage were safely aboard, and he was greeted with the order to get his things together quickly and transfer them and himself to the *Sophia*, where his services as interpreter were still needed.

The convoy dropped quickly down Plymouth Sound, rounded the Eddystone, and headed down channel, with H.M.S. *Indefatigable* flying her distinguishing pennant, the two gun-brigs which had been ordered to assist in convoying the expedition, and the four transports — a small enough force, it seemed to Hornblower, with which to attempt the overthrow of the French republic. There were only eleven hundred infantry; the half battalion of the 43rd and the weak battalion of Frenchmen (if they could be called that, seeing that many of them were soldiers of fortune of all nations) and although Hornblower had enough sense not to try to judge the Frenchmen as they lay in rows in the dark and stinking 'tweendecks in the agonies of seasickness he was puzzled that anyone could expect results from such a small force. His historical reading had told him of many small raids, in many wars, launched against the shores of France, and although he knew that they had once been described by an opposition statesman as 'breaking windows with guineas' he had been inclined to approve of them in principle, as bringing about a dissipation of the French strength — until now, when he found himself part of such an expedition.

So it was with relief that he heard from Pouzauges that the troops he had seen did not constitute the whole of the force to be employed — were indeed only a minor fraction of it. A little pale with seasickness, but manfully combating it, Pouzauges laid out a map on the cabin table and explained the plan.

"The Christian Army," explained Pouzauges, "will land here, at Quiberon. They sailed from Portsmouth — these English names are hard to pronounce — the day before we left Plymouth. There are five thousand men under the Baron de Charette. They will march on Vannes and Rennes."

"And what is your regiment to do?" asked Hornblower.

Pouzauges pointed to the map again.

"Here is the town of Muzillac," he said. Twenty leagues from Quiberon. Here the main road from the south crosses the river Marais, where the tide ceases to flow. It is only a little river, as you see, but its banks are marshy, and the road passes it not only by a bridge but by a long causeway. The rebel armies are to the south, and on their northward march must come by Muzillac. We shall be there. We shall destroy the bridge and defend the crossing, delaying the rebels long enough to enable M. de Charette to raise all Brittany. He will soon have twenty thousand men in arms, the rebels will come back to their allegiance, and we shall march on Paris to restore His Most Christian Majesty to the throne."

So that was the plan. Hornblower was infected with the Frenchmen's enthusiasm. Certainly the road passed within ten miles of the coast, and there, in the broad estuary of the Vilaine, it should be possible to land a small force and seize Muzillac. There should be no difficulty about defending a causeway such as Pouzauges

described for a day or two against even a large force. That would afford Charette every chance.

"My friend M. de Moncoutant here," went on Pouzauges, "is Lord of Muzillac. The people there will welcome him."

"Most of them will," said Moncoutant, his grey eyes narrowing. "Some will be sorry to see me. But I shall be glad of the encounter."

Western France, the Vendée and Brittany, had long been in a turmoil, and the population there, under the leadership of the nobility, had risen in arms more than once against the Paris government. But every rebellion had ended in defeat; the Royalist force now being convoyed to France was composed of the fragments of the defeated armies — a final cast of the dice, and a desperate one. Regarded in that light, the plan did not seem so sound.

It was a grey morning — a morning of grey sky and grey rocks — when the convoy rounded Belle Ile and stood in towards the estuary of the Vilaine river. Far to the northward were to be seen white topsails in Quiberon Bay — Hornblower, from the deck of the *Sophia*, saw signals pass back and forth from the *Indefatigable* as she reported her arrival to the senior officer of the main expedition there. It was a proof of the mobility and ubiquity of naval power that it could take advantage of the configuration of the land so that two blows could be struck almost in sight of each other from the sea yet separated by forty miles of roads on land. Hornblower raked the forbidding shore with his glass, reread the orders for the captain of the *Sophia*, and stared again at the shore. He could distinguish the narrow mouth of the Marais river and the strip of mud where the troops were to land. The lead was going in the chains as the *Sophia* crept towards her allotted anchorage, and the ship was rolling uneasily; these waters, sheltered though they were, were a Bedlam of conflicting currents that could make a choppy sea even in a calm. Then the anchor cable rumbled out through the hawsehole and the *Sophia* swung to the current, while the crew set to work hoisting out the boats.

"France, dear beautiful France," said Pouzauges at Hornblower's side.

A hail came over the water from the *Indefatigable*.

"Mr Hornblower!"

"Sir!" yelled Hornblower back through the captain's megaphone.

"You will go on shore with the French troops and stay with them until you receive further orders."

"Aye aye, sir."

So that was the way in which he was to set foot on foreign soil for the first time in his life.

Pouzauges' men were now pouring up from below; it was a slow and exasperating business getting them down the ship's side into the waiting boats. Hornblower wondered idly regarding what was happening on shore at this moment — without doubt mounted messengers were galloping north and south with the news of the arrival of the expedition, and soon the French Revolutionary generals would be parading their men and marching them hurriedly towards this place; it was well that the important strategic point that had to be seized was less than ten miles inland. He turned back to his duties; as soon as the men were ashore he would have to see that the baggage and reserve ammunition were landed, as well as the horses, now standing miserably in improvised stalls forward of the mainmast.

The first boats had left the ship's side; Hornblower watched the men stagger up the shore through mud and water, the French on the left and the red-coated British infantry on the right. There were some fishermen's cottages in sight up the beach, and Hornblower saw advance parties go forward to seize them; at least the landing had been effected without a single shot being fired. He came on shore with the ammunition, to find Bolton in charge of the beach.

"Get those ammunition boxes well above high-water mark," said Bolton. "We can't send 'em forward until the Lobsters have found us some carts for 'em. And we'll need horses for those guns too."

At that moment Bolton's working party was engaged in manhandling two six-pounder guns in field carriages up the beach; they were to be manned by seamen and drawn by horses commandeered by the landing party, for it was in the old tradition that a British expeditionary force should always be thrown on shore dependent for military necessities on the countryside. Pouzauges and his staff were waiting impatiently for their chargers, and mounted them the moment they had been coaxed out of the boats onto the beach.

"Forward for France!" shouted Pouzauges, drawing his sword and raising the hilt to his lips.

Moncoutant and the others clattered forward to head the advancing infantry, while Pouzauges lingered to

exchange a few words with Lord Edrington. The British infantry was drawn up in a rigid scarlet line; farther inland occasional red dots marked where the light company had been thrown forward as pickets. Hornblower could not hear the conversation, but he noticed that Bolton was drawn into it, and finally Bolton called him over.

"You must go forward with the Frogs, Hornblower," he said.

"I'll give you a horse," added Edrington. "Take that one — the roan. I've got to have someone I can trust along with them. Keep your eye on them and let me know the moment they get up to any monkey tricks — God knows what they'll do next."

"Here's the rest of your stores coming ashore," said Bolton. "I'll send 'em up as soon as you send some carts back to me. What the hell's *that*?"

"That's a portable guillotine, sir," said Hornblower. "Part of the French baggage."

All three turned and looked at Pouzauges, sitting his horse impatiently during this conversation, which he did not understand. He knew what they were referring to, all the same.

"That's the first thing to be sent to Muzillac," he said to Hornblower. "Will you have the goodness to tell these gentlemen so?"

Hornblower translated.

"I'll send the guns and a load of ammunition first," said Bolton. "But I'll see he gets it soon. Now off you go."

Hornblower dubiously approached the roan horse. All he knew about riding he had learned in farmyards, but he got his foot up into the stirrup and climbed in the saddle, grabbing nervously at the reins as the animal started to move off. It seemed as far down to the ground from there as it did from the maintopgallant yard.

Pouzauges wheeled his horse about and started up the beach, and the roan followed its example with Hornblower hanging on desperately, spattered by the mud thrown up by the French horse's heels.

From the fishing hamlet a muddy lane, bordered by green turf banks, led inland, and Pouzauges trotted smartly along it, Hornblower jolting behind him. They covered three or four miles before they overtook the rear of the French infantry, marching rapidly through the mud, and Pouzauges pulled his horse to a walk. When the column climbed a slight undulation they could see the white banner far ahead. Over the banks Hornblower could see rocky fields; out on the left there was a small farmhouse of grey stone. A blue-uniformed soldier was leading away a white horse pulling a cart, while two or three more soldiers were holding back the farmer's frantic wife. So the expeditionary force had secured some of its necessary transport. In another field a soldier was prodding a cow along with his bayonet — Hornblower could not imagine with what motive. Twice he heard distant musket shots to which no one seemed to pay any attention. Then coming down the road, they encountered two soldiers leading bony horses towards the beach; the jests hurled at them by the marching column had set the men's faces in broad grins. But a little way farther on Hornblower saw a plough standing lonely in a little field, and a grey bundle lying near it. The bundle was a dead man.

Over on their right was the marshy river valley, and it was not long before Hornblower could see, far ahead, the bridge and the causeway which they had been sent to seize. The lane they were following came down a slight incline into the town, passing between a few grey cottages before emerging into the highroad along which there lay the town. There was a grey stone church, there was a building that could easily be identified as an inn and postinghouse with soldiers swarming round it, a slight broadening of the high-road, with an avenue of trees, which Hornblower assumed must be the central square of the town. A few faces peered from upper windows, but otherwise the houses were shut and there were no civilians to be seen except two women hastily shuttering their shops. Pouzauges reined up his horse in the square and began issuing orders. Already the horses were being led out of the posthouse, and groups of men were bustling to and fro on seemingly urgent errands. In obedience to Pouzauges one officer called his men together — he had to expostulate and gesticulate before he succeeded — and started towards the bridge. Another party started along the highway in the opposite direction to guard against the possible surprise attack from there. A crowd of men squatted in the square devouring the bread that was brought out from one of the shops after its door had been beaten in, and two or three times civilians were dragged up to Pouzauges and at his orders were hurried away again to the town jail. The seizure of the town of Muzillac was complete.

Pouzauges seemed to think so, too, after an interval, for with a glance at Hornblower he turned his horse and trotted towards the causeway. The town ended before the road entered the marshes, and in a bit of waste

ground beside the road the party sent out in this direction had already lighted a fire, and the men were gathered round it, toasting on their bayonets chunks of meat cut from a cow whose half-flayed corpse lay beside the fire. Farther on, where the causeway became the bridge over the river, a sentry sat sunning himself, with his musket leaning against the parapet of the bridge at his back. Everything was peaceful enough. Pouzauges trotted as far as the crown of the bridge, with Hornblower beside him, and looked over the country on the farther side. There was no sign of any enemy, and when they returned there was a mounted red-coated soldier waiting for them — Lord Edrington.

"I've come to see for myself," he said. "The position looks strong enough in all conscience here. Once you have the guns posted you should be able to hold this bridge until you can blow up the arch. But there's a ford, passable at low water, half a mile lower down. That is where I shall station myself — if we lose the ford they can turn the whole position and cut us off from the shore. Tell this gentleman — what's his name? — what I said."

Hornblower translated as well as he could, and stood by as interpreter while the two commanders pointed here and there and settled their respective duties.

"That's settled, then," said Edrington at length. "Don't forget, Mr Hornblower, that I must be kept informed of every development."

He nodded to them and wheeled his horse and trotted off. As he left a cart approached from the direction of Muzillac, while behind it a loud clanking heralded the arrival of the two six-pounders, each drawn painfully by a couple of horses led by seamen. Sitting upon the front of the cart was Midshipman Bracegirdle, who saluted Hornblower with a broad grin.

"From quarterdeck to dung cart is no more than a step," he announced, swinging himself down. "From midshipman to captain of artillery."

He looked along the causeway and then around him.

"Put the guns over there and they'll sweep the whole length," suggested Hornblower.

"Exactly," said Bracegirdle.

Under his orders the guns were wheeled off the road and pointed along the causeway, and the dung cart was unloaded of its contents, a tarpaulin spread on the ground, the gunpowder cartridges laid on it and covered with another tarpaulin. The shot and the bags of grape were piled beside the guns, the seamen working with a will under the stimulus of their novel surroundings.

"Poverty brings strange bedfellows," said Bracegirdle. "And wars strange duties. Have you ever blown up a bridge?"

"Never," said Hornblower.

"Neither have I. Come, and let us do it. May I offer you a place in my carriage?"

Hornblower climbed up into the cart with Bracegirdle, and two seamen led the plodding horse along the causeway to the bridge. There they halted and looked down at the muddy water — running swiftly with the ebb — craning their heads over the parapet to look at the solid stone construction.

"It is the keystone of the arch which we should blow out," said Bracegirdle.

That was the proverbial recipe for the destruction of a bridge, but as Hornblower looked from the bridge to Bracegirdle and back again the idea did not seem easy to execute. Gunpowder exploded upwards and had to be held in on all sides — how was that to be done under the arch of the bridge?

"What about the pier?" he asked tentatively.

"We can but look and see," said Bracegirdle, and turned to the seaman by the cart. "Hannay, bring a rope." They fastened the rope to the parapet and slid down it to a precarious foothold on the slippery ledge round the base of the pier, the river gurgling at their feet.

"That seems to be the solution," said Bracegirdle, crouching almost double under the arch.

Time slipped by fast as they made their preparations; a working party had to be brought from the guard of the bridge, picks and crowbars had to be found or extemporized and some of the huge blocks with which the pier was built had to be picked out at the shoulder of the arch. Two kegs of gunpowder, lowered gingerly from above, had to be thrust into the holes so formed, a length of slow match put in at each bunghole and led to the exterior, while the kegs were tamped into their caves with all the stones and earth that could be crammed into them. It was almost twilight under the arch when the work was finished, the working party made

laboriously to climb the rope up to the bridge and Bracegirdle and Hornblower left to look at each other again. "I'll fire the fuses," said Bracegirdle. "You go next, sir."

It was not a matter for much argument. Bracegirdle was under orders to destroy the bridge, and Hornblower addressed himself to climbing up the rope while Bracegirdle took his tinderbox from his pocket. Once on the roadway of the bridge Hornblower sent away the cart and waited. It was only two or three minutes before Bracegirdle appeared, frantically climbing the rope and hurling himself over the parapet.

"Run!" was all that was said.

Together they scurried down the bridge and halted breathless to crouch by the abutment of the causeway. Then came a dull explosion, a tremor of the earth under their feet, and a cloud of smoke.

"Let's come and see," said Bracegirdle.

They retraced their steps towards where the bridge was still shrouded in smoke and dust.

"Only partly —" began Bracegirdle as they neared the scene and the dust cleared away.

And at that moment there was a second explosion which made them stagger as they stood. A lump of the roadbed hit the parapet beside them and burst like a shell, spattering them with fragments. There was a rumble and a clatter as the arch subsided into the river.

"That must have been the second keg going off," said Bracegirdle, wiping his face. "We should have remembered the fuses were likely to be of different lengths. Two promising careers might have ended suddenly if we had been any nearer."

"At any rate, the bridge is gone," said Hornblower.

"All's well that ends well," said Bracegirdle.

Seventy pounds of gunpowder had done their work. The bridge was cut clear across, leaving a ragged gap several feet wide, beyond which the roadway reached out towards the gap from the farther pier as a witness to the toughness of the mortar. Beneath their feet as they peered over they could see the river bed almost choked with lumps of stone.

"We'll need no more than an anchor watch to-night," said Bracegirdle.

Hornblower looked round to where the roan horse was tethered; he was tempted to return to Muzillac on foot, leading the animal, but shame forbade. He climbed with an effort into the saddle and headed the animal back up the road; ahead of him the sky was beginning to turn red with the approach of sunset.

He entered the main street of the town and rounded the slight bend to the central square, to see something that made him, without his own volition, tug at his reins and halt his horse. The square was full of people, townsfolk and soldiers, and in the centre of the square a tall narrow rectangle reached upwards towards the sky with a glittering blade at its upper end. The blade fell with a reverberating thump, and the little group of men round the base of the rectangle dragged something to one side and added it to the heap already there. The portable guillotine was at work.

Hornblower sat sick and horrified — this was worse than any flogging at the gratings. He was about to urge his horse forward when a strange sound caught his ear. A man was singing, loud and clear, and out from a building at the side of the square emerged a little procession. In front walked a big man with dark curly hair, wearing a white shirt and dark breeches. At either side and behind him walked soldiers. It was this man who was singing; the tune meant nothing to Hornblower, but he could hear the words distinctly — it was one of the verses of the French revolutionary song, echoes of which had penetrated even across the Channel.

"Oh, sacred love of the Fatherland . . ." sang the man in the white shirt; and when the civilians in the square heard what he was singing, there was a rustle among them and they dropped to the knees, their heads bowed and their hands crossed upon their breasts.

The executioners were winding the blade up again, and the man in the white shirt followed its rise with his eyes while he still sang without a tremor in his voice. The blade reached the top, and the singing ceased at last as the executioners fell on the man with the white shirt and led him to the guillotine. Then the blade fell with another echoing crash.

It seemed that this was to be the last execution, for the soldiers began to push the civilians back towards their homes, and Hornblower urged his horse forward through the dissolving crowd. He was nearly thrown from his saddle when the animal plunged sideways, snorting furiously — it had scented the horrid heap that lay beside the guillotine. At the side of the square was a house with a balcony, and Hornblower looked up at it in time to

see Pouzauges still standing there, wearing his white uniform and blue ribbon, his staff about him and his hands on the rail. There were sentries at the door, and to one of them Hornblower handed over his horse as he entered; Pouzauges was just descending the stairs.

"Good evening, sir," said Pouzauges with perfect courtesy. "I am glad you have found your way to headquarters. I trust it was without trouble? We are about to dine and will enjoy your company. You have your horse, I suppose? M. de Villers here will give orders for it to be looked after, I am sure."

It was all hard to believe. It was hard to believe that thin polished gentleman had ordered the butchery that had just ended; it was hard to believe that the elegant young men with whom he sat at dinner were staking their lives on the overthrow of a barbarous but lusty young republic. But it was equally hard to believe, when he climbed into a four-poster bed that night, that he, Midshipman Horatio Hornblower, was in imminent deadly peril himself.

Outside in the street women wailed as the headless corpses, the harvest of the executions, were carried away, and he thought he would never sleep, but youth and fatigue had their way, and he slept for most of the night, although he awoke with the feeling that he had just been fighting off a nightmare. Everything was strange to him in the darkness, and it was several moments before he could account for the strangeness. He was in a bed and not — as he had spent the preceding three hundred nights — in a hammock; and the bed was steady as a rock instead of swaying about with the lively motion of a frigate. The stuffiness about him was the stuffiness of bed curtains, and not the stuffiness of the midshipmen's berth with its compound smell of stale humanity and stale bilgewater. He was on shore, in a house, in a bed, and everything about him was dead quiet, unnaturally so to a man accustomed to the noises of a wooden ship at sea.

Of course; he was in a house in the town of Muzillac in Brittany. He was sleeping in the headquarters of Brigadier General the Marquis de Pouzauges, commanding the French troops who constituted part of this expedition, which was itself part of a larger force invading Revolutionary France in the royalist cause.

Hornblower felt a quickening of the pulse, a faint sick feeling of insecurity, as he realized afresh that he was now in France, ten miles from the sea and the *Indefatigable* with only a rabble of Frenchmen — half of them mercenaries only nominally Frenchmen at that — around him to preserve him from death or captivity. He regretted his knowledge of French — if he had had none he would not be here, and good fortune might even have put him among the British half-battalion of the 43rd guarding the ford a mile away.

It was partly the thought of the British troops which roused him out of bed. It was his duty to see that liaison was kept up with them, and the situation might have changed while he slept. He drew aside the bed curtains and stepped down to the floor; as his legs took the weight of his body they protested furiously — all the riding he had done yesterday had left every muscle and joint aching so that he could hardly walk. But he hobbled in the darkness over to the window, found the latch of the shutters, and pushed them open. A three-quarter moon was shining down into the empty street of the town, and looking down he could see the three-cornered hat of the sentry posted outside, and the bayonet reflecting the moonlight. Returning from the window, he found his coat and his shoes and put them on, belted his cutlass about him, and then he crept downstairs as quietly as he could. In the room off the entrance hall a tallow dip guttered on the table, and beside it a French sergeant slept with his head on his arms, lightly, for he raised his head as Hornblower paused in the doorway. On the floor of the room the rest of the guard off duty were snoring stertorously, huddled together like pigs in a sty, their muskets stacked against the wall.

Hornblower nodded to the sergeant, opened the front door and stepped out into the street. His lungs expanded gratefully as he breathed in the clean night air — morning air, rather, for there to the east the sky was assuming a lighter tinge — and the sentry, catching sight of the British naval officer, came clumsily to attention. In the square there still stood the gaunt harsh framework of the guillotine reaching up to the moonlit sky, and round it the black patch of the blood of its victims. Hornblower wondered who they were, who it could have been that the Royalists should seize and kill at such short notice, and he decided that they must have been petty officials of the Revolutionary government — the mayor and the customs officer and so on — if they were not merely men against whom the émigrés had cherished grudges since the days of the Revolution itself. It was a savage, merciless world, and at the moment he was very much alone in it, lonely, depressed, and unhappy.

He was distracted from these thoughts by the sergeant of the guard emerging from the door with a file of

men; the sentry in the street was relieved, and the party went on round the house to relieve the others. Then across the street he saw four drummers appear from another house, with a sergeant commanding them. They formed into a line, their drumsticks poised high before their faces, and then at a word from the sergeant, the eight drumsticks fell together with a crash, and the drummers proceeded to march slowly along the street beating out a jerky exhilarating rhythm. At the first corner they stopped, and the drums rolled long and menacingly, and then they marched on again, beating out the previous rhythm. They were beating to arms, calling the men to their duties from their billets, and Hornblower, tone-deaf but highly sensitive to rhythm, thought it was fine music, real music. He turned back to headquarters with his depression fallen away from him. The sergeant of the guard came marching back with the relieved sentries; the first of the awakened soldiers were beginning to appear sleepily in the streets, and then, with a clatter of hoofs, a mounted messenger came riding up to headquarters, and the day was begun.

A pale young French officer read the note which the messenger brought, and politely handed it to Hornblower to read; he had to puzzle over it for a space — he was not accustomed to hand-written French — but its meaning became clear to him at length. It implied no new development; the main expeditionary force, landed yesterday at Quiberon, would move forward this morning on Vannes and Rennes while the subsidiary force to which Hornblower was attached must maintain its position at Muzillac, guarding its flank. The Marquis de Pouzauges, immaculate in his white uniform and blue ribbon, appeared at that moment, read the note without comment, and turned to Hornblower with a polite invitation to breakfast.

They went back to the big kitchen with its copper cooking pans glittering on the walls, and a silent woman brought them coffee and bread. She might be a patriotic Frenchwoman and an enthusiastic counter-revolutionary, but she showed no signs of it. Her feelings, of course, might easily have been influenced by the fact that this horde of men had taken over her house and were eating her food and sleeping in her rooms without payment. Maybe some of the horses and wagons seized for the use of the army were hers too — and maybe some of the people who had died under the guillotine last night were her friends. But she brought coffee, and the staff, standing about in the big kitchen with their spurs clinking, began to breakfast. Hornblower took his cup and a piece of bread — for four months before this his only bread had been ship's biscuit — and sipped at the stuff. He was not sure if he liked it; he had only tasted coffee three or four times before. But the second time he raised his cup to his lips he did not sip; before he could do so, the distant boom of a cannon made him lower his cup and stand stock still. The cannon shot was repeated, and again, and then it was echoed by a sharper, nearer note — Midshipman Bracegirdle's six-pounders on the causeway.

In the kitchen there was instant stir and bustle. Somebody knocked a cup over and sent a river of black liquid swirling across the table. Somebody else managed to catch his spurs together so that he stumbled into somebody else's arms. Everyone seemed to be speaking at once. Hornblower was as excited as the rest of them; he wanted to rush out and see what was happening, but he thought at that moment of the disciplined calm which he had seen in H.M.S. *Indefatigable* as she went into action. He was not of this breed of Frenchmen, and to prove it he made himself put his cup to his lips again and drink calmly. Already most of the staff had dashed out of the kitchen shouting for their horses. It would take time to saddle up; he met Pouzauges' eye as the latter strode up and down the kitchen, and drained his cup — a trifle too hot for comfort, but he felt it was a good gesture. There was bread to eat, and he made himself bite and chew and swallow, although he had no appetite; if he was to be in the field all day, he could not tell when he would get his next meal, and so he crammed a half loaf into his pocket.

The horses were being brought into the yard and saddled; the excitement had infected them, and they plunged and sidled about amid the curses of the officers. Pouzauges leapt up into his saddle and clattered away with the rest of the staff behind him, leaving behind only a single soldier holding Hornblower's roan. That was as it had better be — Hornblower knew that he would not keep his seat for half a minute if the horse took it into his head to plunge or rear. He walked slowly out to the animal, which was calmer now when the groom petted him, and climbed with infinite slowness and precaution into the saddle. With a pull at the bit he checked the brute's exuberance and walked it sedately into the street and towards the bridge in the wake of the galloping staff. It was better to make sure of arriving by keeping his horse down to a walk than to gallop and be thrown. The guns were still booming and he could see the puffs of smoke from Bracegirdle's

six-pounders. On his left, the sun was rising in a clear sky.

At the bridge the situation seemed obvious enough. Where the arch had been blown up a few skirmishers on either side were firing at each other across the gap, and at the far end of the causeway, across the Marais, a cloud of smoke revealed the presence of a hostile battery firing slowly and at extreme range. Beside the causeway on this side were Bracegirdle's two six-pounders, almost perfectly covered by a dip in the ground. Bracegirdle, with his cutlass belted round him, was standing between the guns which his party of seamen were working, and he waved his hand lightheartedly at Hornblower when he caught sight of him. A dark column of infantry appeared on the distant causeway. Bang — bang went Bracegirdle's guns. Hornblower's horse plunged at the noise, distracting him, but when he had time to look again, the column had disappeared. Then suddenly the causeway parapet near him flew into splinters; something hit the roadbed beside his horse's feet a tremendous blow and passed on with a roar — that was the closest so far in his life that a cannon shot had missed him. He lost a stirrup during the resultant struggle with his horse, and deemed it wiser, as soon as he regained moderate control, to dismount and lead the animal off the causeway towards the guns. Bracegirdle met him with a grin.

"No chance of their crossing here," he said. "At least, not if the Frogs stick to their work, and it looks as if they're willing to. The gap's within grapeshot range, they'll never bridge it. Can't think what they're burning powder for."

"Testing our strength, I suppose," said Hornblower, with an air of infinite military wisdom.

He would have been shaking with excitement if he had allowed his body to take charge. He did not know if he were being stiltedly unnatural, but even if he were that was better than to display excitement. There was something strangely pleasant, in a nightmare fashion, in standing here posing as a hardened veteran with cannon balls howling overhead; Bracegirdle seemed happy and smiling and quite master of himself, and Hornblower looked sharply at him, wondering if this were as much a pose as his own. He could not tell.

"Here they come again," said Bracegirdle. "Oh, only skirmishers."

A few scattered men were running out along the causeway to the bridge. At long musket range they fell to the ground and began spasmodic firing; already there were some dead men lying over there and the skirmishers took cover behind the corpses. On this side of the gap the skirmishers, better sheltered, fired back at them.

"They haven't a chance, here at any rate," said Bracegirdle. "And look there."

The main body of the Royalist force, summoned from the town, was marching up along the road. While they watched it, a cannon shot from the other side struck the head of the column and ploughed into it — Hornblower saw dead men flung this way and that, and the column wavered. Pouzauges came riding up and yelled orders, and the column, leaving its dead and wounded on the road, changed direction and took shelter in the marshy fields beside the causeway.

With nearly all the Royalist force assembled, it seemed indeed as if it would be utterly impossible for the Revolutionaries to force a crossing here.

"I'd better report on this to the Lobsters," said Hornblower.

"There was firing down that way at dawn," agreed Bracegirdle.

Skirting the wide marsh here ran a narrow path through the lush grass, leading to the ford which the 43rd were guarding. Hornblower led his horse onto the path before he mounted; he felt he would be more sure in that way of persuading the horse to take that direction. It was not long before he saw a dab of scarlet on the river bank — pickets thrown out from the main body to watch against any unlikely attempt to cross the marshes and stream round the British flank. Then he saw the cottage that indicated the site of the ford; in the field beside it was a wide patch of scarlet indicating where the main body was waiting for developments. At this point the marsh narrowed where a ridge of slightly higher ground approached the water; a company of redcoats was drawn up here with Lord Edrington on horseback beside them. Hornblower rode up and made his report, somewhat jerkily as his horse moved restlessly under him.

"No serious attack, you say?" asked Edrington.

"No sign of one when I left, sir."

"Indeed?" Edrington stared across the river. "And here it's the same story. No attempt to cross the ford in force. Why should they show their hand and then not attack?"

"I thought they were burning powder unnecessarily, sir," said Hornblower.

"They're not fools," snapped Edrington, with another penetrating look across the river. "At any rate, there's no harm in assuming they are not."

He turned his horse and cantered back to the main body and gave an order to a captain, who scrambled to his feet to receive it. The captain bellowed an order, and his company stood up and fell into line, rigid and motionless. Two further orders turned them to the right and marched them off in file, every man in step, every musket sloped at the same angle. Edrington watched them go.

"No harm in having a flank guard," he said.

The sound of a cannon across the water recalled them to the river; on the other side of the marsh a column of troops could be seen marching rapidly along the bank.

"That's the same column coming back, sir," said the company commander. "That or another just like it."

"Marching about and firing random shots," said Edrington. "Mr Hornblower, have the émigré troops any flank guard out towards Quiberon?"

"Towards Quiberon, sir?" said Hornblower, taken aback.

"Damn it, can't you hear a plain question? Is there, or is there not?"

"I don't know, sir," confessed Hornblower miserably.

There were five thousand émigré troops at Quiberon, and it seemed quite unnecessary to keep a guard out in that direction.

"Then present my compliments to the French émigré general, and suggest he posts a strong detachment up the road, if he has not done so."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower turned his horse's head back up the path towards the bridge. The sun was shining strongly now over the deserted herds. He could still hear the occasional thud of a cannon shot, but overhead a lark was singing in the blue sky. Then as he headed up the last low ridge towards Muzillac and the bridge he heard a sudden irregular outburst of firing; he fancied he heard screams and shouts, and what he saw as he topped the rise, made him snatch at his reins and drag his horse to a halt. The fields before him were covered with fugitives in blue uniforms with white crossbelts, all running madly towards him. In among the fugitives were galloping horsemen, whirling sabres that flashed in the sunshine. Farther out to the left a whole column of horsemen were trotting fast across the fields, and farther back the sun glittered on lines of bayonets moving rapidly from the high road towards the sea.

There could be no doubt of what had happened; during those sick seconds when he sat and stared, Hornblower realized the truth; the Revolutionaries had pushed in a force between Quiberon and Muzillac, and, keeping the émigrés occupied by demonstrations from across the river, had rushed down and brought off a complete surprise by this attack from an unexpected quarter. Heaven only knew what had happened at Quiberon — but this was no time to think about that. Hornblower dragged his horse's head round and kicked his heels into the brute's sides, urging him frantically back up the path towards the British. He bounced and rolled in his saddle, clinging on madly, consumed with fear lest he lose his seat and be captured by the pursuing French.

At the clatter of hoofs every eye turned towards him when he reached the British post. Edrington was there, standing with his horse's bridle over his arm.

"The French!" yelled Hornblower hoarsely, pointing back. "They're coming!"

"I expected nothing else," said Edrington.

He shouted an order before he put his foot in the stirrup to mount. The main body of the 43rd was standing in line by the time he was in the saddle. His adjutant went galloping off to recall the company from the water's edge.

"The French are in force, horse, foot, and guns, I suppose?" asked Edrington.

"Horse and foot at least, sir," gasped Hornblower, trying to keep his head clear. "I saw no guns."

"And the émigrés are running like rabbits?"

"Yes, sir."

"Here come the first of them."

Over the nearest ridge a few blue uniforms made their appearance, their wearers still running while stumbling with fatigue.

"I suppose we must cover their retreat, although they're not worth saving," said Edrington. "Look there!" The company he had sent out as a flank guard was in sight on the crest of a slight slope: it was formed into a tiny square, red against the green, and as they watched they saw a mob of horsemen flood up the hill towards it and break into an eddy around it.

"Just as well I had them posted there," remarked Edrington calmly. "Ah, here comes Mayne's company." The force from the ford came marching up. Harsh orders were shouted. Two companies wheeled round while the sergeant-major with his sabre and his silver-headed cane regulated the pace and the alignment as if the men were on the barrack square.

"I would suggest you stay by me, Mr Hornblower," said Edrington.

He moved his horse up into the interval between the two columns, and Hornblower followed him dumbly. Another order, and the force began to march steadily across the valley, the sergeants calling the step and the sergeant-major watching the intervals. All round them now were fleeing émigré soldiers, most of them in the last stages of exhaustion — Hornblower noticed more than one of them fall down on the ground gasping and incapable of further movement. And then over the low slope to the right appeared a line of plumes, a line of sabres — a regiment of cavalry trotting rapidly forward. Hornblower saw the sabres lifted, saw the horses break into a gallop, heard the yells of the charging men. The redcoats around him halted; another shouted order, another slow, deliberate movement, and the half-battalion was in a square with the mounted officers in the centre and the colours waving over their heads. The charging horsemen were less than a hundred yards away. Some officer with a deep voice began giving orders, intoning them as if at some solemn ceremony. The first order brought the muskets from the men's shoulders, and the second was answered by a simultaneous click of opened priming pans. The third order brought the muskets to the present along one face of the square. "Too high!" said the sergeant-major. "Lower, there, number seven."

The charging horsemen were only thirty yards away; Hornblower saw the leading men, their cloaks flying from their shoulders, leaning along their horses' necks with their sabre pointed forward at the full stretch of their arms.

"Fire!" said the deep voice.

In reply came a single sharp explosion as every musket went off at once. The smoke swirled round the square and disappeared. Where Hornblower had been looking, there were now a score of horses and men on the ground, some struggling in agony, some lying still. The cavalry regiment split like a torrent encountering a rock and hurtled harmlessly past the other faces of the square.

"Well enough," said Edrington.

The deep voice was intoning again; like marionettes all on the same string the company that had fired now reloaded, every man biting out his bullet at the same instant, every man ramming home his charge, every man spitting his bullet into his musket barrel with the same instantaneous inclination of head. Edrington looked keenly at the cavalry collecting together in a disorderly mob down the valley.

"The 43rd will advance!" he ordered.

With solemn ritual the square opened up again into two columns and continued its interrupted march. The detached company came marching up to join them from out of a ring of dead men and horses. Someone raised a cheer.

"Silence in the ranks!" bellowed the sergeant-major. "Sergeant, take that man's name."

But Hornblower noticed how the sergeant-major was eyeing keenly the distance between the columns; it had to be maintained exactly so that a company wheeling back filled it to make the square.

"Here they come again," said Edrington.

The cavalry were forming for a new charge, but the square was ready for them. Now the horses were blown and the men were less enthusiastic. It was not a solid wall of horses that came down on them, but isolated groups, rushing first at one face and then at another, and pulling up or swerving aside as they reached the line of bayonets. The attacks were too feeble to meet with company volleys; at the word of command sections here and there gave fire to the more determined groups. Hornblower saw one man — an officer, judging by his gold lace — rein up before the bayonets and pull out a pistol. Before he could discharge it, half a dozen muskets went off together; the officer's face became a horrible bloody mask, and he and his horse fell together to the ground. Then all at once the cavalry wheeled off, like starlings over a field, and the march

could be resumed.

"No discipline about these Frogs, not on either side," said Edrington.

The march was headed for the sea, for the blessed shelter of the *Indefatigable*, but it seemed to Hornblower as if the pace was intolerably slow. The men were marching at the parade step, with agonizing deliberation, while all round them and far ahead of them the fugitive émigrés poured in a broad stream towards safety. Looking back, Hornblower saw the fields full of marching columns — hurrying swarms, rather — of Revolutionary infantry in hot pursuit of them.

"Once let men run, and you can't do anything else with them," commented Edrington, following Hornblower's gaze.

Shouts and shots over to the flank caught their attention. Trotting over the fields, leaping wildly at the bumps, came a cart drawn by a lean horse. Someone in a seaman's frock and trousers was holding the reins; other seamen were visible over the sides firing muskets at the horsemen hovering about them. It was Bracegirdle with his dung cart; he might have lost his guns but he had saved his men. The pursuers dropped away as the cart neared the columns; Bracegirdle, standing up in the cart, caught sight of Hornblower on his horse and waved to him excitedly.

"Boadicea and her chariot!" he yelled.

"I'll thank you, sir!" shouted Edrington with lungs of brass, "to go on and prepare for our embarkation."

"Aye aye, sir!"

The lean horse trotted on with the cart lurching after it and the grinning seamen clinging on to the sides. At the flank appeared a swarm of infantry, a mad, gesticulating crowd, half running to cut off the 43rd's retreat. Edrington swept his glance round the fields.

"The 43rd will form line!" he shouted.

Like some ponderous machine, well oiled, the half battalion fronted towards the swarm; the columns became lines, each man moving into his position like bricks laid on a wall.

"The 43rd will advance!"

The scarlet line swept forward, slowly, inexorably. The swarm hastened to meet it, officers to the front waving their swords and calling on their men to follow.

"Make ready!"

Every musket came down together, the priming pans clicked.

"Present!"

Up came the muskets, and the swarm hesitated before that fearful menace. Individuals tried to get back into the crowd to cover themselves from the volley with the bodies of their comrades.

"Fire!"

A crashing volley; Hornblower, looking over the heads of the British infantry from his point of vantage on horseback, saw the whole face of the swarm go down in swathes. Still the red line moved forward, at each deliberate step a shouted order brought a machine-like response as the men reloaded; five hundred mouths spat in five hundred bullets, five hundred right arms raised five hundred ramrods at once. When the muskets came to the present the red line was at the swathe of dead and wounded, for the swarm had withdrawn before the advance, and shrank back still further at the threat of the volley. The volley was fired; the advance went on. Another volley; another advance. Now the swarm was shredding away. Now men were running from it. Now every man had turned tail and fled from that frightful musketry. The hillside was as black with fugitives as it had been when the émigrés were fleeing.

"Halt!"

The advance ceased; the line became a double column, and the retreat began again.

"Very creditable," remarked Edrington.

Hornblower's horse was trying jerkily to pick its way over a carpet of dead and wounded, and he was so busy keeping his seat, and his brain was in such a whirl, that he did not immediately realize that they had topped the last rise, so that before them lay the glittering waters of the estuary. The strip of muddy beach was packed solid with émigrés. There were the ships riding at anchor, and there, blessed sight, were the boats swarming towards the shore. It was high time, for already the boldest of the Revolutionary infantry were hovering round the columns, taking long shots into them. Here and there a man fell.

"Close up!" snapped the sergeants, and the files marched on stolidly, leaving the wounded and dead behind them.

The adjutant's horse suddenly snorted and plunged, and then fell first to its knees, and, kicking, to its side, while the freckle-faced adjutant freed his feet from the stirrups and flung himself out of the saddle just in time to escape being pinned underneath.

"Are you hit, Stanley?" asked Edrington.

"No, my lord. All safe and sound," said the adjutant, brushing at his scarlet coat.

"You won't have to foot it far," said Edrington. "No need to throw out skirmishers to drive those fellows off. This is where we must make our stand."

He looked about him, at the fishermen's cottages above the beach, the panic-stricken émigrés at the water's edge, and the masses of Revolutionary infantry coming up in pursuit, leaving small enough time for preparation. Some of the redcoats poured into the cottages, appearing a moment later at the windows; it was fortunate that the fishing hamlet guarded one flank of the gap down to the beach while the other was guarded by a steep and inaccessible headland on whose summit a small block of redcoats established themselves. In the gap between the two points the remaining four companies formed a long line just sheltered by the crest of the beach.

The boats of the squadron were already loading with émigrés among the small breakers below. Hornblower heard the crack of a single pistol-shot; he could guess that some officer down there was enforcing his orders in the only possible way to prevent the fear-driven men from pouring into the boats and swamping them. As if in answer came the roar of cannon on the other side. A battery of artillery had unlimbered just out of musket range and was firing at the British position, while all about it gathered the massed battalions of the Revolutionary infantry. The cannon balls howled close overhead.

"Let them fire away," said Edrington. "The longer the better."

The artillery could do little harm to the British in the fold of ground that protected them, and the Revolutionary commander must have realized that as well as the necessity for wasting no time. Over there the drums began to roll — a noise of indescribable menace — and then the columns surged forward. So close were they already that Hornblower could see the features of the officers in the lead, waving their hats and swords.

"43rd, make ready!" said Edrington, and the priming pans clicked as one. "Seven paces forward — march!"

One — two — three — seven paces, painstakingly taken, took the line to the little crest.

"Present! Fire!"

A volley nothing could withstand. The columns halted, swayed, received another smashing volley, and another, and fell back in ruin.

"Excellent!" said Edrington.

The battery boomed again; a file of two redcoat soldiers was tossed back like dolls, to lie in a horrible bloody mass close beside Hornblower's horse's feet.

"Close up!" said a sergeant, and the men on either side had filled the gap.

"43rd, seven paces back — march!"

The line was below the crest again, as the redcoated marionettes withdrew in steady time. Hornblower could not remember later whether it was twice or three times more that the Revolutionary masses came on again, each time to be dashed back by that disciplined musketry. But the sun was nearly setting in the ocean behind him when he looked back to see the beach almost cleared and Bracegirdle plodding up to them to report.

"I can spare one company now," said Edrington in reply but not taking his eyes off the French masses. "After they are on board, have every boat ready and waiting."

One company filed off; another attack was beaten back — after the preceding failures it was not pressed home with anything like the dash and fire of the earlier ones. Now the battery was turning its attention to the headland on the flank, and sending its balls among the redcoats there, while a battalion of French moved over to the attack at that point.

"That gives us time," said Edrington. "Captain Griffin, you can march the men off. Colour party, remain here."

Down the beach went the centre companies to the waiting boats, while the colours still waved to mark their old position, visible over the crest to the French. The company in the cottages came out, formed up, and marched down as well. Edrington trotted across to the foot of the little headland; he watched the French

forming for the attack and the infantry wading out to the boats.

"Now, grenadiers!" he yelled suddenly. "Run for it! Colour party!"

Down the steep seaward face of the headland came the last company, running, sliding, and stumbling. A musket, clumsily handled, went off unexpectedly. The last man came down the slope as the colour party reached the water's edge and began to climb into a boat with its precious burden. A wild yell went up from the French, and their whole mass came rushing towards the evacuated position.

"Now, sir," said Edrington, turning his horse seawards.

Hornblower fell from his saddle as his horse splashed into the shallows. He let go of the reins and plunged out, waist deep, shoulder deep, to where the longboat lay on its oars with its four-pounder gun in its bows and Bracegirdle beside it to haul him in. He looked up in time to see a curious incident; Edrington had reached the *Indefatigable's* gig, still holding his horse's reins. With the French pouring down the beach towards them, he turned and took a musket from the nearest soldier, pressed the muzzle to the horse's head, and fired. The horse fell in its death agony in the shallows; only Hornblower's roan remained as prize to the Revolutionaries. "Back water!" said Bracegirdle, and the longboat backed away from the beach; Hornblower lay in the eyes of the boat feeling as if he had not the strength to move a limb, and the beach was covered with shouting, gesticulating Frenchmen, lit redly by the sunset.

"One moment," said Bracegirdle, reaching for the lanyard of the four-pounder, and tugging at it smartly. The gun roared out in Hornblower's ear, and the charge cut a swathe of destruction on the beach.

"That was canister," said Bracegirdle. "Eighty-four balls. Easy, port! Give way, starboard!"

The longboat turned, away from the beach and towards the welcoming ships. Hornblower looked back at the darkening coast of France. This was the end of an incident; his country's attempt to overturn the Revolution had met with a bloody repulse. Newspapers in Paris would exult; the *Gazette* in London would give the incident five cold lines. Clairvoyant, Hornblower could foresee that in a year's time the world would hardly remember the incident. In twenty Years it would be entirely forgotten. Yet those headless corpses up there in Muzillac; those shattered redcoats; those Frenchmen caught in the four-pounder's blast of canister — they were all as dead as if it had been a day in which history had been changed. And he was just as weary. And in his pocket there was still the bread he had put there that morning and forgotten all about.

CHAPTER SEVEN — THE SPANISH GALLEYS

The old *Indefatigable* was lying at anchor in the Bay of Cadiz at the time when Spain made peace with France. Hornblower happened to be midshipman of the watch, and it was he who called the attention of Lieutenant Chadd to the approach of the eight-oared pinnace, with the red and yellow of Spain dropping at the stern. Chadd's glass made out the gleam of gold on epaulette and cocked hat, and bellowed the order for sideboys and marine guard to give the traditional honours to a captain in an allied service. Pellew, hurriedly warned, was at the gangway to meet his visitor, and it was at the gangway that the entire interview took place. The Spaniard, making a low bow with his hat across his stomach, offered a sealed envelope to the Englishman. "Here, Mr Hornblower," said Pellew, holding the letter unopened, "speak French to this fellow. Ask him to come below for a glass of wine."

But the Spaniard, with a further bow, declined the refreshment, and, with another bow, requested that Pellew open the letter immediately. Pellew broke the seal and read the contents, struggling with the French which he could read to a small extent although he could not speak it at all. He handed it to Hornblower.

"This means the Dagoes have made peace, doesn't it?"

Hornblower struggled through twelve lines of compliments addressed by His Excellency the Duke of Belchite (Grandee of the First Class, with eighteen other titles ending with Captain-General of Andalusia) to the Most Gallant Ship-Captain Sir Edward Pellew, Knight of the Bath. The second paragraph was short and contained only a brief intimation of peace. The third paragraph was as long as the first, and repeated its phraseology almost word for word in a ponderous farewell.

"That's all, sir," said Hornblower.

But the Spanish captain had a verbal message with which to supplement the written one.

"Please tell your captain," he said, in his lisping Spanish-French, "that now as a neutral power, Spain must enforce her rights. You have already been at anchor here for twenty-four hours. Six hours from now" — the Spaniard took a gold watch from his pocket and glanced at it — "if you are within range of the batteries at Puntales there they will be given orders to fire on you."

Hornblower could only translate the brutal message without any attempt at softening it, and Pellew listened, white with anger despite his tan.

"Tell him —" he began, and then mastered his rage. "Damme if I'll let him see he has made me angry."

He put his hat across his stomach and bowed in as faithful an imitation of the Spaniard's courtliness as he could manage, before he turned to Hornblower.

"Tell him I have received his message with pleasure. Tell him I much regret that circumstances are separating him from me, and that I hope I shall always enjoy his personal friendship whatever the relations between our countries. Tell him — oh, you can tell him the sort of thing I want said, can't you, Hornblower? Let's see him over the side with dignity. Sideboys! Bosun's mates! Drummers!"

Hornblower poured out compliments to the best of his ability, and at every phrase the two captains exchanged bows, the Spaniard withdrawing a pace at each bow and Pellew following him up, not to be outdone in courtesy. The drums beat a ruffle, the marines presented arms, the pipes shrilled and twittered until the Spaniard's head had descended to the level of the maindeck, when Pellew stiffened up, clapped his hat on his head, and swung round on his first lieutenant.

"Mr Eccles, I want to be under way within the hour, if you please."

Then he stamped down below to regain his equanimity in private.

Hands were aloft loosing sail ready to sheet home, while the clank of the capstan told how other men were heaving the cable short, and Hornblower was standing on the portside gangway with Mr Wales the carpenter, looking over at the white houses of one of the most beautiful cities in Europe.

"I've been ashore there twice," said Wales. "The wine's good — vino, they calls it — if you happens to like that kind o' muck. But don't you ever try that brandy, Mr Hornblower. Poison, it is, rank poison. Hello! We're going to have an escort, I see."

Two long sharp prows had emerged from the inner bay, and were pointing towards the *Indefatigable*.

Hornblower could not restrain himself from giving a cry of surprise as he followed Wales' gaze. The vessels approaching were galleys, along each side of them the oars were lifting and falling rhythmically, catching the sunlight as they feathered. The effect, as a hundred oars swung like one, was perfectly beautiful. Hornblower remembered a line in a Latin poet which he had translated as a schoolboy, and recalled his surprise when he discovered that to a Roman the 'white wings' of a ship of war were her oars. Now the simile was plain; even a gull in flight, which Hornblower had always looked upon until now as displaying the perfection of motion, was not more beautiful than those galleys. They lay low in the water, immensely long for their beam. Neither the sails nor the lateen yards were set on the low raking masts. The bows blazed with gilding, while the waters of the bay foamed round them as they headed into the teeth of the gentle breeze with the Spanish red and gold streaming aft from the masthead. Up — forward — down — went the oars with unchanging rhythm, the blades not varying an inch in their distance apart during the whole of the stroke. From the bows of each two long guns looked straight forward in the direction the galleys pointed.

"Twenty-four pounders," said Wales. "If they catch you in a calm, they'll knock you to pieces. Lie off on your quarter where you can't bring a gun to bear and rake you till you strike. An' then God help you — better a Turkish prison than a Spanish one."

In a line-ahead that might have been drawn with a ruler and measured with a chain the galleys passed close along the port side of the *Indefatigable* and went ahead of her. As they passed the roll of the drum and the call of the pipes summoned the crew of the *Indefatigable* to attention out of compliment to the flag and the commission pendant going by, while the galleys' officers returned the salute.

"It don't seem right, somehow," mustered Wales under his breath, "to salute 'em like they was a frigate."

Level with the *Indefatigable*'s bowsprit the leader backed her starboard side oars, and spun like a top, despite her length and narrow beam, across the frigate's bows. The gentle wind blew straight to the frigate from the

galley, and then from her consort as the latter followed; and a foul stench came back on the air and assailed Hornblower's nostrils, and not Hornblower's alone, clearly, for it brought forth cries of disgust from all the men on deck.

"They all stink like that," explained Wales. "Four men to the oar an' fifty oars. Two hundred galley slaves, that is. All chained to their benches. When you goes aboard one of them as a slave you're chained to your bench, an' you're never unchained until they drop you overside. Sometimes when the hands aren't busy they'll hose out the bilge, but that doesn't happen often, bein' Dagoes an' not many of 'em."

Hornblower as always sought exact information.

"How many, Mr Wales?"

"Thirty, mebbe. Enough to hand the sails if they're making a passage. Or to man the guns — they strike the yards and sails, like now, before they goes into action, Mr Hornblower," said Wales, pontifical as usual, and with that slight emphasis on the 'Mister' inevitable when a warrant officer of sixty with no hope of further promotion addressed a warrant officer of eighteen (his nominal equal in rank) who might some day be an admiral. "So you see how it is. With no more than thirty of a crew an' two hundred slaves they daren't let 'em loose, not ever."

The galleys had turned again, and were now passing down the *Indefatigable's* starboard side. The beat of the oars had slowed very noticeably, and Hornblower had ample time to observe the vessels closely, the low forecastle and high poop with the gangway connecting them along the whole length of the galley; upon that gangway walked a man with a whip. The rowers were invisible below the bulwarks, the oars being worked through holes in the sides closed, as far as Hornblower could see, with sheets of leather round the oar-looms to keep out the sea. On the poop stood two men at the tiller and a small group of officers, their gold lace flashing in the sunshine. Save for the gold lace and the twenty-four-pounder bow chasers Hornblower was looking at exactly the same sort of vessel as the ancients used to fight their battles. Polybius and Thucydides wrote about galleys almost identical with these — for that matter it was not much more than two hundred years since the galleys had fought their last great battle at Lepanto against the Turks. But those battles had been fought with hundreds of galleys a side.

"How many do they have in commission now?" asked Hornblower.

"A dozen, mebbe — not that I knows for sure, o' course. Carthagenas their usual station, beyond the Gut."

Wales, as Hornblower understood, meant by this through the Strait of Gibraltar in the Mediterranean.

"Too frail for the Atlantic," Hornblower commented.

It was easy to deduce the reasons for the survival of this small number — the innate conservatism of the Spaniards would account for it to a large extent. Then there was the point that condemnation to the galleys was one way of disposing of criminals. And when all was said and done a galley might still be useful in a calm — merchant ships becalmed while trying to pass the Strait of Gibraltar might be snapped up by galleys pushing out from Cadiz or Carthagenas. And at the very lowest estimate there might be some employment for galleys to tow vessels in and out of harbour with the wind unfavourable.

"Mr Hornblower!" said Eccles. "My respects to the captain, and we're ready to get under way."

Hornblower dived below with his message.

"My compliments to Mr Eccles," said Pellew, looking up from his desk, "and I'll be on deck immediately."

There was just enough of a southerly breeze to enable the *Indefatigable* to weather the point in safety. With her anchor catted she braced round her yards and began to steal seaward; in the disciplined stillness which prevailed the sound of the ripple of water under her cutwater was clearly to be heard — a musical note which told nothing, in its innocence, of the savagery and danger of the world of the sea into which she was entering. Creeping along under her topsails the *Indefatigable* made no more than three knots, and the galleys came surging past her again, oars beating their fastest rhythm, as if the galleys were boasting of their independence of the elements. Their gilt flashed in the sun as they overtook to windward, and once again their foul stench offended the nostrils of the men of the *Indefatigable*.

"I'd be obliged if they'd keep to leeward of us," muttered Pellew, watching them through his glass. "But I suppose that's not Spanish courtesy. Mr Cutler!"

"Sir!" said the gunner.

"You may commence the salute."

"Aye aye, sir."

The forward carronade on the lee side roared out the first of its compliments, and the fort of Puntales began its reply. The sound of the salute rolled round the beautiful bay; nation was speaking to nation in all courtesy. "The next time we hear those guns they'll be shotted, I fancy," said Pellew, gazing across at Puntales and the flag of Spain flying above it.

Indeed, the tide of war was turning against England. Nation after nation had retired from the contest against France, some worsted by arms, and some by the diplomacy of the vigorous young republic. To any thinking mind it was obvious that once the step from war to neutrality had been taken, the next step would be easy, from neutrality to war on the other side. Hornblower could foresee, close at hand, a time when all Europe would be arrayed in hostility to England, when she would be battling for her life against the rejuvenescent power of France and the malignity of the whole world.

"Set sail please, Mr Eccles," said Pellew.

Two hundred trained pairs of legs raced aloft; two hundred trained pairs of arms let loose the canvas, and the *Indefatigable* doubled her speed, heeling slightly to the gentle breeze. Now she was meeting the long Atlantic swell. So were the galleys; as the *Indefatigable* overtook them, Hornblower could see the leader put her nose into a long roller so that a cloud of spray broke over her forecastle. That was asking too much of such frail craft. Back went one bank of oars, forward went the other. The galleys rolled hideously for a moment in the trough of the sea before they completed their turn and headed back for the safe waters of Cadiz Bay. Someone forward in the *Indefatigable* began to boo, and the cry was instantly taken up through the ship. A storm of boos and whistles and catcalls pursued the galleys, the men momentarily quite out of hand while Pellew spluttered with rage on the quarterdeck and the petty officers strove in vain to take the names of the offenders. It was an ominous farewell to Spain.

Ominous indeed. It was not long before Captain Pellew gave the news to the ship that Spain had completed her change-over; with the treasure convoy safely in she had declared war against England; the revolutionary republic had won the alliance of the most decayed monarchy in Europe. British resources were now stretched to the utmost; there was another thousand miles of coast to watch, another fleet to blockade, another horde of privateers to guard against, and far fewer harbours in which to take refuge and from which to draw the fresh water and the meagre stores which enabled the hard-worked crews to remain at sea. It was then that friendship had to be cultivated with the half savage Barbary States, and the insolence of the Deys and the Sultans had to be tolerated so that North Africa could provide the skinny bullocks and the barley grain to feed the British garrisons in the Mediterranean — all of them beleaguered on land — and the ships which kept open the way to them. Oran, Tetuan, Algiers wallowed in unwontedly honest prosperity with the influx of British gold.

It was a day of glassy calm in the Straits of Gibraltar. The sea was like a silver shield, the sky like a bowl of sapphire, with the mountains of Africa on the one hand, the mountains of Spain on the other as dark serrations on the horizon. It was not a comfortable situation for the *Indefatigable*, but that was not because of the blazing sun which softened the pitch in the deck seams. There is almost always a slight current setting inwards into the Mediterranean from the Atlantic, and the prevailing winds blow in the same direction. In a calm like this it was not unusual for a ship to be carried far through the Straits, past the Rock of Gibraltar, and then to have to beat for days and even weeks to make Gibraltar Bay. So that Pellew was not unnaturally anxious about his convoy of grain ships from Oran. Gibraltar had to be revictualled — Spain had already marched an army up for the siege — and he dared not risk being carried past his destination. His orders to his reluctant convoy had been enforced by flag and gun signals, for no short-handed merchant ship relished the prospect of the labour Pellew wished to be executed. The *Indefatigable* no less than her convoy had lowered boats, and the helpless ships were now all in tow. That was backbreaking, exhausting labour, the men at the oars tugging and straining, dragging the oar blades through the water, while the towlines tightened and bucked with superhuman perversity and the ships sheered freakishly from side to side. It was less than a mile an hour, that the ships made in this fashion, at the cost of the complete exhaustion of the boats' crews, but at least it postponed the time when the Gibraltar current would carry them to leeward, and similarly gave more chance for the longed-for southerly wind — two hours of a southerly wind was all they wished for — to waft them up to the Mole.

Down in the *Indefatigable's* longboat and cutter the men tugging at their oars were so stupefied with their toil that they did not hear the commotion in the ship. They were just tugging and straining, under the pitiless sky, living through their two hours' spell of misery, but they were roused by the voice of the captain himself, hailing them from the forecastle.

"Mr Bolton! Mr Chadd! Cast off there, if you please. You'd better come and arm your men at once. Here come our friends from Cadiz."

Back on the quarterdeck, Pellew looked through his glass at the hazy horizon; he could make out from here by now what had first been reported from the masthead.

"They're heading straight for us," he said.

The two galleys were on their way from Cadiz, presumably a fast horseman from the lookout point at Tarifa had brought them the news of this golden opportunity, of the flat calm and the scattered and helpless convoy. This was the moment for galleys to justify their continued existence. They could capture and at least burn, although they could not hope to carry off, the unfortunate merchant ships, while the *Indefatigable* lay helpless hardly out of cannon's range. Pellew looked round at the two merchant ships and the three brigs; one of them was within half a mile of him and might be covered by his gunfire, but the others — a mile and a half, two miles away — had no such protection.

"Pistols and cutlasses, my lads!" he said to the men pouring up from overside. "Clap onto that stay tackle now. Smartly with that carronade, Mr Cutler!"

The *Indefatigable* had been in too many expeditions where minutes counted to waste any time over these preparations. The boats' crews seized their arms, the six-pounder carronades were lowered into the bows of the cutter and longboat, and soon the boats, crowded with armed men, and provisioned against sudden emergency, were pulling away to meet the galleys.

"What the devil d'you think you're doing, Mr Hornblower?"

Pellew had just caught sight of Hornblower in the act of swinging out of the jolly boat which was his special charge. He wondered what his midshipman thought he could achieve against a war-galley with a twelve-foot boat and a crew of six.

"We can pull to one of the convoy and reinforce the crew, sir," said Hornblower.

"Oh, very well then, carry on. I'll trust to your good sense, even though that's a broken reed."

"Good on you, sir!" said Jackson ecstatically, as the jolly boat shoved off from the frigate. "Good on you! No one else wouldn't never have thought of that."

Jackson, the coxswain of the jolly boat, obviously thought that Hornblower had no intention of carrying out his suggestion to reinforce the crew of one of the merchant ships.

"Those stinking Dagoes," said stroke oar, between his teeth.

Hornblower was conscious of the presence in his crew of the same feeling of violent hostility toward the Spanish galleys as he felt within himself. In a fleeting moment of analysis, he attributed it to the circumstances in which they had first made the galleys' acquaintance, as well as to the stench which the galleys trailed after them. He had never known this feeling of personal hatred before; when previously he had fought it had been as a servant of the King, not out of personal animosity. Yet here he was gripping the tiller under the scorching sky and leaning forward in his eagerness to be at actual gaps with his enemy.

The longboat and cutter had a long start of them, and even though they were manned by crews who had already served a spell at the oars they were skimming over the water at such a speed that the jolly boat with all the advantage of the glassy-smooth water only slowly caught up to them. Overside the sea was of the bluest, deepest blue until the oar blades churned it white. Ahead of them the vessels of the convoy lay scattered where the sudden calm had caught them, and just beyond them Hornblower caught sight of the flash of oar blades as the galleys came sweeping down on their prey. Longboat and cutter were diverging in an endeavour to cover as many vessels as possible, and the gig was still far astern. There would hardly be time to board a ship even if Hornblower should wish to. He put the tiller over to incline his course after the cutter; one of the galleys at that moment abruptly made its appearance in the gap between two of the merchant ships. Hornblower saw the cutter saving round to point her six-pounder carronade at the advancing bows.

"Pull, you men! Pull!" he shrieked mad with excitement.

He could not imagine what was going to happen, but he wanted to be in the fray. That six-pounder popgun

was grossly inaccurate at any range longer than musket shot. It would serve to hurl a mass of grape into a crowd of men, but its ball would have small effect on the strengthened bows of a war galley.

"Pull!" shrieked Hornblower again. He was nearly up to them, wide on the cutter's quarter.

The carronade boomed out. Hornblower thought he saw the splinters fly from the galley's bow, but the shot had no more effect on deterring her than a peashooter could stop a charging bull. The galley turned a little, getting exactly into line, and then her oars' beat quickened. She was coming down to ram, like the Greeks at Salamis.

"Pull!" shrieked Hornblower.

Instinctively, he gave the tiller a touch to take the jolly boat out into a flanking position.

"Easy!"

The jolly boat's oars stilled, as their way carried them past the cutter. Hornblower could see Soames standing up in the sternsheets looking at the death which was cleaving the blue water towards him. Bow to bow the cutter might have stood a chance, but too late the cutter tried to evade the blow altogether. Hornblower saw her turn, presenting her vulnerable side to the galley's stem. That was all he could see, for the next moment the galley herself hid from him the final act of the tragedy. The jolly boat's starboard side oars only just cleared the galley's starboard oars as she swept by. Hornblower heard a shriek and a crash, saw the galley's forward motion almost cease at the collision. He was mad with the lust of fighting, quite insane, and his mind was working with the rapidity of insanity.

"Give way, port!" he yelled, and the jolly boat swung round under the galley's stern. "Give way all!"

The jolly boat leaped after the galley like a terrier after a bull.

"Grapple them, damn you, Jackson!"

Jackson shouted an oath in reply, as he leaped forward, seemingly hurdling the men at the oars without breaking their stroke. In the bows Jackson seized the boat's grapnel on its long line and flung it hard and true. It caught somewhere in the elaborate gilt rail on the galley's quarter. Jackson hauled on the line, the oars tugged madly in the effort to carry the jolly boat up to the galley's stern. At that moment Hornblower saw it, the sight which would long haunt his dreams — up from under the galley's stern came the shattered forepart of the cutter, still with men clinging to it who had survived the long passage under the whole length of the galley which had overrun them. There were straining faces, empurpled faces, faces already relaxing in death. But in a moment it was past and gone, and Hornblower felt the jerk transmitted through the line to the jolly boat as the galley leaped forward.

"I can't hold her!" shouted Jackson.

"Take a turn round the cleat, you fool!"

The galley was towing the jolly boat now, dragging her along at the end of a twenty-foot line close on her quarter just clear of the arc of her rudder. The white water bubbled all around her, her bows were cocked up with the strain. It was a mad moment, as though they had harpooned a whale. Some one came running aft on the Spaniard's poop, knife in hand to cut the line.

"Shoot him, Jackson!" shrieked Hornblower again.

Jackson's pistol cracked, and the Spaniard fell to the deck out of sight — a good shot. Despite his fighting madness despite the turmoil of rushing water and glaring sun, Hornblower tried to think out his next move. Inclination and common sense alike told him that the best plan was to close with the enemy despite the odds.

"Pull up to them, there!" he shouted — everyone in the boat was shouting and yelling. The men in the bows of the jolly boat faced forward and took the grapnel line and began to haul in on it, but the speed of the boat through the water made any progress difficult, and after a yard or so had been gained the difficulty became insurmountable, for the grapnel was caught in the poop rail ten or eleven feet above water, and the angle of pull became progressively steeper as the jolly boat neared the stern of the galley. The boat's bow cocked higher out of the water than ever.

"Belay!" said Hornblower, and then, his voice rising again, "Out pistols, lads!"

A row of four or five swarthy faces had appeared at the stern of the galley. Muskets were pointing into the jolly boat, and there was a brief but furious exchange of shots. One man fell groaning into the bottom of the jolly boat, but the row of faces disappeared. Standing up precariously in the swaying sternsheets, Hornblower could still see nothing of the galley's poop deck save for the tops of two heads, belonging, it was clear, to the

men at the tiller.

"Reload," he said to his men, remembering by a miracle to give the order. The ramrods went down the pistol barrels.

"Do that carefully if you ever want to see Pompey again," said Hornblower.

He was shaking with excitement and mad with the fury of fighting, and it was the automatic, drilled part of him which was giving these level-headed orders. His higher faculties were quite negated by his lust for blood. He was seeing things through a pink mist — that was how he remembered it when he looked back upon it later. There was a sudden crash of glass. Someone had thrust a musket barrel through the big stern window of the galley's after cabin. Luckily having thrust it through he had to recover himself to take aim. An irregular volley of pistols almost coincided with the report of the musket. Where the Spaniard's bullet went no one knew; but the Spaniard fell back from the window.

"By God! That's our way!" screamed Hornblower, and then, steadying himself, "Reload."

As the bullets were being spat into the barrels he stood up. His unused pistols were still in his belt; his cutlass was at his side.

"Come aft, here," he said to stroke oar; the jolly boat would stand no more weight in the bows than she had already. "And you, too."

Hornblower poised himself on the thwarts, eyeing the grapnel line and the cabin window.

"Bring 'em after me one at a time, Jackson," he said.

Then he braced himself and flung himself at the grapnel line. His feet grazed the water as the line sagged, but using all his clumsy strength his arms carried him upwards. Here was the shattered window at his side; he swung up his feet, kicked out a big remaining piece of the pane, and then shot his feet through and then the rest of himself. He came down on the deck of the cabin with a thud; it was dark in here compared with the blinding sun outside. As he got to his feet, he trod on something which gave out a cry of pain — the wounded Spaniard, evidently — and the hand with which he drew his cutlass was sticky with blood. Spanish blood.

Rising, he hit his head a thunderous crash on the deck-beams above, for the little cabin was very low, hardly more than five feet, and so severe was the blow that his senses almost left him. But before him was the cabin door and he reeled out through it, cutlass in hand. Over his head he heard a stamping of feet, and shots were fired behind him and above him — a further exchange, he presumed, between the jolly boat and the galley's stern rail. The cabin door opened into a low half-deck, and Hornblower reeled along it out into the sunshine again. He was on the tiny strip of maindeck at the break of the poop. Before him stretched the narrow gangway between the two sets of rowers; he could look down at these latter — two seas of bearded faces, mops of hair and lean sunburned bodies, swinging rhythmically back and forward to the beat of the oars.

That was all the impression he could form of them at the moment. At the far end of the gangway at the break of the forecastle stood the overseer with his whip; he was shouting words in rhythmic succession to the slaves — Spanish numbers, perhaps, to give them the time. There were three or four men on the forecastle; below them the half-doors through the forecastle bulkhead were hooked open, through which Hornblower could see the two big guns illuminated by the light through the port holes out of which they were run almost at the water level. The guns' crews were standing by the guns, but numerically they were far fewer than two twenty-four pounders would demand. Hornblower remembered Wales' estimate of no more than thirty for a galley's crew. The men of one gun at least had been called aft to defend the poop against the jolly boat's attack.

A step behind him made him leap with anxiety and he swung round with his cutlass ready to meet Jackson stumbling out of the half deck, cutlass in hand.

"Nigh on cracked my nut," said Jackson.

He was speaking thickly like a drunken man, and his words were chorused by further shots fired from the poop at the level of the top of their heads.

"Oldroyd's comin' next," said Jackson. "Franklin's dead."

On either side of them a companion ladder mounted to the poop deck. It seemed logical, mathematical, that they should each go up one but Hornblower thought better of it.

"Come along," he said, and headed for the starboard ladder, and, with Oldroyd putting in an appearance at that moment, he yelled to him to follow.

The handropes of the ladder were of twisted red and yellow cord — he even could notice that as he rushed up the ladder, pistol in hand and cutlass in the other. After the first step, his eye was above deck level. There were more than a dozen men crowded on the tiny poop, but two were lying dead, and one was groaning with his back to the rail, and two stood by the tiller. The others were looking over the rail at the jolly boat. Hornblower was still insane with fighting madness. He must have leaped up the final two or three steps with a bound like a stag's, and he was screaming like a maniac as he flung himself at the Spaniards. His pistol went off apparently without his willing it, but the face of the man a yard away dissolved into bloody ruin, and Hornblower dropped the weapon and snatched the second, his thumb going to the hammer as he whirled his cutlass down with a crash on the sword which the next Spaniard raised as a feeble guard. He struck and struck and struck with a lunatic's strength. Here was Jackson beside him shouting hoarsely and striking out right and left.

"Kill 'em! Kill 'em!" shouted Jackson.

Hornblower saw Jackson's cutlass flash down on the head of the defenceless man at the tiller. Then out of the tail of his eye he saw another sword threaten him as he battered with his cutlass at the man before him, but his pistol saved him as he fired automatically again. Another pistol went off beside him — Oldroyd's, he supposed — and then the fight on the poop was over. By what miracle of ineptitude the Spaniards had allowed the attack to take them by surprise Hornblower never could discover. Perhaps they were ignorant of the wounding of the man in the cabin, and had relied on him to defend that route; perhaps it had never occurred to them that three men could be so utterly desperate as to attack a dozen; perhaps they never realized that three men had made the perilous passage of the grapnel line; perhaps — most probably — in the mad excitement of it all, they simply lost their heads, for five minutes could hardly have elapsed altogether from the time the jolly boat hooked on until the poop was cleared. Two of three Spaniards ran down the companion to the maindeck and forward along the gangway between the rows of slaves. One was caught against the rail and made a gesture of surrender, but Jackson's hand was already at his throat. Jackson was a man of immense physical strength; he bent the Spaniard back over the rail, farther and farther, and then caught him by the thigh with his other hand and heaved him over. He fell with a shriek before Hornblower could interpose. The poop deck was covered with writhing men, like the bottom of a boat filled with flapping fish. One man was getting to his knees when Jackson and Oldroyd seized him. They swung him up to toss him over the rail.

"Stop that!" said Hornblower, and quite callously they dropped him again with a crash on the bloody planks. Jackson and Oldroyd were like drunken men, unsteady on their feet, glazed of eye and stertorous of breath; Hornblower was just coming out of his insane fit. He stepped forward to the break of the poop, wiping the sweat out of his eyes while trying to wipe away the red mist that tinged his vision. Forward by the forecastle were gathered the rest of the Spaniards, a large group of them; as Hornblower came forward, one of them fired a musket at him but the ball went wide. Down below him the rowers were still swinging rhythmically, forward and back, forward and back, the hairy heads and the naked bodies moving in time to the oars; in time to the voice of the overseer, too, for the latter was still standing on the gangway (the rest of the Spaniards were clustered behind him) calling the time — "Seis, siete, ocho."

"Stop!" bellowed Hornblower.

He walked to the starboard side to be in full view of the starboard side rowers. He held up his hand and bellowed again. A hairy face or two was raised, but the oars still swung.

"Uno, doce, tres," said the overseer.

Jackson appeared at Hornblower's elbow, and levelled a pistol to shoot the nearest rower.

"Oh, belay that!" said Hornblower testily. He knew he was sick of killings now. "Find my pistols and reload them."

He stood at the top of the companion like a man in a dream — in a nightmare. The galley slaves went on swinging and pulling; his dozen enemies were still clustered at the break of the forecastle thirty yards away; behind him the wounded Spaniards groaned away their lives. Another appeal to the rowers was as much ignored as the preceding ones. Oldroyd must have had the clearest head or have recovered himself quickest.

"I'll haul down his colours, sir, shall I?" he said.

Hornblower woke from his dream. On a staff above the taffrail fluttered the yellow and red.

"Yes, haul 'em down at once," he said.

Now his mind was clear, and now his horizon was no longer bounded by the narrow limits of the galley. He looked about him, over the blue, blue sea. There were the merchant ships; over there lay the *Indefatigable*. Behind him boiled the white wake of the galley — a curved wake. Not until that moment did he realize that he was in control of the tiller, and that for the last three minutes, the galley had been cutting over the blue seas unsteered.

"Take the tiller, Oldroyd," he ordered.

Was that a galley disappearing into the hazy distance? It must be, and far in its wake was the longboat. And there, on the port bow, was the gig, resting on her oars — Hornblower could see little figures standing waving in bow and stern, and it dawned upon him that this was in acknowledgement of the hauling down of the Spanish colours. Another musket banged off forward, and the rail close at his hip was struck a tremendous blow which sent gilded splinters flying in the sunlight. But he had all his wits about him again, and he ran back over the dying men; at the after end of the poop he was out of sight of the gangway and safe from shot. He could still see the gig on the port bow.

"Starboard your helm, Oldroyd."

The galley turned slowly — her narrow length made her unhandy if the rudder were not assisted by the oars — but soon the bow was about to obscure the gig.

"Midships!"

Amazing that there, leaping in the white water that boiled under the galley's stern, was the jolly boat with one live man and two dead men still aboard.

"Where are the others, Bromley?" yelled Jackson.

Bromley pointed overside. They had been shot from the taffrail at the moment that Hornblower and the others were preparing to attack the poop.

"Why in hell don't you come aboard?"

Bromley took hold of his left arm with his right; the limb was clearly useless. There was no reinforcement to be obtained here, and yet full possession must be taken of the galley. Otherwise it was even conceivable that they would be carried off to Algeciras; even if they were masters of the rudder the man who controlled the oars dictated the course of the ship if he willed. There was only one course left to try.

Now that his fighting madness had ebbed away, Hornblower was in a sombre mood. He did not care what happened to him; hope and fear had alike deserted him, along with his previous exalted condition. It might be resignation that possessed him now. His mind, still calculating, told him that with only one thing left to do to achieve victory he must attempt it, and the flat, dead condition of his spirits enabled him to carry the attempt through like an automaton, unwavering and emotionless. He walked forward to the poop rail again; the Spaniards were still clustered at the far end of the gangway, with the overseer still giving the time to the oars. They looked up at him as he stood there. With the utmost care and attention he sheathed his cutlass, which he had held in his hand up to that moment. He noticed the blood on his coat and on his hands as he did so. Slowly he settled the sheathed weapon at his side.

"My pistols, Jackson," he said.

Jackson handed him the pistols and with the same callous care he thrust them into his belt. He turned back to Oldroyd, the Spaniards watching every movement fascinated.

"Stay by the tiller, Oldroyd. Jackson, follow me. Do nothing without my orders."

With the sun pouring down on his face, he strode down the companion ladder, walked to the gangway, and approached the Spaniards along it. On either side of him the hairy heads and naked bodies of the galley slaves still swung with the oars. He neared the Spaniards; swords and muskets and pistols were handled nervously, but every eye was on his face. Behind him Jackson coughed. Two yards only from the group, Hornblower halted and swept them with his glance. Then, with a gesture, he indicated the whole of the group except the overseer; and then pointed to the forecastle.

"Get forrard, all of you," he said.

They stood staring at him, although they must have understood the gesture.

"Get forrard," said Hornblower with a wave of his hand and a tap of his foot on the gangway.

There was only one man who seemed likely to demur actively, and Hornblower had it in mind to snatch a pistol from his belt and shoot him on the spot. But the pistol might misfire, the shot might arouse the

Spaniards out of their fascinated dream. He stared the man down.

"Get forrard, I say."

They began to move, they began to shamle off. Hornblower watched them go. Now his emotions were returning to him, and his heart was thumping madly in his chest so that it was hard to control himself. Yet he must not be precipitate. He had to wait until the others were well clear before he could address himself to the overseer.

"Stop those men," he said.

He glared into the overseer's eyes while pointing to the oarsmen; the overseer's lips moved, but he made no sound.

"Stop them," said Hornblower, and this time he put his hand to the butt of his pistol.

That sufficed. The overseer raised his voice in a high pitched order, and the oars instantly ceased. Strange what sudden stillness possessed the ship with the cessation of the grinding of the oars in the tholes. Now it was easy to hear the bubbling of the water round the galley as her way carried her forward. Hornblower turned back to hail Oldroyd.

"Oldroyd! Where away's the gig?"

"Close on the starboard bow, sir!"

"How close?"

"Two cable's lengths, sir. She's pulling for us now."

"Steer for her while you've steerage way."

"Aye aye, sir."

How long would it take the gig under oars to cover a quarter of a mile? Hornblower feared anticlimax, feared a sudden revulsion of feeling among the Spaniards at this late moment. Mere waiting might occasion it, and he must not stand merely idle. He could still hear the motion of the galley through the water, and he turned to Jackson.

"This ship carries her way well, Jackson, doesn't she?" he said, and he made himself laugh as he spoke, as if everything in the world was a matter of sublime certainty.

"Aye, sir, I suppose she does, sir," said the startled Jackson; he was fidgeting nervously with his pistols.

"And look at the man there," went on Hornblower, pointing to a galley slave. "Did you ever see such a beard in your life?"

"N-no, sir."

"Speak to me, you fool. Talk naturally."

"I — I dunno what to say, sir."

"You've no sense, damn you, Jackson. See the welt on that fellow's shoulder? He must have caught it from the overseer's whip not so long ago."

"Mebbe you're right, sir."

Hornblower was repressing his impatience and was about to make another speech when he heard a rasping thump alongside and a moment later the gig's crew was pouring over the bulwarks. The relief was inexpressible. Hornblower was about to relax completely when he remembered appearances. He stiffened himself up.

"Glad to see you aboard, sir," he said, as Lieutenant Chadd swung his legs over and dropped to the maindeck at the break of the forecastle.

"Glad to see *you*," said Chadd, looking about him curiously.

"These men forrard are prisoners, sir," said Hornblower. "It might be well to secure them. I think that is all that remains to be done."

Now he could not relax; it seemed to him as if he must remain strained and tense for ever. Strained and yet stupid, even when he heard the cheers of the hands in the *Indefatigable* as the galley came alongside her. Stupid and dull, making a stumbling report to Captain Pellew, forcing himself to remember to commend the bravery of Jackson and Oldroyd in the highest terms.

"The Admiral will be pleased," said Pellew, looking at Hornblower keenly.

"I'm glad, sir," Hornblower heard himself say.

"Now that we've lost poor Soames," went on Pellew, "we shall need another watch-keeping officer. I have it in

mind to give you an order as acting-lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower, still stupid.

Soames had been a gray-haired officer of vast experience, He had sailed the seven seas, he had fought in a score of actions. But, faced with a new situation, he had not had the quickness of thought to keep his boat from under the ram of the galley. Soames was dead, and acting-lieutenant Hornblower would take his place. Fighting madness, sheer insanity, had won him this promise of promotion. Hornblower had never realized the black depths of lunacy into which he could sink. Like Soames, like all the rest of the crew of the *Indefatigable*, he had allowed himself to be carried away by his blind hatred for the galleys, and only good fortune had allowed him to live through it. That was something worth remembering.

CHAPTER EIGHT — THE EXAMINATION FOR LIEUTENANT

H.M.S. *Indefatigable* was gliding into Gibraltar Bay, with Acting-Lieutenant Horatio Hornblower stiff and self-conscious on the quarterdeck beside Captain Pellew. He kept his telescope trained over toward Algeciras; it was a strange situation, this, that major naval bases of two hostile powers should be no more than six miles apart, and while approaching the harbour it was as well to keep close watch on Algeciras, for there was always the possibility that a squadron of Spaniards might push out suddenly to pounce on an unwary frigate coming in.

"Eight ships — nine ships with their yards crossed, sir," reported Hornblower.

"Thank you," answered Pellew. "Hands 'bout ship."

The *Indefatigable* tacked and headed in toward the Mole. Gibraltar harbour was, as usual, crowded with shipping, for the whole naval effort of England in the Mediterranean was perforce based here. Pellew clewed up his topsails and put his helm over. Then the cable roared out and the *Indefatigable* swung at anchor.

"Call away my gig," ordered Pellew.

Pellew favoured dark blue and white as the colour scheme for his boat and its crew — dark blue shirts and white trousers for the men, with white hats with blue ribbons. The boat was of dark blue picked out with white, the oars had white looms and blue blades. The general effect was very smart indeed as the drive of the oars sent the gig skimming over the water to carry Pellew to pay his respects to the port admiral. It was not long after his return that a messenger came scurrying up to Hornblower.

"Captain's compliments, sir, and he'd like to see you in his cabin."

"Examine your conscience well," grinned Midshipman Bracegirdle. "What crimes have you committed?"

"I wish I knew," said Hornblower, quite genuinely.

It is always a nervous moment going in to see the captain in reply to his summons. Hornblower swallowed as he approached the cabin door, and he had to brace himself a little to knock and enter. But there was nothing to be alarmed about; Pellew looked up with a smile from his desk.

"Ah, Mr Hornblower, I hope you will consider this good news. There will be an examination for lieutenant to-morrow, in the *Santa Barbara* there. You are ready to take it, I hope?"

Hornblower was about to say 'I suppose so, sir,' but checked himself.

"Yes, sir," he said — Pellew hated slipshod answers.

"Very well, then. You report there at three P.M. with your certificates and journals."

"Aye aye, sir."

That was a very brief conversation for such an important subject. Hornblower had Pellew's order as acting-lieutenant for two months now. To-morrow he would take his examination. If he should pass the admiral would confirm the order next day, and Hornblower would be a lieutenant with two month's seniority already. But if he should fail! That would mean he had been found unfit for lieutenant's rank. He would revert to midshipman, the two months' seniority would be lost, and it would be six months at least before he could try again. Eight months' seniority was a matter of enormous importance. It would affect all his subsequent career.

"Tell Mr Bolton you have my permission to leave the ship to-morrow, and you may use one of the ship's

boats."

"Thank you, sir."

"Good luck, Hornblower."

During the next twenty-four hours Hornblower had not merely to try to read all through Norie's *Epitome of Navigation* again, and Clarke's *Complete Handbook of Seamanship*, but he had to see that his number one uniform was spick and span. It cost his spirit ration to prevail on the warrant cook to allow the gunroom attendant to heat a flatiron in the galley and iron out his neck handkerchief. Bracegirdle lent him a clean shirt, but there was a feverish moment when it was discovered that the gunroom's supply of shoe blacking had dried to a chip. Two midshipmen had to work it soft with lard, and the resultant compound, when applied to Hornblower's buckled shoes, was stubbornly resistant to taking a polish; only much labour with the gunroom's moulting shoebrush and then with a soft cloth brought those shoes up to a condition of brightness worthy of an examination for lieutenant. And as for the cocked hat — the life of a cocked hat in the midshipman's berth is hard, and some of the dents could not be entirely eliminated.

"Take it off as soon as you can and keep it under your arm," advised Bracegirdle. "Maybe they won't see you come up the ship's side."

Everybody turned out to see Hornblower leave the ship, with his sword and his white breeches and his buckled shoes, his bundle of journals under his arm and his certificates of sobriety and good conduct in his pocket. The winter afternoon was already far advanced as he was rowed over to the *Santa Barbara* and went up the ship's side to report himself to the officer of the watch.

The *Santa Barbara* was a prison hulk, one of the prizes captured in Rodney's action off Cadiz in 1780 and kept rotting at her moorings, mastless, ever since, a storeship in time of peace and a prison in time of war. Redcoated soldiers, muskets loaded and bayonets fixed, guarded the gangways; on forecastle and quarterdeck were carronades, trained inboard and depressed to sweep the waist, wherein a few prisoners took the air, ragged and unhappy. As Hornblower came up the side he caught a whiff of the stench within, where two thousand prisoners were confined. Hornblower reported himself to the officer of the watch as come on board, and for what purpose.

"Whoever would have guessed it?" said the officer of the watch — an elderly lieutenant with white hair hanging down to his shoulders — running his eye over Hornblower's immaculate uniform and the portfolio under his arm. "Fifteen of your kind have already come on board, and — Holy Gemini, see there!"

Quite a flotilla of small craft was closing in on the *Santa Barbara*. Each boat held at least one cocked-hatted and white-breached midshipman, and some held four or five.

"Every courtesy young gentleman in the Mediterranean Fleet is ambitious for an epaulet," said the lieutenant. "Just wait until the examining board sees how many there are of you! I wouldn't be in your shoes, young shaver, for something. Go aft, there, and wait in the portside cabin."

It was already uncomfortably full; when Hornblower entered, fifteen pairs of eyes measured him up. There were officers of all ages from eighteen to forty, all in their number one's, all nervous — one or two of them had Norie's *Epitome* open on their laps and were anxiously reading passages about which they were doubtful. One little group was passing a bottle from hand to hand, presumably in an effort to keep up their courage. But no sooner had Hornblower entered than a stream of newcomers followed him. The cabin began to fill, and-soon it was tightly packed. Half the forty men present found seats on the deck, and the others were forced to stand.

"Forty years back," said a loud voice somewhere, "my grandad marched with Clive to revenge the Black Hole of Calcutta. If he could but have witnessed the fate of his posterity!"

"Have a drink," said another voice, "and to hell with care."

"Forty of us," commented a tall, thin, clerkly officer, counting heads. "How many of us will they pass, do you think? Five?"

"To hell with care," repeated the bibulous voice in the corner, and lifted itself in song. "Begone, dull care; I prithee be gone from me —"

"Cheese it, you fool!" rasped another voice. "Hark to that!"

The air was filled with the long-drawn twittering of the pipes of the bos'n's mates, and someone on deck was shouting an order.

"A captain coming on board," remarked someone.

An officer had his eye at the crack of the door. "It's Dreadnought Foster," he reported.

"He's a tail twister if ever there was one," said a fat young officer, seated comfortably with his back to the bulkhead.

Again the pipes twittered.

"Harvey, of the dockyard," reported the lookout.

The third captain followed immediately. "It's Black Charlie Hammond," said the lookout. "Looking as if he'd lost a guinea and found sixpence."

"Black Charlie?" exclaimed someone, scrambling to his feet in haste and pushing to the door. "Let's see! So it is! Then here is one young gentleman who will not stay for an answer. I know too well what that answer would be. 'Six months more at sea, sir, and damn your eyes for your impertinence in presenting yourself for examination in your present state of ignorance.' Black Charlie won't ever forget that I lost his pet poodle overside from the cutter in Port-o'-Spain when he was first of the *Pegasus*. Good-bye, gentlemen. Give my regards to the examining board."

With that he was gone, and they saw him explaining himself to the officer of the watch and hailing a shore boat to take him back to his ship. "One fewer of us, at least," said the clerkly officer. "What is it, my man?"

"The board's compliments, sir," said the marine messenger, "an' will the first young gentleman please to come along?"

There was a momentary hesitation; no one was anxious to be the first victim.

"The one nearest the door," said an elderly master's mate. "Will you volunteer, sir?"

"I'll be the Daniel," said the erstwhile lookout desperately. "Remember me in your prayers."

He pulled his coat smooth, twitched at his neckcloth, and was gone, the remainder waiting in gloomy silence, relieved only by the glug-glug of the bottle as the bibulous midshipman took another swig. A full ten minutes passed before the candidate for promotion returned, making a brave effort to smile.

"Six months more at sea?" asked someone.

"No," was the unexpected answer. "Three! . . . I was told to send the next man. It had better be you."

"But what did they ask you?"

"They began by asking me to define a rhumb line. . . . But don't keep them waiting, I advise you." Some thirty officers had their textbooks open on the instant to reread about thumb lines.

"You were there ten minutes," said the clerkly officer, looking at his watch. "Forty of us, ten minutes each — why, it'll be midnight before they reach the last of us. They'll never do it."

"They'll be hungry," said someone.

"Hungry for our blood," said another.

"Perhaps they'll try us in batches," suggested a third, "like the French tribunals."

Listening to them, Hornblower was reminded of French aristocrats jesting at the foot of the scaffold.

Candidates departed and candidates returned, some gloomy, some smiling. The cabin was already far less crowded; Hornblower was able to secure sufficient deck space to seat himself, and he stretched out his legs with a nonchalant sigh of relief, and he no sooner emitted the sigh than he realized that it was a stage effect which he had put on for his own benefit. He was as nervous as he could be. The winter night was falling, and some good Samaritan on board sent in a couple of purser's dips to give a feeble illumination to the darkening cabin.

"They are passing one in three," said the clerkly officer, making ready for his turn. "May I be the third."

Hornblower got to his feet again when he left; it would be his turn next. He stepped out under the halfdeck into the dark night and breathed the chill fresh air. A gentle breeze was blowing from the southward, cooled, presumably, by the snow-clad Atlas Mountains of Africa across the strait. There was neither moon nor stars. Here came the clerkly officer back again.

"Hurry," he said. "They're impatient."

Hornblower made his way past the sentry to the after cabin; it was brightly lit, so that he blinked as he entered, and stumbled over some obstruction. And it was only then that he remembered that he had not straightened his neckcloth and seen to it that his sword hung correctly at his side. He went on blinking in his nervousness at the three grim faces across the table.

"Well, sir?" said a stern voice. "Report yourself. We have no time to waste."

"H-Hornblower, sir. H-Horatio H-Hornblower. M-Midshipman — I mean Acting-Lieutenant, H.M.S. *Indefatigable*."

"Your certificates, please," said the right-hand face.

Hornblower handed them over, and as he waited for them to be examined, the left-hand face suddenly spoke.

"You are close-hauled on the port tack, Mr Hornblower, beating up channel with a nor-easterly wind blowing hard, with Dover bearing north two miles. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now the wind veers four points and takes you flat aback. What do you do, sir? What do you do?"

Hornblower's mind, if it was thinking about anything at all at that moment, was thinking about rhumb lines; this question took him as much aback as the situation it envisaged. His mouth opened and shut, but there was no word he could say.

"By now you're dismayed," said the middle face — a swarthy face; Hornblower was making the deduction that it must belong to Black Charlie Hammond. He could think about that even if he could not force his mind to think at all about his examination.

"Dismayed," said the left-hand face, with a smile like Nero enjoying a Christian's death agony. "With Dover cliffs under your lee. You are in serious trouble, Mr — ah — Hornblower."

Serious indeed. Hornblower's mouth opened and shut again. His dulled mind heard, without paying special attention to it, the thud of a cannon shot somewhere not too far off. The board passed no remark on it either, but a moment later there came a series of further cannon shots which brought the three captains to their feet. Unceremoniously they rushed out of the cabin, sweeping out of the way the sentry at the door. Hornblower followed them; they arrived in the waist just in time to see a rocket soar up into the night sky and burst in a shower of red stars. It was the general alarm; over the water of the anchorage they could hear the drums rolling as all the ships present beat to quarters. On the portside gangway the remainder of the candidates were clustered, speaking excitedly.

"See there!" said a voice.

Across half a mile of dark water a yellow light grew until the ship there was wrapped in flame. She had every sail set and was heading straight into the crowded anchorage.

"Fire ships!"

"Officer of the watch! Call my gig!" bellowed Foster.

A line of fire ships was running before the wind, straight at the crowd of anchored ships. The *Santa Barbara* was full of the wildest bustle as the seamen and marines came pouring on deck, and as captains and candidates shouted for boats to take them back to their ships. A line of orange flame lit up the water, followed at once by the roar of a broadside; some ship was firing her guns in the endeavour to sink a fire ship. Let one of those blazing hulls make contact with one of the anchored ships, even for a few seconds, and the fire would be transmitted to the dry, painted timber, to the tarred cordage, to the inflammable sails, so that nothing would put it out. To men in highly combustible ships filled with explosives fire was the deadliest and most dreaded peril of the sea.

"You shore boat, there!" bellowed Hammond suddenly. "You shore boat! Come alongside! Come alongside, blast you!"

His eye had been quick to sight the pair-oar rowing by.

"Come alongside or I'll fire into you!" supplemented Foster. "Sentry, there, make ready to give them a shot!"

At the threat the wherry turned and glided towards the mizzen chains.

"Here you are, gentlemen," said Hammond.

The three captains rushed to the mizzen chains and flung themselves down into the boat. Hornblower was at their heels. He knew there was small enough chance of a junior officer getting a boat to take him back to his ship, to which it was his bounden duty to go as soon as possible. After the captains had reached their destinations he could use this boat to reach the *Indefatigable*. He threw himself off into the sternsheets as she pushed off, knocking the breath out of Captain Harvey, his sword scabbard clattering on the gunwale. But the three captains accepted his uninvited presence there without comment.

"Pull for the *Dreadnought*," said Foster.

"Dammit, I'm the senior!" said Hammond. "Pull for *Calypso*."

"*Calypso* it is," said Harvey. He had his hand on the tiller, heading the boat across the dark water.

"Pull! Oh, pull!" said Foster, in agony. There can be no mental torture like that of a captain whose ship is in peril and he not on board.

"There's one of them," said Harvey.

Just ahead, a small brig was bearing down on them under topsails; they could see the glow of the fire, and as they watched the fire suddenly burst into roaring fury, wrapping the whole vessel in flames in a moment, like a set piece in a fireworks display. Flames spouted out of the holes in her sides and roared up through her hatchways. The very water around her glowed vivid red. They saw her halt in her career and begin to swing slowly around.

"She's across *Santa Barbara*'s cable," said Foster.

"She's nearly clear," added Hammond. "God help 'em on board there. She'll be alongside her in a minute."

Hornblower thought of two thousand Spanish and French prisoners battened down below decks in the hulk.

"With a man at her wheel she could be steered clear," said Foster. "We ought to do it!"

Then things happened rapidly. Harvey put the tiller over. "Pull away!" he roared at the boatmen.

The latter displayed an easily understood reluctance to row up to that fiery hull.

"Pull!" said Harvey.

He whipped out his sword from its scabbard, and the blade reflected the red fire as he thrust it menacingly at the stroke oar's throat. With a kind of sob, stroke tugged at his oar and the boat leaped forward.

"Lay us under her counter," said Foster. "I'll jump for it."

At last Hornblower found his tongue. "Let me go, sir. I'll handle her."

"Come with me, if you like," replied Foster. "It may need two of us."

His nickname of Dreadnought Foster may have had its origin in the name of his ship, but it was appropriate enough in all circumstances. Harvey swung the boat under the fire ship's stern; she was before the wind again now, and just gathering way, just heading down upon the *Santa Barbara*.

For a moment Hornblower was the nearest man in the boat to the brig and there was no time to be lost. He stood up on the thwart and jumped; his hands gripped something, and with a kick and a struggle he dragged his ungainly body up onto the deck. With the brig before the wind, the flames were blown forward; right aft here it was merely frightfully hot, but Hornblower's ears were filled with the roar of the flames and the crackling and banging of the burning wood. He stepped forward to the wheel and seized the spokes, the wheel was lashed with a loop of line, and as he cast this off and took hold of the wheel again he could feel the rudder below him bite into the water. He flung his weight on the spoke and spun the wheel over. The brig was about to collide; with the *Santa Barbara*, starboard bow to starboard bow, and the flames lit an anxious gesticulating crowd on the *Santa Barbara*'s forecastle.

"Hard over!" roared Foster's voice in Hornblower's ear.

"Hard over it is!" said Hornblower, and the brig answered her wheel at that moment, and her bow turned away, avoiding the collision.

An immense fountain of flame poured out from the hatchway abaft the mainmast, setting mast and rigging ablaze, and at the same time a flaw of wind blew a wave of flame aft. Some instinct made Hornblower while holding the wheel with one hand snatch out his neckcloth with the other and bury his face in it. The flame whirled round him and was gone again. But the distractions had been dangerous; the brig had continued to turn under full helm, and now her stern was swinging in to bump against the *Santa Barbara*'s bow.

Hornblower desperately spun the wheel over the other way. The flames had driven Foster aft to the taffrail, but now he returned.

"Hard-a-lee!"

The brig was already responding. Her starboard quarter bumped the *Santa Barbara* in the waist, and then bumped clear.

"Midships!" shouted Foster.

At a distance of only two or three yards the fire ship passed on down the *Santa Barbara*'s side; an anxious group ran along her gangways keeping up with her as she did so. On the quarterdeck another group stood by with a spar to boom the fire ship off; Hornblower saw them out of the tail of his eye as they went by. Now they

were clear.

"There's the *Dauntless* on the port bow," said Foster. "Keep her clear."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The din of the fire was tremendous; it could hardly be believed that on this little area of deck it was still possible to breathe and live. Hornblower felt the appalling heat on his hands and face. Both masts were immense pyramids of flame.

"Starboard a point," said Foster. "We'll lay her aground on the shoal by the Neutral Ground."

"Starboard a point," responded Hornblower.

He was being borne along on a wave of the highest exaltation; the roar of the fire was intoxicating, and he knew not a moment's fear. Then the whole deck only a yard or two forward of the wheel opened up in flame. Fire spouted out of the gaping seams and the heat was utterly unbearable, and the fire moved rapidly aft as the seams gaped progressively backward.

Hornblower felt for the looline to lash the wheel, but before he could do so the wheel spun idly under his hand, presumably as the tiller ropes below him were burned away, and at the same time the deck under his feet heaved and warped in the fire. He staggered back to the taffrail. Foster was there.

"Tiller ropes burned away, sir," reported Hornblower.

Flames roared up beside them. His coat sleeve was smouldering.

"Jump!" said Foster.

Hornblower felt Foster shoving him — everything was insane. He heaved himself over, gasped with fright as he hung in the air, and then felt the breath knocked out of his body as he hit the water. The water closed over him, and he knew panic as he struggled back to the surface. It was cold — the Mediterranean in December is cold. For the moment the air in his clothes supported him, despite the weight of the sword at his side, but he could see nothing in the darkness, with his eyes still dazzled by the roaring flames. Somebody splashed beside him.

"They were following us in the boat to take us off," said Foster's voice. "Can you swim?"

"Yes, sir. Not very well."

"That might describe me," said Foster; and then he lifted his voice to hail, "Ahoy! Ahoy! Hammond! Harvey! Ahoy!"

He tried to raise himself as well as his voice, fell back with a splash, and splashed and splashed again, the water flowing into his mouth cutting short something he tried to say. Hornblower, beating the water with increasing feebleness, could still spare a thought — such were the vagaries of his wayward mind — for the interesting fact that even captains of much seniority were only mortal men after all. He tried to unbuckle his sword belt, failed, and sank deep with the effort, only just succeeding in struggling back to the surface. He gasped fair breath, but in another attempt he managed to draw his sword half out of its scabbard, and as he struggled it slid out the rest of the way by its own weight; yet he was not conscious of any noticeable relief. It was then that he heard the splashing and grinding of oars and loud voices, and he saw the dark shape of the approaching boat, and he uttered a spluttering cry. In a second or two the boat was up to them, and he was clutching the gunwale in panic.

They were lifting Foster in over the stern, and Hornblower knew he must keep still and make no effort to climb in, but it called for all his resolution to make himself hang quietly onto the side of the boat and wait his turn. He was interested in this overmastering fear, while he despised himself for it. It called for a conscious and serious effort of willpower to make his hands alternately release their death-like grip on the gunwale, so that the men in the boat could pass him round to the stern. Then they dragged him in and he fell face downward in the bottom of the boat, on the verge of fainting. Then somebody spoke in the boat, and Hornblower felt a cold shiver pass over his skin, and his feeble muscles tensed themselves, for the words spoken were Spanish — at any rate an unknown tongue, and Spanish presumably.

Somebody else answered in the same language. Hornblower tried to struggle up, and a restraining hand was laid on his shoulder. He rolled over, and with his eyes now accustomed to the darkness, he could see the three swarthy faces with the long black moustaches. These men were not Gibraltarians. On the instant he could guess who they were — the crew of one of the fire ships who had steered their craft in past the Mole, set fire to it, and made their escape in the boat. Foster was sitting doubled up, in the bottom of the boat, and now he

lifted his face from his knees and stared round him.

"Who are these fellows?" he asked feebly — his struggle in the water had left him as weak as Hornblower.

"Spanish fire ship's crew, I fancy, sir," said Hornblower. "We're prisoners."

"Are we indeed!"

The knowledge galvanized him into activity just as it had Hornblower. He tried to get to his feet, and the Spaniard at the tiller thrust him down with a hand on his shoulder. Foster tried to put his hand away, and raised his voice in a feeble cry, but the man at the tiller was standing no nonsense. He brought out, in a lightning gesture, a knife from his belt. The light from the fire ship, burning itself harmlessly out on the shoal in the distance, ran redly along the blade, and Foster ceased to struggle. Men might call him Dreadnought Foster, but he could recognize the need for discretion.

"How are we heading?" he asked Hornblower, sufficiently quietly not to irritate their captors.

"North, sir. Maybe they're going to land on the Neutral Ground and make for the Line."

"That's their best chance," agreed Foster.

He turned his neck uncomfortably to look back up the harbour.

"Two other ships burning themselves out up there," he said. "There were three fire ships came in, I fancy."

"I saw three, sir."

"Then there's no damage done. But a bold endeavour. Whoever would have credited the Dons with making such an attempt?"

"They have learned about fire ships from us, perhaps, sir," suggested Hornblower.

"We may have 'nursed the pinion that impelled the steel,' you think?"

"It is possible, sir."

Foster was a cool enough customer, quoting poetry and discussing the naval situation while being carried off into captivity by a Spaniard who guarded him with a drawn knife. Cool might be a too accurate adjective; Hornblower was shivering in his wet clothes as the chill night air blew over him, and he felt weak and feeble after all the excitement and exertions of the day.

"Boat ahoy!" came a hail across the water; there was a dark nucleus in the night over there. The Spaniard in the sternsheets instantly dragged the tiller over, heading the boat directly away from it, while the two at the oars redoubled their exertions.

"Guard boat —" said Foster, but cut his explanation short at a further threat from the knife.

Of course there would be a boat rowing guard at this northern end of the anchorage; they might have thought of it.

"Boat ahoy!" came the hail again. "Lay on your oars or I'll fire into you!"

The Spaniard made no reply, and a second later came the flash and report of a musket shot. They heard nothing of the bullet, but the shot would put the fleet — towards which they were heading again — on the alert. But the Spaniards were going to play the game out to the end. They rowed doggedly on.

"Boat ahoy!"

This was another hail, from a boat right ahead of them. The Spaniards at the oars ceased their efforts in dismay, but a roar from the steersman set them instantly to work again. Hornblower could see the new boat almost directly ahead of them, and heard another hail from it as it rested on its oars. The Spaniard at the tiller shouted an order, and the stroke oar backed water and the boat turned sharply; another order, and both rowers tugged ahead again and the boat surged forward to ram. Should they succeed in overturning the intercepting boat they might make their escape even now, while the pursuing boat stopped to pick up their friends.

Everything happened at once, with everyone shouting at the full pitch of his lungs, seemingly. There was the crash of the collision, both boats heeling wildly as the bow of the Spanish boat rode up over the British boat but failed to overturn it. Someone fired a pistol, and the next moment the pursuing guard boat came dashing alongside, its crew leaping madly aboard them. Somebody flung himself on top of Hornblower, crushing the breath out of him and threatening to keep it out permanently with a hand on his throat. Hornblower heard Foster bellowing in protest, and a moment later his assailant released him, so that he could hear the midshipman of the guard boat apologizing for this rough treatment of a post captain of the Royal Navy. Someone unmasked the guard boat's lantern, and by its light Foster revealed himself, bedraggled and

battered. The light shone on their sullen prisoners.

"Boats ahoy!" came another hail, and yet another boat emerged from the darkness and pulled towards them.

"Cap'n Hammond, I believe!" hailed Foster, with an ominous rasp in his voice.

"Thank God!" they heard Hammond say, and the boat pulled into the faint circle of light.

"But no thanks to you," said Foster bitterly.

"After your fire ship cleared the *Santa Barbara* a puff of wind took you on faster than we could keep up with you," explained Harvey.

"We followed as fast as we could get these rock scorpions to row," added Hammond.

"And yet it called for Spaniards to save us from drowning," sneered Foster. The memory of his struggle in the water rankled, apparently. "I thought I could rely on two brother captains."

"What are you implying, sir?" snapped Hammond.

"I make no implications, but others may read implications into a simple statement of fact."

"I consider that an offensive remark, sir," said Harvey, "addressed to me equally with Captain Hammond."

"I congratulate you on your perspicacity, sir," replied Foster.

"I understand," said Harvey. "This is not a discussion we can pursue with these men present. I shall send a friend to wait on you."

"He will be welcome."

"Then I wish you a very good night, sir."

"And I, too, sir," said Hammond. "Give way there."

The boat pulled out of the circle of light, leaving an audience open-mouthed at this strange freak of human behaviour, that a man saved first from death and then from captivity should wantonly thrust himself into peril again. Foster looked after the boat for some seconds before speaking; perhaps he was already regretting his rather hysterical outburst.

"I shall have much to do before morning," he said, more to himself than to anyone near him, and then addressed himself to the midshipman of the guard boat, "You, sir, will take charge of these prisoners and convey me to my ship."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Is there anyone here who can speak their lingo? I would have it explained to them that I shall send them back to Cartagena under cartel, free without exchange. They saved our lives, and that is the least we can do in return." The final explanatory sentence was addressed to Hornblower.

"I think that is just, sir."

"And you, my fire-breathing friend. May I offer you my thanks? You did well. Should I live beyond to-morrow, I shall see that authority is informed of your actions."

"Thank you, sir." A question trembled on Hornblower's lips. It called for a little resolution to thrust it out, "And my examination, sir? My certificate?"

Foster shook his head. "That particular examining board will never reassemble, I fancy. You must wait your opportunity to go before another one."

"Aye aye, sir," said Hornblower, with despondency apparent in his tone.

"Now lookee here, Mr Hornblower," said Foster, turning upon him. "To the best of my recollection, you were flat aback, about to lose your spars and with Dover cliffs under your lee. In one more minute you would have been failed — it was the warning gun that saved you. Is not that so?"

"I suppose it is, sir."

"Then be thankful for small mercies. And even more thankful for big ones."

CHAPTER NINE — NOAH'S ARK

Acting-Lieutenant Hornblower sat in the sternsheets of the longboat beside Mr Tapling of the diplomatic service, with his feet among bags of gold. About him rose the steep shores of the Gulf of Oran, and ahead of

him lay the city, white in the sunshine, like a mass of blocks of marble dumped by a careless hand upon the hillsides where they rose from the water. The oar blades, as the boat's crew pulled away rhythmically over the gentle swell, were biting into the clearest emerald green, and it was only a moment since they had left behind the bluest the Mediterranean could show.

"A pretty sight from here," said Tapling, gazing at the town they were approaching, "but closer inspection will show that the eye is deceived. And as for the nose! The stinks of the true believers have to be smelt to be believed. Lay her alongside the jetty there, Mr Hornblower, beyond those xebecs."

"Aye aye, sir," said the coxswain, when Hornblower gave the order.

"There's a sentry on the waterfront battery here," commented Tapling, looking about him keenly, "not more than half asleep, either. And notice the two guns in the two castles. Thirty-two pounders, without a doubt. Stone shot piled in readiness. A stone shot flying into fragments on impact effects damage out of proportion to its size. And the walls seem sound enough. To seize Oran by a *coup de main* would not be easy, I am afraid. If His Nibs the Bey should choose to cut our throats and keep our gold it would be long before we were avenged, Mr Hornblower."

"I don't think I should find any satisfaction in being avenged in any case, sir," said Hornblower.

"There's some truth in that. But doubtless His Nibs will spare us this time. The goose lays golden eggs — a boatload of gold every month must make a dazzling prospect for a pirate Bey in these days of convoys."

"Way 'nough," called the coxswain. "Oars!"

The longboat came gliding alongside the jetty and hooked on neatly. A few seated figures in the shade turned eyes at least, and in some cases even their heads as well, to look at the British boat's crew. A number of swarthy Moors appeared on the decks of the xebecs and gazed down at them, and one or two shouted remarks to them.

"No doubt they are describing the ancestry of the infidels," said Tapling. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me, especially when I do not understand them. Where's our man?"

He shaded his eyes to look along the waterfront.

"No one in sight, sir, that looks like a Christian," said Hornblower.

"Our man's no Christian," said Tapling. "White, but no Christian. White by courtesy at that — French-Arab-Levantine mixture. His Britannic Majesty's Consul at Oran *pro tem.*, and a Mussulman from expediency. Though there are very serious disadvantages about being a true believer. Who would want four wives at any time, especially when he pays for the doubtful privilege by abstaining from wine?"

Tapling stepped up onto the jetty and Hornblower followed him. The gentle swell that rolled up the Gulf broke soothingly below them, and the blinding heat of the noonday sun was reflected up into their faces from the stone blocks on which they stood. Far down the Gulf lay the two anchored ships — the storeship and H.M.S. *Indefatigable* — lovely on the blue and silver surface.

"And yet I would rather see Drury Lane on a Saturday night," said Tapling.

He turned back to look at the city wall, which guarded the place from seaborne attack. A narrow gate, flanked by bastions, opened onto the waterfront. Sentries in red caftans were visible on the summit. In the deep shadow of the gate something was moving, but it was hard with eyes dazzled by the sun to see what it was. Then it emerged from the shadow as a little group coming towards them — a half-naked Negro leading a donkey, and on the back of the donkey, seated side ways far back towards the root of the tail, a vast figure in a blue robe.

"Shall we meet His Britannic Majesty's Consul halfway?" asked Tapling. "No. Let him come to us."

The Negro halted the donkey, and the man on the donkey's back slid to the ground and came towards them — a mountainous man, waddling straddle-legged in his robe, his huge clay-coloured face topped by a white turban. A scanty black moustache and beard sprouted from his lip and chin.

"Your servant, Mr Duras," said Tapling. "And may I present Acting-Lieutenant Horatio Hornblower, of the frigate *Indefatigable*?"

Mr Duras nodded his perspiring head.

"Have you brought the money?" he asked, in guttural French; it took Hornblower a moment or two to adjust his mind to the language and his ear to Duras' intonation.

"Seven thousand golden guineas," replied Tapling, in reasonably good French.

"Good," said Duras, with a trace of relief. "Is it in the boat?"

"It is in the boat, and it stays in the boat at present," answered Tapling. "Do you remember the conditions agreed upon? Four hundred fat cattle, fifteen hundred fanegas of barley grain. When I see those in the lighters, and the lighters alongside the ships down the bay, then I hand over the money. Have you the stores ready?"

"Soon."

"As I expected. How long?"

"Soon — very soon."

Tapling made a grimace of resignation.

"Then we shall return to the ships. To-morrow, perhaps, or the day after, we shall come back with the gold."

Alarm appeared on Duras' sweating face.

"No, do not do that," he said, hastily. "You do not know His Highness the Bey. He is changeable. If he knows the gold is here he will give orders for the cattle to be brought. Take the gold away, and he will not stir. And — and — he will be angry with me."

"Ira principis mors est," said Tapling, and in response to Duras' blank look obliged by a translation. "The wrath of the prince means death. Is not that so?"

"Yes," said Duras, and he in turn said something in an unknown language, and stabbed at the air with his fingers in a peculiar gesture; and then translated, "May it not happen."

"Certainly we hope it may not happen," agreed Tapling with disarming cordiality. "The bowstring, the hook, even the bastinado are all unpleasant. It might be better if you went to the Bey and prevailed upon him to give the necessary orders for the grain and the cattle. Or we shall leave at nightfall."

Tapling glanced up at the sun to lay stress on the time limit.

"I shall go," said Duras, spreading his hands in a deprecatory gesture. "I shall go. But I beg of you, do not depart. Perhaps His Highness is busy in his harem. Then no one may disturb him. But I shall try. The grain is here ready — it lies in the Kasbah there. It is only the cattle that have to be brought in. Please be patient. I implore you. His Highness is not accustomed to commerce, as you know, sir. Still less is he accustomed to commerce after the fashion of the Franks."

Duras wiped his streaming face with a corner of his robe.

"Pardon me," he said, "I do not feel well. But I shall go to His Highness. I shall go. Please wait for me."

"Until sunset," said Tapling implacably.

Duras called to his Negro attendant, who had been crouching huddled up under the donkey's belly to take advantage of the shade it cast. With an effort Duras hoisted his ponderous weight onto the donkey's hind quarters. He wiped his face again and looked at them with a trace of bewilderment.

"Wait for me," were the last words he said as the donkey was led away back into the city gate.

"He is afraid of the Bey," said Tapling watching him go. "I would rather face twenty Beys than Admiral Sir John Jervis in a tantrum. What will he do when he hears about this further delay, with the Fleet on short rations already? He'll have my guts for a necktie."

"One cannot expect punctuality of these people," said Hornblower with the easy philosophy of the man who does not bear the responsibility. But he thought of the British Navy, without friends, without allies, maintaining desperately the blockade of a hostile Europe, in face of superior numbers, storms, disease, and now famine.

"Look at that!" said Tapling pointing suddenly.

It was a big grey rat which had made its appearance in the dry storm gutter that crossed the waterfront here. Regardless of the bright sunshine it sat up and looked round at the world; even when Tapling stamped his foot it showed no great signs of alarm. When he stamped a second time it slowly turned to hide itself again in the drain, missed its footing so that it lay writhing for a moment at the mouth of the drain, and then regained its feet and disappeared into the darkness.

"An old rat, I suppose," said Tapling meditatively. "Senile, possibly. Even blind, it may be."

Hornblower cared nothing about rats, senile or otherwise. He took a step or two back in the direction of the longboat and the civilian officer conformed to his movements.

"Rig that mains'l so that it gives us some shade, Maxwell," said Hornblower. "We're here for the rest of the

day."

"A great comfort," said Tapling, seating himself on a stone bollard beside the boat, "to be here in a heathen port. No need to worry in case any men run off. No need to worry about liquor. Only about bullocks and barley. And how to get a spark on this tinder."

He blew through the pipe that he took from his pocket, preparatory to filling it. The boat was shaded by the mainsail now, and the hands sat in the bows yarning in low tones, while the others made themselves as comfortable as possible in the sternsheets; the boat rolled peacefully in the tiny swell, the rhythmic sound as the fendoffs creaked between her gunwale and the jetty having a soothing effect while city and port dozed in the blazing afternoon heat. Yet it was not easy for a young man of Hornblower's active temperament to endure prolonged inaction. He climbed up on the jetty to stretch his legs, and paced up and down; a Moor in a white gown and turban came staggering in the sunshine along the waterfront. His gait was unsteady, and he walked with his legs well apart to provide a firmer base for his swaying body.

"What was it you said, sir, about liquor being abhorred by the Moslems?" said Hornblower to Tapling down in the sternsheets.

"Not necessarily abhorred," replied Tapling, guardedly. "But anathematized, illegal, unlawful, and hard to obtain."

"Someone here has contrived to obtain some, sir," said Hornblower.

"Let me see," said Tapling, scrambling up; the hands, bored with waiting and interested as ever in liquor, landed from the bows to stare as well.

"That looks like a man who has taken drink," agreed Tapling.

"Three sheets in the wind, sir," said Maxwell, as the Moor staggered.

"And taken all aback," supplemented Tapling, as the Moor swerved wildly to one side in a semicircle.

At the end of the semicircle he fell with a crash on his face; his brown legs emerged from the robe a couple of times and were drawn in again, and he lay passive, his head on his arms, his turban fallen on the ground to reveal his shaven skull with a tassel of hair on the crown.

"Totally dismayed," said Hornblower.

"And hard aground," said Tapling.

But the Moor now lay oblivious of everything.

"And here's Duras," said Hornblower.

Out through the gate came the massive figure on the little donkey; another donkey bearing another portly figure followed, each donkey being led by a Negro slave, and after them came a dozen swarthy individuals whose muskets, and whose presence at uniform, indicated that they were soldiers.

"The Treasurer of His Highness," said Duras, by way of introduction when he and the other had dismounted.

"Come to fetch the gold."

The portly Moor looked loftily upon them; Duras was still streaming with sweat in the hot sun.

"The gold is there," said Tapling, pointing. "In the sternsheets of the longboat. You will have a closer view of it when we have a closer view of the stores we are to buy."

Duras translated this speech into Arabic. There was a rapid interchange of sentences, before the Treasurer apparently yielded. He turned and waved his arms back to the gate in what was evidently a prearranged signal. A dreary procession immediately emerged — a long line of men, all of them almost naked, white, black, and mulatto, each man staggering along under the burden of a sack of grain. Overseers with sticks walked with them.

"The money," said Duras, as a result of something said by the Treasurer.

A word from Tapling set the hands to work lifting the heavy bags of gold onto the quay.

"With the corn on the jetty I will put the gold there too," said Tapling to Hornblower. "Keep your eye on it while I look at some of those sacks."

Tapling walked over to the slave gang. Here and there he opened a sack, looked into it, and inspected handfuls of the golden barley grain; other sacks he felt from the outside.

"No hope of looking over every sack in a hundred ton of barley," he remarked, strolling back again to Hornblower. "Much of it is sand, I expect. But that is the way of the heathen. The price is adjusted accordingly. Very well, Effendi."

At a sign from Duras, and under the urgings of the overseers, the slaves burst into activity, trotting up to the quayside and dropping their sacks into the lighter which lay there. The first dozen men were organized into a working party to distribute the cargo evenly into the bottom of the lighter, while the others trotted off, their bodies gleaming with sweat, to fetch fresh loads. At the same time a couple of swarthy herdsmen came out through the gate driving a small herd of cattle.

"Scrubby little creatures," said Tapling, looking them over critically, "but that was allowed for in the price, too."

"The gold," said Duras.

In reply Tapling opened one of the bags at his feet, filled his hand with golden guineas, and let them cascade through his fingers into the bag again.

"Five hundred guineas there," he said. "Fourteen bags, as you see. They will be yours when the lighters are loaded and unmoored."

Duras wiped his face with a weary gesture. His knees seemed to be weak, and he leaned upon the patient donkey that stood behind him.

The cattle were being driven down a gangway into another lighter, and a second herd had now appeared and was waiting.

"Things move faster than you feared," said Hornblower.

"See how they drive the poor wretches," replied Tapling sententiously. "See! Things move fast when you have no concern for human flesh and blood."

A coloured slave had fallen to the ground under his burden. He lay there disregarding the blows rained on him by the sticks of the overseers. There was a small movement of his legs. Someone dragged him out of the way at last and the sacks continued to be carried to the lighter. The other lighter was filling fast with cattle, packed into a tight, bellowing mass in which no movement was possible.

"His Nibs is actually keeping his word," marvelled Tapling. "I'd 'a settled for the half, if I had been asked beforehand."

One of the herdsmen on the quay had sat down with his face in his hands; now he fell over limply on his side.

"Sir —" began Hornblower to Tapling, and the two men looked at each other with the same awful thought occurring to them at the same moment.

Duras began to say something, with one hand on the withers of the donkey and the other gesticulating in the air it seemed that he was making something of a speech, but there was no sense in the words he was roaring out in a hoarse voice. His face was swollen beyond its customary fatness and his expression was widely distorted, while his cheeks were so suffused with blood as to look dark under his tan. Duras quitted his hold of the donkey and began to reel about in half circles, under the eyes of Moors and Englishmen. His voice died away to a whisper, his legs gave way under him, and he fell to his hands and knees and then to his face.

"That's the plague!" said Tapling. "The Black Death! I saw it in Smyrna in '96."

He and the other Englishmen had shrunk back on the one side, the soldiers and the Treasurer on the other, leaving the palpitating body lying in the clear space between them.

"The plague, by St Peter!" squealed one of the young sailors. He would have headed a rush to the longboat.

"Stand still, there!" roared Hornblower, scared of the plague but with the habits of discipline so deeply engrained in him by now that he checked the panic automatically.

"I was a fool not to have thought of it before," said Tapling. "That dying rat — that fellow over there who we thought was drunk. I should have known!"

The soldier who appeared to be the sergeant in command of the Treasurer's escort was in explosive conversation with the chief of the overseers of the slaves, both of them staring and pointing at the dying Duras; the Treasurer himself was clutching his robe about him and looking down at the wretched man at his feet in fascinated horror.

"Well sir," said Hornblower to Tapling, "what do we do now?"

Hornblower was of the temperament that demands immediate action in face of a crisis.

"Do?" replied Tapling with a bitter smile. "We stay here and rot."

"Stay *here*?"

"The fleet will never have us back. Not until we have served three weeks of quarantine. Three weeks after the

last case has occurred. Here in Oran."

"Nonsense!" said Hornblower, with all the respect due to his senior startled out of him. "No one would order that."

"Would they not? Have you ever seen an epidemic in a fleet?"

Hornblower had not, but he had heard enough about them — fleets where nine out of ten had died of putrid fevers. Crowded ships with twenty-two inches of hammock space per man were ideal breeding places for epidemics. He realized that no captain, no admiral, would run that risk for the sake of a longboat's crew of twenty men.

The two xebecs against the jetty had suddenly cast off, and were working their way out of the harbour under sweeps.

"The plague can only have struck to-day," mused Hornblower, the habit of deduction strong in him despite his sick fear.

The cattle herders were abandoning their work, giving a wide berth to that one of their number who was lying on the quay. Up at the town gate it appeared that the guard was employed in driving people back into the town — apparently the rumour of plague had spread sufficiently therein to cause a panic, while the guard had just received orders not to allow the population to stream out into the surrounding country. There would be frightful things happening in the town soon. The Treasurer was climbing on his donkey; the crowd of grain-carrying slaves was melting away as the overseers fled.

"I must report this to the ship," said Hornblower; Tapling, as a civilian diplomatic officer, held no authority over him.

The whole responsibility was Hornblower's. The longboat and the longboat's crew were Hornblower's command, entrusted to him by Captain Pellew whose authority derived from the King.

Amazing how the panic was spreading. The Treasurer was gone; Duras' Negro slave had ridden off on his late master's donkey; the soldiers had hastened off in a single group. The waterfront was deserted now except for the dead and dying; along the waterfront, presumably, at the foot of the wall, lay the way to the open country which all desired to seek. The Englishmen were standing alone, with the bags of gold at their feet.

"Plague spreads through the air," said Tapling. "Even the rats die of it. We have been here for hours. We were near enough to — that —" he nodded at the dying Duras — "to speak to him, to catch his breath. Which of us will be the first?"

"We'll see when the time comes," said Hornblower. It was his contrary nature to be sanguine in the face of depression; besides, he did not want the men to hear what Tapling was saying.

"And there's the fleet!" said Tapling bitterly. "This lot" — he nodded at the deserted lighters, one almost full of cattle, the other almost full of grain sacks — "this lot would be a Godsend. The men are on two-thirds rations."

"Damn it, we can do something about it," said Hornblower. "Maxwell, put the gold back in the boat, and get that awning in."

The officer of the watch in H.M.S. *Indefatigable* saw the ship's longboat returning from the town. A slight breeze had swung the frigate and the *Caroline* (the transport brig) to their anchors, and the longboat, instead of running alongside, came up under the *Indefatigable*'s stern to leeward.

"Mr Christie!" hailed Hornblower, standing up in the bows of the longboat.

The officer of the watch came aft to the taffrail.

"What is it?" he demanded, puzzled.

"I must speak to the Captain."

"Then come on board and speak to him. What the devil — ?"

"Please ask the Captain if I may speak to him."

Pellew appeared at the after-cabin window; he could hardly have helped hearing the bellowed conversation.

"Yes, Mr Hornblower?"

Hornblower told him the news.

"Keep to loo'ard, Mr Hornblower."

"Yes, sir. But the stores —"

"What about them?"

Hornblower outlined the situation and made his request.

"It's not very regular," mused Pellew. "Besides —"

He did not want to shout aloud his thoughts that perhaps everyone in the longboat would soon be dead of plague.

"We'll be all right, sir. It's a week's rations for the squadron." That was the point, the vital matter. Pellew had to balance the possible loss of a transport brig against the possible gain of supplies, immeasurably more important, which would enable the squadron to maintain its watch over the outlet to the Mediterranean. Looked at in that light Hornblower's suggestion had added force.

"Oh, very well, Mr Hornblower. By the time you bring the stores out I'll have the crew transferred. I appoint you to the command of the *Caroline*."

"Thank you, sir."

"Mr Tapling will continue as passenger with you."

"Very good, sir."

So when the crew of the longboat, toiling and sweating at the sweeps, brought the two lighters down the bay, they found the *Caroline* swinging deserted at her anchors, while a dozen curious telescopes from the *Indefatigable* watched the proceedings. Hornblower went up the brig's side with half a dozen hands.

"She's like a blooming Noah's Ark, sir," said Maxwell.

The comparison was apt; the *Caroline* was flush-decked, and the whole available deck area was divided by partitions into stalls for the cattle, while to enable the ship to be worked light gangways had been laid over the stalls into a practically continuous upper deck.

"An' all the animiles, sir," said another seaman.

"But Noah's animals walked in two by two," said Hornblower. "We're not so lucky. And we've got to get the grain on board first. Get those hatches unbattened."

In ordinary conditions a working party of two or three hundred men from the *Indefatigable* would have made short work of getting in the cargo from the lighters, but now it had to be done by the longboat's complement of eighteen. Luckily Pellew had had the forethought and kindness to have the ballast struck out of the holds, or they would have had to do that weary job first.

"Tail on to those tackles, men," said Hornblower.

Pellew saw the first bundle of grain sacks rise slowly into the air from the lighter, and swung over and down the *Caroline*'s hatchway.

"He'll be all right," he decided. "Man the capstan and get under way, if you please, Mr Bolton."

Hornblower, directing the work on the tackles, heard Pellew's voice come to him through the speaking trumpet.

"Good luck, Mr Hornblower. Report in three weeks at Gibraltar."

"Very good, sir. Thank you, sir."

Hornblower turned back to find a seaman at his elbows knuckling his forehead.

"Beg pardon, sir. But can you hear those cattle bellerin', sir? 'Tis mortal hot, an' 'tis water they want, sir."

"Hell," said Hornblower.

He would never get the cattle on board before nightfall. He left a small party at work transferring cargo, and with the rest of the men he began to extemporize a method of watering the unfortunate cattle in the lighter. Half *Caroline*'s hold space was filled with water barrels and fodder, but it was an awkward business getting water down to the lighter with pump and hose, and the poor brutes down there surged about uncontrollably at the prospect of water. Hornblower saw the lighter heel and almost capsize; one of his men — luckily one who could swim — went hastily overboard from the lighter to avoid being crushed to death.

"Hell," said Hornblower again, and that was by no means the last time.

Without any skilled advice he was having to learn the business of managing livestock at sea; each moment brought its lessons. A naval officer on active service indeed found himself engaged on strange duties. It was well after dark before Hornblower called a halt to the labours of his men, and it was before dawn that he roused them up to work again. It was still early in the morning that the last of the grain sacks was stowed away and Hornblower had to face the operation of swaying up the cattle from the lighter. After their night down there, with little water and less food, they were in no mood to be trifled with, but it was easier at first while they were crowded together. A bellyband was slipped round the nearest, the tackle hooked on, and the animal

was swayed up, lowered to the deck through an opening in the gangways, and herded into one of the stalls with ease. The seamen, shouting and waving their shirts, thought it was great fun, but they were not sure when the next one, released from its bellyband, went on the rampage and chased them about the deck, threatening death with its horns, until it wandered into its stall where the bar could be promptly dropped to shut it in. Hornblower, looking at the sun rising rapidly in the east, did not think it fun at all.

And the emptier the lighter became, the more room the cattle had to rush about in it; to capture each one so as to put a bellyband on it was a desperate adventure. Nor were those half-wild bullocks soothed by the sight of their companions being successively hauled bellowing into the air over their heads. Before the day was half done Hornblower's men were as weary as if they had fought a battle, and there was not one of them who would not gladly have quitted this novel employment in exchange for some normal seaman's duty like going aloft to reef topsails on a stormy night. As soon as Hornblower had the notion of dividing the interior of the lighter up into sections with barricades of stout spars the work became easier, but it took time, and before it was done the cattle had already suffered a couple of casualties — weaker members of the herd crushed underfoot in the course of the wild rushes about the lighter.

And there was a distraction when a boat came out from the shore, with swarthy Moors at the oars and the Treasurer in the stern. Hornblower left Tapling to negotiate — apparently the Bey at least had not been so frightened of the plague as to forget to ask for his money. All Hornblower insisted upon was that the boat should keep well to leeward, and the money was floated off to it headed up in an empty rum-puncheon. Night found not more than half the cattle in the stalls on board, with Hornblower worrying about feeding and watering them, and snatching at hints diplomatically won from those members of his crew who had had bucolic experience. But the earliest dawn saw him driving his men to work again, and deriving a momentary satisfaction from the sight of Tapling having to leap for his life to the gangway out of reach of a maddened bullock which was charging about the deck and refusing to enter a stall. And by the time the last animal was safely packed in Hornblower was faced with another problem — that of dealing with what one of the men elegantly termed 'mucking out'. Fodder — water — mucking out; that deck-load of cattle seemed to promise enough work in itself to keep his eighteen men busy, without any thought of the needs of handling the ship. But there were advantages about the men being kept busy, as Hornblower grimly decided; there had not been a single mention of plague since the work began. The anchorage where the *Caroline* lay was exposed to north-easterly winds, and it was necessary that he should take her out to sea before such a wind should blow. He mustered his men to divide them into watches; he was the only navigator, so that he had to appoint the coxswain and the under-coxswain, Jordan, as officers of the watch. Someone volunteered as cook, and Hornblower, running his eye over his assembled company, appointed Tapling as cook's mate. Tapling opened his mouth to protest, but there was that in Hornblower's expression which cut the protest short. There was no bos'n, no carpenter — no surgeon either, as Hornblower pointed out to himself gloomily. But on the other hand if the need for a doctor should arise it would, he hoped, be mercifully brief.

"Port watch, loose the jibs and main tops'l," ordered Hornblower. "Starboard watch, man the capstan." So began that voyage of H.M. transport brig *Caroline* which became legendary (thanks to the highly coloured accounts retailed by the crew during innumerable dog-watches in later commissions) throughout the King's navy. The *Caroline* spent her three weeks of quarantine in homeless wanderings about the western Mediterranean. It was necessary that she should keep close up to the Straits, for fear lest the westerlies and the prevailing inward set of the current should take her out of reach of Gibraltar when the time came, so she beat about between the coasts of Spain and Africa trailing behind her a growing farmyard stench. The *Caroline* was a worn-out ship; with any sort of sea running she leaked like a sieve; and there were always hands at work on the pumps, either pumping her out or pumping sea water on to her deck to clean it or pumping up fresh water for the cattle.

Her top hamper made her almost unmanageable in a fresh breeze; her deck seams leaked, of course, when she worked, allowing a constant drip of unspeakable filth down below. The one consolation was in the supply of fresh meat — a commodity some of Hornblower's men had not tasted for three months. Hornblower recklessly sacrificed a bullock a day, for in that Mediterranean climate meat could not be kept sweet. So his men feasted on steaks and fresh tongues; there were plenty of men on board who had never in their whole lives before eaten a beef steak.

But fresh water was the trouble — it was a greater anxiety to Hornblower than even it was to the average ship's captain, for the cattle were always thirsty; twice Hornblower had to land a raiding party at dawn on the coast of Spain, seize a fishing village, and fill his water casks in the local stream.

It was a dangerous adventure, and the second landing revealed the danger, for while the *Caroline* was trying to claw off the land again a Spanish guarda-costa lugger came gliding round the point with all sail set. Maxwell saw her first, but Hornblower saw her before he could report her presence.

"Very well, Maxwell," said Hornblower, trying to sound composed.

He turned his glass upon her. She was no more than three miles off, a trifle to windward, and the *Caroline* was embayed, cut off by the land from all chance of escape. The lugger could go three feet to her two, while the *Caroline's* clumsy superstructure prevented her from lying nearer than eight points to the wind. As Hornblower gazed, the accumulated irritation of the past seventeen days boiled over. He was furious with fate for having thrust this ridiculous mission on him. He hated the *Caroline* and her clumsiness and her stinks and her cargo. He raged against the destiny which had caught him in this hopeless position.

"Hell!" said Hornblower, actually stamping his feet on the upper gangway in his anger. "Hell *and* damnation!" He was dancing with rage, he observed with some curiosity. But with his fighting madness at the boil there was no chance of his yielding without a struggle, and his mental convulsions resulted in his producing a scheme for action. How many men of a crew did a Spanish guarda-costa carry? Twenty? That would be an outside figure — those luggers were only intended to act against petty smugglers. And with surprise on his side there was still a chance, despite the four eight-pounders that the lugger carried.

"Pistols and cutlasses, men," he said. "Jordan, choose two men and show yourselves up here. But the rest of you keep under cover. Hide yourselves. Yes, Mr Tapling, you may serve with us. See that you are armed." No one would expect resistance from a laden cattle transport; the Spaniards would expect to find on board a crew of a dozen at most, and not a disciplined force of twenty. The problem lay in luring the lugger within reach.

"Full and by," called Hornblower down to the helmsman below. "Be ready to jump, men. Maxwell, if a man shows himself before my order shoot him with your own hand. You hear me? That's an order, and you disobey me at your peril."

"Aye aye, sir," said Maxwell.

The lugger was romping up towards them; even in that light air there was a white wave under her sharp bows. Hornblower glanced up to make sure that the *Caroline* was displaying no colours. That made his plan legal under the laws of war. The report of a gun and a puff of smoke came from the lugger as she fired across the *Caroline's* bows.

"I'm going to heave to, Jordan," said Hornblower. "Main tops'l braces. Helm-a-lee."

The *Caroline* came to the wind and lay there wallowing, a surrendered and helpless ship apparently, if ever there was one.

"Not a sound, men," said Hornblower.

The cattle bellowed mournfully. Here came the lugger, her crew plainly visible now. Hornblower could see an officer clinging to the main shrouds ready to board, but no one else seemed to have a care in the world. Everyone seemed to be looking up at the clumsy superstructure and laughing at the farmyard noises issuing from it.

"Wait, men, wait," said Hornblower.

The lugger was coming alongside when Hornblower suddenly realized, with a hot flood of blood under his skin, that he himself was unarmed. He had told his men to take pistols and cutlasses: he had advised Tabling to arm himself, and yet he had clean forgotten about his own need for weapons. But it was too late now to try to remedy that. Someone in the lugger hailed in Spanish, and Hornblower spread his hands in a show of incomprehension. Now they were alongside.

"Come on, men!" shouted Hornblower.

He ran across the superstructure and with a gulp he flung himself across the gap at the officer in the shrouds. He gulped again as he went through the air; he fell with all his weight on the unfortunate man, clasped him round the shoulders, and fell with him to the deck. There were shouts and yells behind him as the *Caroline* spewed up her crew into the lugger. A rush of feet, a clatter and a clash. Hornblower got to his feet

empty-handed. Maxwell was just striking down a man with his cutlass. Tapling was heading a rush forward into the bows, waving a cutlass and yelling like a madman. Then it was all over; the astonished Spaniards were unable to lift a hand in their own defence.

So it came about that on the twenty-second day of her quarantine the *Caroline* came into Gibraltar Bay with a captured guarda-costa lugger under her lee. A thick barn-yard stench trailed with her, too, but at least, when Hornblower went on board the *Indefatigable* to make his report, he had a suitable reply ready for Mr Midshipman Bracegirdle.

"Hullo, Noah, how are Shem and Ham?" asked Mr Bracegirdle.

"Shem and Ham have taken a prize," said Hornblower. "I regret that Mr Bracegirdle can't say the same."

But the Chief Commissary of the squadron, when Hornblower reported to him, had a comment to which even Hornblower was unable to make a reply.

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr Hornblower," said the Chief Commissary, "that you allowed your men to eat fresh beef? A bullock a day for your eighteen men? There must have been plenty of ship's provisions on board. That was wanton extravagance, Mr Hornblower, I'm surprised at you."

CHAPTER TEN — THE DUCHESS AND THE DEVIL

Acting-Lieutenant Hornblower was bringing the sloop *Le Rêve*, prize of H.M.S. *Indefatigable*, to anchor in Gibraltar Bay. He was nervous; if anyone had asked him if he thought that all the telescopes in the Mediterranean Fleet were trained upon him he would have laughed at the fantastic suggestion, but he felt as if they were. Nobody ever gauged more cautiously the strength of the gentle following breeze, or estimated more anxiously the distances between the big anchored ships of the line, or calculated more carefully the space *Le Rêve* would need to swing at her anchor. Jackson, his petty officer, was standing forward awaiting the order to take in the jib, and he acted quickly at Hornblower's hail.

"Helm-a-lee," said Hornblower next, and *Le Rêve* rounded into the wind. "Brail up!"

Le Rêve crept forward, her momentum diminishing as the wind took her way off her.

"Let go!"

The cable growled a protest as the anchor took it out through the hawsehole — that welcome splash of the anchor, telling of the journey's end. Hornblower watched carefully while *Le Rêve* took up on her cable, and then relaxed a little. He had brought the prize safely in. The commodore — Captain Sir Edward Pellew of H.M.S. *Indefatigable* — had clearly not yet returned, so that it was Hornblower's duty to report to the port admiral.

"Get the boat hoisted out," he ordered, and then, remembering his humanitarian duty, "and you can let the prisoners up on deck."

They had been battened down below for the last forty-eight hours, because the fear of a recapture was the nightmare of every prizemaster. But here in the Bay with the Mediterranean fleet all round that danger was at an end. Two hands at the oars of the gig sent her skimming over the water, and in ten minutes Hornblower was reporting his arrival to the admiral.

"You say she shows a fair turn of speed?" said the latter, looking over at the prize.

"Yes, sir. And she's handy enough," said Hornblower.

"I'll purchase her into the service. Never enough despatch vessels," mused the Admiral.

Even with that hint it was a pleasant surprise to Hornblower when he received heavily sealed official orders and, opening them, read that 'you are hereby requested and required' to take H.M. sloop *Le Rêve* under his command and to proceed 'with the utmost expedition' to Plymouth as soon as the despatches destined for England should be put in his charge. It was an independent command, it was a chance of seeing England again (it was three years since Hornblower had last set foot on the English shore) and it was a high professional compliment. But there was another letter, delivered at the same moment, which Hornblower read with less elation.

"Their Excellencies, Major-General Sir Hew and Lady Dalrymple, request the pleasure of Acting-Lieutenant Horatio Hornblower's company at dinner to-day, at three o'clock, at Government House."

It might be a pleasure to dine with the Governor of Gibraltar and his lady, but it was only a mixed pleasure at best for an acting-lieutenant with a single sea chest, faced with the need to dress himself suitably for such a function. Yet it was hardly possible for a young man to walk up to Government House from the landing slip without a thrill of excitement, especially as his friend Mr Midshipman Bracegirdle, who came from a wealthy family and had a handsome allowance, had lent him a pair of the finest white stockings of China silk — Bracegirdle's calves were plump, and Hornblower's were skinny, but that difficulty had been artistically circumvented. Two small pads of oakum, some strips of sticking plaster from the surgeon's stores, and Hornblower now had a couple of legs of which no one need be ashamed. He could put his left leg forward to make his bow without any fear of wrinkles in his stockings, and sublimely conscious, as Bracegirdle said, of a leg of which any gentleman would be proud.

At Government House the usual polished and languid aide-de-camp took charge of Hornblower and led him forward. He made his bow to Sir Hew, a red-faced and fussy old gentleman, and to Lady Dalrymple, a red-faced and fussy old lady.

"Mr Hornblower," said the latter, "I must present you — Your Grace, this is Mr Hornblower, the new captain of *Le Rêve*. Her Grace the Duchess of Wharfedale."

A duchess, no less! Hornblower poked forward his padded leg, pointed his toe, laid his hand on his heart and bowed with all the depth the tightness of his breeches allowed — he had still been growing when he bought them on joining the *Indefatigable*. Bold blue eyes, and a once beautiful middle-aged face.

"So this 'ere's the feller in question?" said the duchess. "Matilda, my dear, are you going to hentrust me to a hinfant in harms?"

The startling vulgarity of the accent took Hornblower's breath away. He had been ready for almost anything except that a superbly dressed duchess should speak in the accent of Seven Dials. He raised his eyes to stare, while forgetting to straighten himself up, standing with his chin poked forward and his hand still on his heart.

"You look like a gander on a green," said the duchess. "I hexpects you to 'iss hany moment."

She stuck her own chin out and swung from side to side with her hands on her knees in a perfect imitation of a belligerent goose, apparently with so close a resemblance to Hornblower as well as to excite a roar of laughter from the other guests. Hornblower stood in blushing confusion.

"Don't be 'ard on the young feller." said the duchess, coming to his defence and patting him on the shoulder.

"'E's only young, en' thet's nothink to be ashamed of. Somethink to be prard of, for thet matter, to be trusted with a ship at thet hage."

It was lucky that the announcement of dinner came to save Hornblower from the further confusion into which this kindly remark had thrown him. Hornblower naturally found himself with the riff-raff, the ragtag and bobtail of the middle of the table along with the other junior officers — Sir Hew sat at one end with the duchess, while Lady Dalrymple sat with a commodore at the other. Moreover, there were not nearly as many women as men; that was only to be expected, as Gibraltar was, technically at least, a beleaguered fortress. So Hornblower had no woman on either side of him; at his right sat the young aide-de-camp who had first taken him in charge.

"Your health, Your Grace," said the commodore, looking down the length of the table and raising his glass.

"Thank'ee," replied the duchess. "Just in time to save my life. I was wonderin' 'oo'd come to my rescue."

She raised her brimming glass to her lips and when she put it down again it was empty.

"A jolly boon companion you are going to have," said the aide-de-camp to Hornblower.

"How is she going to be my companion?" asked Hornblower, quite bewildered.

The aide-de-camp looked at him pityingly.

"So you have not been informed?" he asked. "As always the man most concerned is the last to know. When you sail with your despatches to-morrow you will have the honour of bearing Her Grace with you to England."

"God bless my soul," said Hornblower.

"Let's hope He does," said the aide-de-camp piously, nosing his wine. "Poor stuff this sweet Malaga is. Old Hare bought a job lot in '95, and every governor since then seems to think it's his duty to use it up."

"But who *is* she?" asked Hornblower

"Her Grace the Duchess of Wharfedale," replied the aide-de-camp. "Did you not hear Lady Dalrymple's introduction?"

"But she doesn't talk like a duchess," protested Hornblower.

"No. The old duke was in his dotage when he married her. She was an innkeeper's widow, so her friends say. You can imagine, if you like, what her enemies say."

"But what is she doing here?" went on Hornblower.

"She is on her way back to England. She was at Florence when the French marched in, I understand. She reached Leghorn, and bribed a coaster to bring her here. She asked Sir Hew to find her a passage, and Sir Hew asked the Admiral — Sir Hew would ask anyone for anything on behalf of a duchess, even one said by her friends to be an innkeeper's widow."

"I see," said Hornblower.

There was a burst of merriment from the head of the table, and the duchess was prodding the governor's scarlet-coated ribs with the handle of her knife, as if to make sure he saw the joke.

"Maybe you will not lack for mirth on your homeward voyage," said the aide-de-camp.

Just then a smoking sirloin of beef was put down in front of Hornblower, and all his other worries vanished before the necessity of carving it and remembering his manners. He took the carving knife and fork gingerly in his hands and glanced round at the company.

"May I help you to some of this beef, Your Grace? Madam? Sir? Well done or underdone, sir? A little of the brown fat?"

In the hot room the sweat ran down his face as he wrestled with the joint; he was fortunate that most of the guests desired helpings from the other removes so that he had little carving to do. He put a couple of haggled slices on his own plate as the simplest way of concealing the worst results of his own handiwork.

"Beef from Tetuan," sniffed the aide-de-camp. "Tough and stringy."

That was all very well for a governor's aide-de-camp — he could not guess how delicious was this food to a young naval officer fresh from beating about at sea in an over-crowded frigate. Even the thought of having to act as host to a duchess could not entirely spoil Hornblower's appetite. And the final dishes, the meringues and macaroons, the custards and the fruits, were ecstasy for a young man whose last pudding had been currant duff last Sunday.

"Those sweet things spoil a man's palate," said the aide-de-camp — much Hornblower cared.

They were drinking formal toasts now. Hornblower stood for the King and the royal family, and raised his glass for the duchess.

"And now for the enemy," said Sir Hew, "may their treasure galleons try to cross the Atlantic."

"A supplement to that, Sir Hew," said the commodore at the other end, "may the Dons make up their minds to leave Cadiz."

There was a growl almost like wild animals from round the table. Most of the naval officers present were from Jervis' Mediterranean squadron which had beaten about in the Atlantic for the past several months hoping to catch the Spaniards should they come out. Jervis had to detach his ships to Gibraltar two at a time to replenish their stores, and these officers were from the two ships of the line present at the moment in Gibraltar.

"Johnny Jervis would say amen to that," said Sir Hew. "A bumper to the Dons then, gentlemen, and may they come out from Cadiz."

The ladies left them then, gathered together by Lady Dalrymple, and as soon as it was decently possible Hornblower made his excuses and slipped away, determined not to be heavy with wine the night before he sailed in independent command.

Maybe the prospect of the coming on board of the duchess was a useful counter-irritant, and saved Hornblower from worrying too much about his first command. He was up before dawn — before even the brief Mediterranean twilight had begun — to see that his precious ship was in condition to face the sea, and the enemies who swarmed upon the sea. He had four popgun four-pounders to deal with those enemies, which meant that he was safe from no one; his was the weakest vessel at sea, for the smallest trading brig carried a more powerful armament. So that like all weak creatures his only safety lay in flight — Hornblower looked aloft in the half-light, where the sails would be set on which so much might depend. He went over the watch bill with his two watch-keeping officers, Midshipman Hunter and Master's Mate Winyatt, to make sure

that every man of his crew of eleven knew his duty. Then all that remained was to put on his smartest seagoing uniform, try to eat breakfast, and wait for the duchess.

She came early, fortunately; Their Excellencies had had to rise at a most unpleasant hour to see her off. Mr Hunter reported the approach of the governor's launch with suppressed excitement.

"Thank you, Mr Hunter," said Hornblower coldly — that was what the service demanded, even though not so many weeks before they had been playing follow-my-leader through the *Indefatigable's* rigging together. The launch swirled alongside, and two neatly dressed seamen hooked on the ladder. *Le Rêve* had such a small freeboard that boarding her presented no problem even for ladies. The governor stepped on board to the twittering of the only two pipes *Le Rêve* could muster, and Lady Dalrymple followed him. Then came the duchess, and the duchess's companion; the latter was a younger woman, as beautiful as the duchess must once have been. A couple of aides-de-camp followed, and by that time the minute deck of *Le Rêve* was positively crowded, so that there was no room left to bring up the duchess's baggage.

"Let us show you your quarters, Your Grace," said the governor.

Lady Dalrymple squawked her sympathy at sight of the minute cabin, which the two cots almost filled, and every one's head, inevitably, bumped against the deck-beam above. "We shall live through it," said the duchess stoically, "an' that's more than many a man makin' a little trip to Tyburn could say."

One of the aides-de-camp produced a last minute packet of despatches and demanded Hornblower's signature on the receipt; the last farewells were said, and Sir Hew and Lady Dalrymple went down the side again to the twittering of the pipes.

"Man the windlass!" bellowed Hornblower the moment the launch's crew bent to their oars.

A few seconds' lusty work brought *Le Rêve* up to her anchor.

"Anchor's aweigh, sir," reported Winyatt.

"Jib halliards!" shouted Hornblower. "Mains'l halliards!"

Le Rêve came round before the wind as her sails were set and her rudder took a grip on the water. Everyone was so busy catting the anchor and setting sail that it was Hornblower himself who dipped his colours in salute as *Le Rêve* crept out beyond the mole before the gentle south-easter, and dipped her nose to the first of the big Atlantic rollers coming in through the Gut. Through the skylight beside him he heard a clatter and a wail, as something fell in the cabin with that first roll, but he could spare no attention for the woman below. He had the glass to his eye now, training it first on Algeciras and then upon Tarifa — some well-manned privateer or ship of war might easily dash out to snap up such a defenceless prey as *Le Rêve*. He could not relax while the forenoon watch wore on. They rounded Cape Marroqui and he set a course for St Vincent, and then the mountains of Southern Spain began to sink below the horizon. Cape Trafalgar was just visible on the starboard bow when at last he shut the telescope and began to wonder about dinner; it was pleasant to be captain of his own ship and to be able to order dinner when he chose. His aching legs told him he had been on his feet too long — eleven continuous hours; if the future brought him many independent commands he would wear himself out by this sort of behaviour.

Down below he relaxed gratefully on the locker, and sent the cook to knock at the duchess's cabin door to ask with his compliments if all was well; he heard the duchess's sharp voice saying that they needed nothing, not even dinner. Hornblower philosophically shrugged his shoulders and ate his dinner with a young man's appetite. He went on deck again as night closed in upon them; Winyatt had the watch.

"It's coming up thick, sir," he said.

So it was. The sun was invisible on the horizon, engulfed in watery mist. It was the price he had to pay for a fair wind, he knew; in the winter months in these latitudes there was always likely to be fog where the cool land breeze reached the Atlantic.

"It'll be thicker still by morning," he said gloomily, and revised his night orders, setting a course due west instead of west by north as he originally intended. He wanted to make certain of keeping clear of Cape St Vincent in the event of fog.

That was one of those minute trifles which may affect a man's whole after life — Hornblower had plenty of time later to reflect on what might have happened had he not ordered that alteration of course. During the night he was often on deck, peering through the increasing mist, but at the time when the crisis came he was down below snatching a little sleep. What woke him was a seaman shaking his shoulder violently.

"Please, sir. Please, sir. Mr Hunter sent me. Please, sir, won't you come on deck, he says, sir."

"I'll come," said Hornblower, blinking himself awake and rolling out of his cot.

The faintest beginnings of dawn were imparting some slight luminosity to the mist which was close about them. *Le Rêve* was lurching over an ugly sea with barely enough wind behind her to give her steerage way. Hunter was standing with his back to the wheel in an attitude of tense anxiety.

"Listen!" he said, as Hornblower appeared.

He half-whispered the word, and in his excitement he omitted the 'sir' which was due to his captain — and in his excitement Hornblower did not notice the omission. Hornblower listened. He heard the shipboard noises he could expect — the clattering of the blocks as *Le Rêve* lurched, the sound of the sea at her bows. Then he heard other shipboard noises. There were other blocks clattering; the sea was breaking beneath other bows. "There's a ship close alongside," said Hornblower.

"Yes, sir," said Hunter. "And after I sent below for you I heard an order given. And it was in Spanish — some foreign tongue, anyway."

The tenseness of fear was all about the little ship like the fog.

"Call all hands. Quietly," said Hornblower.

But as he gave the order he wondered if it would be any use. He could send his men to their stations, he could man and load his four-pounders, but if that ship out there in the fog was of any force greater than a merchant ship he was in deadly peril. Then he tried to comfort himself — perhaps the ship was some fat Spanish galleon bulging with treasure, and were he to board her boldly she would become his prize and make him rich for life.

"A 'appy Valentine's day to you," said a voice beside him, and he nearly jumped out of his skin with surprise.

He had actually forgotten the presence of the duchess on board.

"Stop that row!" he whispered furiously at her, and she pulled up abruptly in astonishment. She was bundled up in a cloak and hood against the damp air, and no further detail could be seen of her in the darkness and fog.

"May I hask —" she began.

"Shut up!" whispered Hornblower.

A harsh voice could be heard through the fog, other voices repeating the order, whistles being blown, much noise and bustle.

"That's Spanish, sir, isn't it?" whispered Hunter.

"Spanish for certain. Calling the watch. Listen!"

The two double-strokes of a ship's bell came to them across the water. Four bells in the morning watch. And instantly from all round them a dozen other bells could be heard, as if echoing the first.

"We're in the middle of a fleet, by God!" whispered Hunter.

"Big ships, too, sir," supplemented Winyatt who had joined them with the calling of all hands. "I could hear half a dozen different pipes when they called the watch."

"The Dons are out, then," said Hunter.

And the course I set has taken us into the midst of them, thought Hornblower bitterly. The coincidence was maddening, heartbreaking. But he forbore to waste breath over it. He even suppressed the frantic gibe that rose to his lips at the memory of Sir Hew's toast about the Spaniards coming out from Cadiz.

"They're setting more sail," was what he said. "Dagos snug down at night, just like some fat Indiaman. They only set their t'gallants at daybreak."

All round them through the fog could be heard the whine of sheaves in blocks, the stamp-and-go of the men at the halliards, the sound of ropes thrown on decks, the chatter of a myriad voices.

"They make enough noise about it, blast 'em," said Hunter.

The tension under which he laboured was apparent as he stood straining to peer through the mist.

"Please God they're on a different course to us," said Winyatt, more sensibly. "Then we'll soon be through 'em."

"Not likely," said Hornblower.

Le Rêve was running almost directly before what little wind there was; if the Spaniards were beating against it or had it on their beam they would be crossing her course at a considerable angle, so that the volume of sound from the nearest ship would have diminished or increased considerably in this time, and there was no indication of that whatever. It was far more likely that *Le Rêve* had overhauled the Spanish fleet under its

nightly short canvas and had sailed forward into the middle of it. It was a problem what to do next in that case, to shorten sail, or to heave to, and let the Spaniards get ahead of them again, or to clap on sail to pass through. But the passage of the minutes brought clear proof that fleet and sloop were on practically the same course, as otherwise they could hardly fail to pass some ship close. As long as the mist held they were safest as they were.

But that was hardly to be expected with the coming of day.

"Can't we alter course, sir?" asked Winyatt.

"Wait," said Hornblower.

In the faint growing light he had seen shreds of denser mist blowing past them — a clear indication that they could not hope for continuous fog. At that moment they ran out of a fog bank into a clear patch of water.

"There she is, by God!" said Hunter.

Both officers and seamen began to move about in sudden panic.

"Stand still, damn you!" rasped Hornblower, his nervous tension releasing itself in the fierce monosyllables.

Less than a cable's length away a three-decked ship of the line was standing along parallel to them on their starboard side. Ahead and on the port side could be seen the outlines, still shadowy, of other battleships.

Nothing could save them if they drew attention to themselves; all that could be done was to keep going as if they had as much right there as the ships of the line. It was possible that in the happy-go-lucky Spanish navy the officer of the watch over there did not know that no sloop like *Le Rêve* was attached to the fleet — or even possibly by a miracle there *might* be one. *Le Rêve* was French built and French rigged, after all. Side by side *Le Rêve* and the battleship sailed over the lumpy sea. They were within pointblank range of fifty big guns, when one well-aimed shot would sink them. Hunter was uttering filthy curses under his breath, but discipline had asserted itself; a telescope over there on the Spaniard's deck would not discover any suspicious bustle on board the sloop. Another shred of fog drifted past them, and then they were deep in a fresh fog bank.

"Thank God!" said Hunter, indifferent to the contrast between this present piety and his preceding blasphemy.

"Hands wear ship," said Hornblower. "Lay her on the port tack."

There was no need to tell the hands to do it quietly; they were as well aware of their danger as anyone. *Le Rêve* silently rounded-to, the sheets were hauled in and coiled down without a sound; and the sloop, as close to the wind as she would lie, heeled to the small wind, meeting the lumpy waves with her port bow.

"We'll be crossing their course now," said Hornblower.

"Please God it'll be under their sterns and not their bows," said Winyatt.

There was the duchess still in her cloak and hood, standing right aft as much out of the way as possible.

"Don't you think Your Grace had better go below?" asked Hornblower, making use by a great effort of the formal form of address.

"Oh, no, *please*," said the duchess. "I couldn't bear it." Hornblower shrugged his shoulders, and promptly forgot the duchess's presence again as a new anxiety struck him. He dived below and came up again with the two big sealed envelopes of despatches. He took a belaying pin from the rail and began very carefully to tie the envelopes to the pin with a bit of line.

"Please," said the duchess, "please, Mr Hornblower, tell me what you are doing?"

"I want to make sure these will sink when I throw them overboard if we're captured," said Hornblower grimly.

"Then they'll be lost for good?"

"Better that than that the Spaniards should read 'em," said Hornblower with all the patience he could muster.

"I could look after them for you," said the duchess. "Indeed I could."

Hornblower looked keenly at her.

"No," he said, "they might search your baggage. Probably they would."

"Baggage!" said the duchess. "As if I'd put them in my baggage! I'll put them next my skin — they won't search *me* in any case. They'll never find 'em, not if I put 'em up my petticoats."

There was a brutal realism about those words that staggered Hornblower a little, but which also brought him to admit to himself that there was something in what the duchess was saying.

"If they capture us," said the duchess, "— I pray they won't, but if they do — they'll never keep me prisoner.

You know that. They'll send me to Lisbon or put me aboard a King's ship as soon as they can. Then the despatches will be delivered eventually. Late, but better late than never."

"That's so," mused Hornblower.

"I'll guard them like my life," said the duchess. "I swear I'll never part from them. I'll tell no one I have them, not until I hand them to a King's officer."

She met Hornblower's eyes with transparent honesty in her expression.

"Fog's thinning, sir," said Winyatt.

"Quick!" said the duchess.

There was no time for further debate. Hornblower slipped the envelopes from their binding of rope and handed them over to her, and replaced the belaying pin in the rail.

"These damned French fashions," said the duchess. "I was right when I said I'd put these letters up my petticoats. There's no room in my bosom."

Certainly the upper part of her gown was not at all capacious; the waist was close up under the armpits and the rest of the dress hung down from there quite straight in utter defiance of anatomy.

"Give me a yard of that rope, quick!" said the duchess.

Winyatt cut her a length of the line with his knife and handed it to her. Already she was hauling at her petticoats; the appalled Hornblower saw a gleam of white thigh above her stocking tops before he tore his glance away. The fog was certainly thinning.

"You can look at me now," said the duchess; but her petticoats only just fell in time as Hornblower looked round again. "They're inside my shift, next my skin as I promised. With these Directory fashions no one wears stays any more. So I tied the rope round my waist outside my shift. One envelope is flat against my chest and the other against my back. Would you suspect anything?"

She turned round for Hornblower's inspection.

"No, nothing shows," he said. "I must thank Your Grace."

"There is a certain thickening," said the duchess, "but it does not matter what the Spaniards suspect as long as they do not suspect the truth."

Momentary cessation of the need for action brought some embarrassment to Hornblower. To discuss with a woman her shift and stays — or the absence of them — was a strange thing to do.

A watery sun, still nearly level, was breaking through the mist and shining in his eyes. The mainsail cast a watery shadow on the deck. With every second the sun was growing brighter.

"Here it comes," said Hunter.

The horizon ahead expanded rapidly, from a few yards to a hundred, from a hundred yards to half a mile. The sea was covered with ships. No less than six were in plain sight, four ships of the line and two big frigates, with the red-and-gold of Spain at their mastheads, and, what marked them even more obviously as Spaniards, huge wooden crosses hanging at their peaks.

"Wear ship again, Mr Hunter," said Hornblower. "Back into the fog."

That was the one chance of safety. Those ships running down towards them were bound to ask questions, and they could not hope to avoid them all. *Le Rêve* spun around on her heel, but the fog-bank from which she had emerged was already attenuated, sucked up by the thirsty sun. They could see a drifting stretch of it ahead, but it was lazily rolling away from them at the same time as it was dwindling. The heavy sound of a cannon shot reached their ears, and close on their starboard quarter a ball threw up a fountain of water before plunging into the side of a wave just ahead. Hornblower looked round just in time to see the last of the puff of smoke from the bows of the frigate astern pursuing them.

"Starboard two points," he said to the helmsman, trying to gauge at one and the same moment the frigate's course, the direction of the wind, the bearing of the other ships, and that of the thin last nucleus of that wisp of fog.

"Starboard two points," said the helmsman.

"Fore and main sheets!" said Hunter.

Another shot, far astern this time but laid true for line; Hornblower suddenly remembered the duchess.

"You must go below, Your Grace," he said curtly.

"Oh, no, no, no!" burst out the duchess with angry vehemence. "Please let me stay here. I can't go below to where that seasick maid of mine lies hoping to die. Not in that stinking box of a cabin."

There would be no safety in that cabin, Hornblower reflected — *Le Rêve's* scantlings were too fragile to keep

out any shot at all. Down below the water line in the hold the women might be safe, but they would have to lie flat on top of beef barrels.

"Sail ahead!" screamed the lookout.

The mist there was parting and the outline of a ship of the line was emerging from it, less than a mile away and on almost the same course as *Le Rêve*'s. Thud — thud from the frigate astern. Those gunshots by now would have warned the whole Spanish fleet that something unusual was happening. The battleship ahead would know that the little sloop was being pursued. A ball tore through the air close by, with its usual terrifying noise. The ship ahead was awaiting their coming; Hornblower saw her topsails slowly turning.

"Hands to the sheets!" said Hornblower. "Mr Hunter, jibe her over."

Le Rêve came round again, heading for the lessening gap on the port side. The frigate astern turned to intercept. More jets of smoke from her bows. With an appalling noise a shot passed within a few feet of Hornblower, so that the wind of it made him stagger. There was a hole in the mainsail.

"Your Grace," said Hornblower, "those aren't warning shots —"

It was the ship of the line which fired them, having succeeded in clearing away and manning some of her upper-deck guns. It was as if the end of the world had come. One shot hit *Le Rêve*'s hull, and they felt the deck heave under their feet as a result as if the little ship were disintegrating. But the mast was hit at the same moment, stays and shrouds parting, splinters raining all round. Mast, sails, boom, gaff and all went from above them over the side to windward. The wreckage dragged in the sea and turned the helpless wreck round with the last of her way. The little group aft stood momentarily dazed.

"Anybody hurt?" asked Hornblower, recovering himself.

"On'y a scratch, sir," said one voice.

It seemed a miracle that no one was killed.

"Carpenter's mate, sound the well," said Hornblower and then, recollecting himself, "No, damn it. Belay that order. If the Dons can save the ship, let 'em try."

Already the ship of the line whose salvo had done the damage was filling her topsails again and bearing away from them, while the frigate which had pursued them was running down on them fast. A wailing figure came scrambling out of the afterhatch way. It was the duchess's maid, so mad with terror that her seasickness was forgotten. The duchess put a protective arm round her and tried to comfort her.

"Your Grace had better look to your baggage," said Hornblower. "No doubt you'll be leaving us shortly for other quarters with the Dons. I hope you will be more comfortable."

He was trying desperately hard to speak in a matter-of-fact way, as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening, as if he were not soon to be a prisoner of the Spaniards; but the duchess saw the working of the usually firm mouth, and marked how the hands were tight clenched.

"How can I tell you how sorry I am about this?" asked the duchess, her voice soft with pity.

"That makes it the harder for me to bear," said Hornblower, and he even forced a smile.

The Spanish frigate was just rounding-to, a cable's length to windward.

"Please, sir," said Hunter.

"Well?"

"We can fight, sir. You give the word. Cold shot to drop in the boats when they try to board. We could beat 'em off once, perhaps."

Hornblower's tortured misery nearly made him snap out 'Don't be a fool', but he checked himself. He contented himself with pointing to the frigate. Twenty guns were glaring at them at far less than point-blank range. The very boat the frigate was hoisting out would be manned by at least twice as many men as *Le Rêve* carried — she was no bigger than many a pleasure yacht. It was not odds of ten to one, or a hundred to one, but odds of ten thousand to one.

"I understand, sir," said Hunter.

Now the Spanish frigate's boat was in the water, about to shove off.

"A private word with you, please, Mr Hornblower," said the duchess suddenly.

Hunter and Winyatt heard what she said, and withdrew out of earshot.

"Yes, Your Grace?" said Hornblower.

The duchess stood there, still with her arm round her weeping maid, looking straight at him.

"I'm no more of a duchess than you are," she said.

"Good God!" said Hornblower. "Who — who are you, then?"

"Kitty Cobham."

The name meant a little to Hornblower, but only a little.

"You're too young for that name to have any memories for you, Mr Hornblower, I see. It's five years since last I trod the boards."

That was it. Kitty Cobham the actress.

"I can't tell it all now," said the duchess — the Spanish boat was dancing over the waves towards them. "But when the French marched into Florence that was only the last of my misfortunes. I was penniless when I escaped from them. Who would lift a finger for a onetime actress — one who had been betrayed and deserted? What was I to do? But a duchess — that was another story. Old Dalrymple at Gibraltar could not do enough for the Duchess of Wharfedale."

"Why did you choose that title?" asked Hornblower in spite of himself.

"I knew of her," said the duchess with a shrug of the shoulders. "I knew her to be what I played her as. That was why I chose her — I always played character parts better than straight comedy. And not nearly so tedious in a long role."

"But my despatches!" said Hornblower in a sudden panic of realization. "Give them back, quick."

"If you wish me to," said the duchess. "But I can still be the duchess when the Spaniards come. They will still set me free as speedily as they can. I'll guard those despatches better than my life — I swear it, I swear it! In less than a month I'll deliver them, if you trust me."

Hornblower looked at the pleading eyes. She might be a spy, ingeniously trying to preserve the despatches from being thrown overboard before the Spaniards took possession. But no spy could have hoped that *Le Rêve* would run into the midst of the Spanish fleet.

"I made use of the bottle, I know," said the Duchess. "I drank. Yes, I did. But I stayed sober in Gibraltar, didn't I? And I won't touch a drop, not a drop, until I'm in England I'll swear that, too. Please, sir — please. I beg of you. Let me do what I can for my country."

It was a strange decision for a man of nineteen to have to make — one who had never exchanged a word with an actress in his life before. A harsh voice overside told him that the Spanish boat was about to hook on.

"Keep them, then," said Hornblower. "Deliver them when you can."

He had not taken his eyes from her face. He was looking for a gleam of triumph in her expression. Had he seen anything of the sort he would have torn the despatches from her body at that moment. But all he saw was the natural look of pleasure, and it was then that he made up his mind to trust her — not before.

"Oh, thank you, sir," said the duchess.

The Spanish boat had hooked on now, and a Spanish lieutenant was awkwardly trying to climb aboard. He arrived on the deck on his hands and knees, and Hornblower stepped over to receive him as he got to his feet. Captor and captive exchange bows. Hornblower could not understand what the Spaniard said, but obviously they were formal sentences that he was using. The Spaniard caught sight of the two women aft and halted in surprise; Hornblower hastily made the presentation in what he hoped was Spanish.

"Señor el tenente Espanol," he said. "Señora la Duquesa de Wharfedale."

The title clearly had its effect; the lieutenant bowed profoundly, and his bow was received with the most lofty aloofness by the duchess. Hornblower could be sure the despatches were safe. That was some alleviation of the misery of standing here on the deck of his water-logged little ship, a Prisoner of the Spaniards. As he waited he heard, from far to leeward, roll upon roll of thunder coming up against the wind. No thunder could endure that long. What he could hear must be the broadsides of ships in action — of fleets in action.

Somewhere over there by Cape St Vincent the British fleet must have caught the Spaniards at last. Fiercer and fiercer sounded the roll of the artillery. There was excitement among the Spaniards who had scrambled on to the deck of *Le Rêve*, while Hornblower stood bareheaded waiting to be taken into captivity.

Captivity was a dreadful thing. Once the numbness had worn off Hornblower came to realize what a dreadful thing it was. Not even the news of the dreadful bartering which the Spanish navy had received at St Vincent could relieve the misery and despair of being a prisoner. It was not the physical conditions — ten square feet of floor space per man in an empty sail loft at Ferrol along with other captive warrant officers — for they were

no worse than what a junior officer often had to put up with at sea. It was the loss of freedom, the fact of being a captive, that was so dreadful.

There were four months of it before the first letter came through to Hornblower; the Spanish government, inefficient in all ways, had the worst postal system in Europe. But here was the letter, addressed and re-addressed, now safely in his hands after he had practically snatched it from a stupid Spanish non-commissioned officer who had been puzzling over the strange name. Hornblower did not know the handwriting, and when he broke the seal and opened the letter the salutation made him think for a moment that he had opened someone else's letter.

"Darling Boy," it began. Now who on earth would call him that? He read on in a dream.

"Darling Boy,

I hope it will give you happiness to hear that what you gave me has reached its destination. They told me, when I delivered it, that you are a prisoner, and my heart bleeds for you. And they told me too that they were pleased with you for what you had done. And one of those admirals is a shareholder in Drury Lane. Whoever would have thought of such a thing? But he smiled at me, and I smiled at him. I did not know he was a shareholder then, and I only smiled out of the kindness of my heart. And all that I told him about my dangers and perils with my precious burden were only histrionic exercises, I am afraid. Yet he believed me, and so struck was he by my smile and my adventures, that he demanded a part for me from Sherry, and behold, now I am playing second lead, usually a tragic mother, and receiving the acclaim of the groundlings. There are compensations in growing old, which I am discovering too. And I have not tasted wine since I saw you last, nor shall I ever again. As one more reward, my admiral promised me that he would forward this letter to you in the next cartel — an expression which no doubt means more to you than to me. I only hope that it reaches you in good time and brings you comfort in your affliction.

I pray nightly for you.

Ever your devoted friend,
Katharine Cobham."

Comfort in his affliction? A little, perhaps. There was some comfort in knowing that the despatches had been delivered; there was some comfort in a second-hand report that Their Lordships were pleased with him. There was comfort even in knowing that the duchess was re-established on the stage. But the sum total was nothing compared with his misery.

Here was a guard come to bring him to the commandant and beside the commandant was the Irish renegade who served as interpreter. There were further papers on the commandant's desk — it looked as if the same cartel which had brought in Kitty Cobham's note had brought in letters for the commandant.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the commandant, always polite offering a chair.

"Good afternoon, sir, and many thanks," said Hornblower. He was learning Spanish slowly and painfully.

"You have been Promoted," said the Irishman in English

"W-what?" said Hornblower.

"Promoted," said the Irishman. "Here is the letter — 'The Spanish authorities are informed that on account of his meritorious service the acting-commission of Mr Horatio Hornblower, midshipman and acting-lieutenant, has been confirmed. Their Lordships of the Admiralty express their confidence that Mr Horatio Hornblower will be admitted immediately to the privileges of commissioned rank.' There you are, young man."

"My felicitations, sir," said the commandant.

"Many thanks, sir," said Hornblower.

The commandant was a kindly old gentleman with a pleasant smile for the awkward young man. He went on to say more, but Hornblower's Spanish was not equal to the technicalities he used, and Hornblower in despair looked at the interpreter.

"Now that you are a commissioned officer," said the latter, "you will be transferred to the quarters for captured officers."

"Thank you," said Hornblower.

"You will receive the half pay of your rank."

'Thank you.'

"And your parole will be accepted. You will be at liberty to visit in the town and the neighbourhood for two hours each day on giving your parole."

"Thank you," said Hornblower.

Perhaps, during the long months which followed, it was some mitigation of his unhappiness that for two hours each day his parole gave him freedom; freedom to wander in the streets of the little town, to have a cup of chocolate or a glass of wine — providing he had any money — making polite and laborious conversation with Spanish soldiers or sailors or civilians. But it was better to spend his two hours wandering over the goat paths of the headland in the wind and the sun, in the companionship of the sea, which might alleviate the sick misery of captivity. There was slightly better food, slightly better quarters. And there was the knowledge that now he was a lieutenant, that he held the King's commission, that if ever, ever, the war should end and he should be set free he could starve on half pay — for with the end of the war there would be no employment for junior lieutenants. But he had earned his promotion. He had gained the approval of authority, that was something to think about on his solitary walks.

There came a day of south-westerly gales, with the wind shrieking in from across the Atlantic. Across three thousand miles of water it came, building up its strength unimpeded on its way, and heaping up the sea into racing mountain ridges which came crashing in upon the Spanish coast in thunder and spray. Hornblower stood on the headland above Ferrol harbour, holding his worn greatcoat about him as he leaned forward into the wind to keep his footing. So powerful was the wind that it was difficult to breathe while facing it. If he turned his back he could breathe more easily, but then the wind blew his wild hair forward over his eyes, almost inverted his greatcoat over his head, and furthermore forced him into little tottering steps down the slope towards Ferrol, whither he had no wish to return at present. For two hours he was alone and free, and those two hours were precious. He could breathe the Atlantic air, he could walk, he could do as he liked during that time. He could stare out to sea; it was not unusual to catch sight, from the headland, of some British ship of war which might be working slowly along the coast in the hope of snapping up a coasting vessel while keeping a watchful eye upon the Spanish naval activity. When such a ship went by during Hornblower's two hours of freedom, he would stand and gaze at it, as a man dying of thirst might gaze at a bucket of water held beyond his reach; he would note all the little details, the cut of the topsails and the style of the paint, while misery wrung his bowels. For this was the end of his second year as a prisoner of war. For twenty-two months, for twenty-two hours every day, he had been under lock and key, herded with five other junior lieutenants in a single room in the fortress of Ferrol. And today the wind roared by him, shouting in its outrageous freedom. He was facing into the wind; before him lay Corunna, its white houses resembling pieces of sugar scattered over the slopes. Between him and Corunna was all the open space of Corunna Bay, flogged white by the wind, and on his left hand was the narrow entrance to Ferrol Bay. On his right was the open Atlantic; from the foot of the low cliffs there the long wicked reef of the Dientes del Diablo — the Devil's Teeth — ran out to the northward, square across the path of the racing rollers driven by the wind. At half-minute intervals the rollers would crash against the reef with an impact that shook even the solid headland on which Hornblower stood, and each roller dissolved into spray which was instantly whirled away by the wind to reveal again the long black tusks of the rocks.

Hornblower was not alone on the headland; a few yards away from him a Spanish militia artilleryman on lookout duty gazed with watery eyes through a telescope with which he continually swept the seaward horizon. When at war with England it was necessary to be vigilant; a fleet might suddenly appear over the horizon, to land a little army to capture Ferrol, and burn the dockyard installations and the ships. No hope of that to-day, thought Hornblower — there could be no landing of troops on that raging lee shore.

But all the same the sentry was undoubtedly staring very fixedly through his telescope right to windward; the sentry wiped his streaming eyes with his coat sleeve and stared again. Hornblower peered in the same direction, unable to see what it was that had attracted the sentry's attention. The sentry muttered something to himself, and then turned and ran clumsily down to the little stone guardhouse where sheltered the rest of the militia detachment stationed there to man the guns of the battery on the headland. He returned with the sergeant of the guard, who took the telescope and peered out to windward in the direction pointed out by the sentry. The two of them jabbered in their barbarous Gallego dialect; in two years of steady application

Hornblower had mastered Galician as well as Castilian, but in that howling gale he could not intercept a word. Then finally, just as the sergeant nodded in agreement, Hornblower saw with his naked eyes what they were discussing. A pale grey square on the horizon above the grey sea — a ship's topsail. She must be running before the gale making for the shelter of Corunna or Ferrol.

It was a rash thing for a ship to do, because it would be no easy matter for her to round-to into Corunna Bay and anchor, and it would be even harder for her to hit off the narrow entrance to the Ferrol inlet. A cautious captain would claw out to sea and heave-to with a generous amount of sea room until the wind moderated. These Spanish captains, said Hornblower to himself, with a shrug of his shoulders, but naturally they would always wish to make harbour as quickly as possible when the Royal Navy was sweeping the seas. But the sergeant and the sentry were more excited than the appearance of a single ship would seem to justify. Hornblower could contain himself no longer, and edged up to the chattering pair, mentally framing his sentences in the unfamiliar tongue.

"Please, gentlemen," he said, and then started again, shouting against the wind. "Please, gentlemen, what is it that you see?"

The sergeant gave him a glance, and then, reaching some undiscoverable decision, handed over the telescope — Hornblower could hardly restrain himself from snatching it from his hands. With the telescope to his eye he could see far better; he could see a ship-rigged vessel, under close-reefed topsails (and that was much more sail than it was wise to carry) hurtling wildly towards them. And then a moment later he saw the other square of grey. Another topsail. Another ship. The foretopmast was noticeably shorter than the maintopmast, and not only that, but the whole effect was familiar — she was a British ship of war, a British frigate, plunging along in hot pursuit of the other, which seemed most likely to be a Spanish privateer. It was a close chase; it would be a very near thing, whether the Spaniard would reach the protection of the shore batteries before the frigate overhauled her. He lowered the telescope to rest his eye, and instantly the sergeant snatched it from him. He had been watching the Englishman's face, and Hornblower's expression had told him what he wanted to know. Those two ships out there were behaving in such a way as to justify his rousing his officer and giving the alarm. Sergeant and sentry went running back to the guardhouse, and in a few moments the artillerymen were pouring out to man the batteries on the verge of the cliff. Soon enough came a mounted officer urging his horse up the path; a single glance through the telescope sufficed for him. He went clattering down to the battery and the next moment the boom of a gun from there alerted the rest of the defences. The flag of Spain rose up the flagstaff beside the battery, and Hornblower saw an answering flag rise up the flagstaff on San Anton where another battery guarded Corunna Bay. All the guns of the harbour defences were now manned, and there would be no mercy shown to any English ship that came in range.

Pursuer and pursued had covered quite half the distance already towards Corunna. They were hull-up over the horizon now to Hornblower on the headland, who could see them plunging madly over the grey sea — Hornblower momentarily expected to see them carry away their topmasts or their sails blow from the bolt-ropes. The frigate was half a mile astern still, and she would have to be much closer than that to have any hope of hitting with her guns in that sea. Here came the commandant and his staff, clattering on horseback up the path to see the climax of the drama; the commandant caught sight of Hornblower and doffed his hat with Spanish courtesy, while Hornblower, hatless, tried to bow with equal courtesy. Hornblower walked over to him with an urgent request — he had to lay his hand on the Spaniard's saddlebow and shout up into his face to be understood.

"My parole expires in ten minutes, sir," he yelled. "May I please extend it? May I please stay?"

"Yes, stay, señor," said the commandant generously.

Hornblower watched the chase, and at the same time observed closely the preparations for defence. He had given his parole, but no part of the gentlemanly code prevented him from taking note of all he could see. One day he might be free, and one day it might be useful to know all about the defences of Ferrol. Everyone else of the large group on the headland was watching, the chase, and excitement rose higher as the ships came racing nearer. The English captain was keeping a hundred yards or more to seaward of the Spaniard, but he was quite unable to overhaul her — in fact it seemed to Hornblower as if the Spaniard was actually increasing his lead. But the English frigate being to seaward meant that escape in that direction was cut off. Any turn away from the land would reduce the Spaniard's lead to a negligible distance. If he did not get into Corunna Bay or Ferrol

Inlet he was doomed.

Now he was level with the Corunna headland, and it was time to put his helm hard over and turn into the bay and hope that his anchors would hold in the lee of the headland. But with a wind of that violence hurtling against cliffs and headlands strange things can happen. A flaw of wind coming out of the bay must have caught her aback as she tried to round-to. Hornblower saw her stagger, saw her heel as the backlash died away and the gale caught her again. She was laid over almost on her beam-ends and as she righted herself Hornblower saw a momentary gap open up in her maintopsail. It was momentary because from the time the gap appeared the life of the topsail was momentary; the gap appeared and at once the sail vanished, blown into ribbons as soon as its continuity was impaired. With the loss of its balancing pressure the ship became unmanageable; the gale pressing against the foretopsail swung her round again before the wind like a weathervane. If there had been time to spare to set a fragment of sail farther aft she would have been saved, but in those enclosed waters there was no time to spare. At one moment she was about to round the Corunna headland; at the next she had lost the opportunity for ever.

There was still the chance that she might fetch the opening to the Ferrol inlet; the wind was nearly fair for her to do that — nearly. Hornblower on the Ferrol headland was thinking along with the Spanish captain down there on the heaving deck. He saw him try to steady the ship so as to head for the narrow entrance, notorious among seamen for its difficulty. He saw him get her on her course, and for a few seconds as she flew across the mouth of the bay it seemed as if the Spaniard would succeed, against all probability, in exactly hitting off the entrance to the inlet. Then the backlash hit her again. Had she been quick on the helm she might still have been safe, but with her sail pressure so outbalanced she was bound to be slow in her response to her rudder. The shrieking wind blew her bows round, and it was instantly obvious, too, that she was doomed, but the Spanish captain played the game out to the last. He would not pile his ship up against the foot of the low cliffs. He put his helm hard over; with the aid of the wind rebounding from the cliffs he made a gallant attempt to clear the Ferrol headland altogether and give himself a chance to claw out to sea.

A gallant attempt, but doomed to failure as soon as begun; he actually cleared the headland, but the wind blew his bows round again, and, bows first, the ship plunged right at the long jagged line of the Devil's Teeth. Hornblower, the commandant, and everyone, hurried across the headland to look down at the final act of the tragedy. With tremendous speed, driving straight before the wind, she raced at the reef. A roller picked her up as she neared it and seemed to increase her speed. Then she struck, and vanished from sight for a second as the roller burst into spray all about her. When the spray cleared she lay there transformed. Her three masts had all gone with the shock, and it was only a black hull which emerged from the white foam. Her speed and the roller behind her had carried her almost over the reef — doubtless tearing her bottom out — and she hung by her stern, which stood out clear of the water, while her bows were just submerged in the comparatively still water in the lee of the reef.

There were men still alive on her. Hornblower could see them crouching for shelter under the break of her poop. Another Atlantic roller came surging up, and exploded on the Devil's Teeth, wrapping the wreck round with spray. But yet she emerged again, black against the creaming foam. She had cleared the reef sufficiently far to find shelter for most of her length in the lee of the thing that had destroyed her. Hornblower could see those living creatures crouching on her deck. They had a little longer to live — they might live five minutes, perhaps, if they were lucky. Five hours if they were not.

All round him the Spaniards were shouting maledictions. Women were weeping; some of the men were shaking their fists with rage at the British frigate, which, well satisfied with the destruction of her victim, had rounded-to in time and was now clawing out to sea again under storm canvas. It was horrible to see those poor devils down there die. If some larger wave than usual, bursting on the reef, did not lift the stern of the wreck clear so that she sank, she would still break up for the survivors to be whirled away with the fragments. And, if it took a long time for her to break up, the wretched men sheltering there would not be able to endure the constant beating of the cold spray upon them. Something should be done to save them, but no boat could round the headland and weather the Devil's Teeth to reach the wreck. That was so obvious as not to call for a second thought. But . . . Hornblower's thoughts began to race as he started to work on the alternatives. The commandant on his horse was speaking vehemently to a Spanish naval officer, clearly on the same subject, and the naval officer was spreading his hands and saying that any attempt would be hopeless. And yet . . . For

two years Hornblower had been a prisoner; all his pent-up restlessness was seeking an outlet, and after two years of the misery of confinement he did not care whether he lived or died. He went up to the commandant and broke into the argument.

"Sir," he said, "let me try to save them. Perhaps from the little bay there. . . . Perhaps some of the fishermen would come with me."

The commandant looked at the officer and the officer shrugged his shoulders.

"What do you suggest, sir?" asked the commandant of Hornblower.

"We might carry a boat across the headland from the dockyard," said Hornblower, struggling to word his ideas in Spanish, "but we must be quick — quick!"

He pointed to the wreck, and force was added to his words by the sight of a roller bursting over the Devil's Teeth.

"How would you carry a boat?" asked the commandant.

To shout his plan in English against that wind would have been a strain; to do so in Spanish was beyond him.

"I can show you at the dockyard, sir," he yelled. "I cannot explain. But we must hurry!"

"You want to go to the dockyard, then?"

"Yes — oh, yes."

"Mount behind me, sir," said the commandant.

Awkwardly Hornblower scrambled up to a seat astride the horse's haunches and clutched at the commandant's belt. He bumped frightfully as the animal wheeled round and trotted down the slope. All the idlers of the town and garrison ran beside them.

The dockyard at Ferrol was almost a phantom organization, withered away like a tree deprived of its roots, thanks to the British blockade. Situated as it was at the most distant corner of Spain, connected with the interior by only the roughest of roads, it relied on receiving its supplies by sea, and any such reliance was likely with British cruisers off the coast to be disappointed. The last visit of Spanish ships of war had stripped the place of almost all its stores, and many of the dockyard hands had been pressed as seamen at the same time. But all that Hornblower needed was there, as he knew, thanks to his careful observation. He slid off the horse's hindquarters — miraculously avoiding an instinctive kick from the irritated animal — and collected his thoughts. He pointed to a low dray — a mere platform on wheels — which was used for carrying beef barrels and brandy kegs to the pier.

"Horses," he said, and a dozen willing hands set to work harnessing a team.

Beside the jetty floated half a dozen boats. There was tackle and shears, all the apparatus necessary for swinging heavy weights about. To put slings under a boat and swing her up was the work of only a minute or two. These Spaniards might be dilatory and lazy as a rule, but inspire them with the need for instant action, catch their enthusiasm, present them with a novel plan, and they would work like madmen — and some of them were skilled workmen, too. Oars, mast and sail (not that they would need the sail), rudder, tiller and balers were all present. A group came running from a store shed with chocks for the boat, and the moment these were set up on the dray the dray was backed under the tackle and the boat lowered on to them.

"Empty barrels," said Hornblower. "Little ones — so."

A swarthy Galician fisherman grasped his intention at once and amplified Hornblower's halting sentences with voluble explanation. A dozen empty water breakers, with their bungs driven well home, were brought, and the swarthy fisherman climbed on the dray and began to lash them under the thwarts. Properly secured, they would keep the boat afloat even were she filled to the gunwale with water.

"I want six men," shouted Hornblower, standing on the dray and looking round at the crowd. "Six fishermen who know little boats."

The swarthy fisherman lashing the breakers in the boat looked up from his task.

"I know whom we need, sir," he said.

He shouted a string of names, and half a dozen men came forward; burly, weather-beaten fellows, with the self-reliant look in their faces of men used to meeting difficulties. It was apparent that the swarthy Galician was their captain.

"Let us go, then," said Hornblower, but the Galician checked him.

Hornblower did not hear what he said, but some of the crowd nodded, turned away, and came hastening back

staggering under a breaker of fresh water and a box that must contain biscuit. Hornblower was cross with himself for forgetting the possibility of their being blown out to sea. And the commandant, still sitting his horse and watching these preparations with a keen eye, took note of these stores too.

"Remember, sir, that I have your parole," he said.

"You have my parole, sir," said Hornblower — for a few blessed moments he had actually forgotten that he was a prisoner.

The stores were safely put away into the sternsheets and the fishing-boat captain caught Hornblower's eye and got a nod from him.

"Let us go," he roared to the crowd.

The iron-shod hoofs clashed on the cobbles and the dray lurched forward, with men leading the horses, men swarming alongside, and Hornblower and the captain riding on the dray like triumphing generals in a procession. They went through the dockyard gate, along the level main street of the little town, and turned up a steep lane which climbed the ridge constituting the backbone of the headland. The enthusiasm of the crowd was still lively; when the horses slowed as they breasted the slope a hundred men pushed at the back, strained at the sides, tugged at the traces to run the dray up the hillside. At the crest the lane became a track, but the dray still lurched and rumbled along. From the track diverged an even worse track, winding its way sideways down the slope through arbutus and myrtle towards the sandy cove which Hornblower had first had in mind — on fine days he had seen fishermen working a seine net on that beach, and he himself had taken note of it as a suitable place for a landing party should the Royal Navy ever plan a descent against Ferrol.

The wind was blowing as wildly as ever; it shrieked round Hornblower's ears. The sea as it came in view was chaotic with wave-crests, and then as they turned a shoulder of the slope they could see the line of the Devil's Teeth running out from the shore up there to windward, and still hanging precariously from their jagged fangs was the wreck, black against the seething foam. Somebody raised a shout at the sight, everybody heaved at the dray, so that the horses actually broke into a trot and the dray leaped and bounced over the obstructions in its way.

"Slowly," roared Hornblower. "Slowly!"

If they were to break an axle or smash a wheel at this moment the attempt would end in ludicrous failure. The commandant on his horse enforced Hornblower's cries with loud orders of his own, and restrained the reckless enthusiasm of his people. More sedately the dray went on down the trail to the edge of the sandy beach. The wind picked up even the damp sand and flung it stinging into their faces, but only small waves broke here, for the beach was in a recess in the shoreline, the south-westerly wind was blowing a trifle off shore here, and up to windward the Devil's Teeth broke the force of the rollers as they raced along in a direction nearly parallel to the shoreline. The wheels plunged into the sand and the horses stopped at the water's edge. A score of willing hands unharnessed them and a hundred willing arms thrust the dray out into the water — all these things were easy with such vast manpower available. As the first wave broke over the floor of the dray the crew scrambled up and stood ready. There were rocks here, but mighty heaves by the militiamen and the dockyard workers waist-deep in water forced the dray over them. The boat almost floated off its chocks, and the crew forced it clear and scrambled aboard, the wind beginning to swing her immediately. They grabbed for their oars and put their backs into half a dozen fierce strokes which brought her under command; the Galician captain had already laid a steering oar in the notch in the stern, with no attempt at shipping rudder and tiller. As he braced himself to steer he glanced at Hornblower, who tacitly left the job to him.

Hornblower, bent against the wind, was standing in the sternsheets planning a route through the rocks which would lead them to the wreck. The shore and the friendly beach were gone now, incredibly far away, and the boat was struggling out through a welter of water with the wind howling round her. In those jumbled waves her motion was senseless and she lurched in every direction successively. It was well that the boatmen were used to rowing in broken water so that their oars kept the boat under way, giving the captain the means by which, tugging fiercely at the steering oar, he could guide her through that maniacal confusion. Hornblower, planning his course, was able to guide the captain by his gestures, so that the captain could devote all the necessary attention to keeping the boat from being suddenly capsized by an unexpected wave. The wind howled, and the boat heaved and pitched as she met each lumpy wave, but yard by yard they were struggling up to the wreck. If there was any order in the waves at all, they were swinging round the outer end of the

Devil's Teeth, so that the boat had to be carefully steered, turning to meet the waves with her bows and then turning back to gain precarious yards against the wind. Hornblower spared a glance for the men at the oars; at every second they were exerting their utmost strength. There could never be a moment's respite — tug and strain, tug and strain, until Hornblower wondered how human hearts and sinews could endure it.

But they were edging up towards the wreck. Hornblower, when the wind and spray allowed, could see the whole extent of her canted deck now. He could see human figures cowering under the break of the poop. He saw somebody there wave an arm to him. Next moment his attention was called away when a jagged monster suddenly leaped out of the sea twenty yards ahead. For a second he could not imagine what it was, and then it leaped clear again and he recognized it — the butt end of a broken mast. The mast was still anchored to the ship by a single surviving shroud attached to the upper end of the mast and to the ship, and the mast, drifting down to leeward, was jerking and leaping on the waves as though some sea god below the surface was threatening them with his wrath. Hornblower called the steersman's attention to the menace and received a nod in return; the steersman's shouted "Nombre de Dios" was whirled away in the wind. They kept clear of the mast, and as they pulled up along it Hornblower could form a clearer notion of the speed of their progress now that he had a stationary object to help his judgement. He could see the painful inches gained at each frantic tug on the oars, and could see how the boat stopped dead or even went astern when the wilder gusts hit her, the oar blades pulling ineffectively through the water. Every inch of gain was only won at the cost of an infinity of labour.

Now they were past the mast, close to the submerged bows of the ship, and close enough to the Devil's Teeth to be deluged with spray as each wave burst on the farther side of the reef. There were inches of water washing back and forth in the bottom of the boat, but there was neither time nor opportunity to bale it out. This was the trickiest part of the whole effort, to get close enough alongside the wreck to be able to take off the survivors without stoving in the boat, there were wicked fangs of rock all about the after end of the wreck, while forward, although the forecastle was above the surface at times the forward part of the waist was submerged. But the ship was canted a little over to port, towards them, which made the approach easier. When the water was at its lowest level, immediately before the next roller broke on the reef, Hornblower, standing up and craning his neck, could see no rocks beside the wreck in the middle part of the waist where the deck came down to water level. It was easy to direct the steersman towards that particular point, and then, as the boat moved in, to wave his arms and demand the attention of the little group under the break of the poop, and to point to the spot to which they were approaching. A wave burst upon the reef, broken over the stern of the wreck, and filled the boat almost full. She swung back and forth in the eddies, but the kegs kept her afloat and quick handling of the steering oar and lusty rowing kept her from being dashed against either the wreck or the rocks.

"Now!" shouted Hornblower — it did not matter that he spoke English at this decisive moment. The boat surged forward, while the survivors, releasing themselves from the lashings which had held them in their shelter, came slithering down the deck towards them. It was a little of a shock to see there were but four of them — twenty or thirty men must have been swept overboard when the ship hit the reef. The bows of the boat moved towards the wreck. At a shouted order from the steersman the oars fell still. One survivor braced himself and flung himself into the bows. A stroke of the oars, a tug at the steering oar, and the boat nosed forward again, and another survivor plunged into the boat. Then Hornblower, who had been watching the sea, saw the next breaker rear up over the reef. At his warning shout the boat backed away to safety — comparative safety — while the remaining survivors went scrambling back up the deck to the shelter of the poop. The wave burst and roared, the foam hissed and the spray rattled, and then they crept up to the wreck again. The third survivor poised himself for his leap, mistimed it, and fell into the sea, and no one ever saw him again. He was gone, sunk like a stone, crippled as he was with cold and exhaustion, but there was no time to spare for lamentation. The fourth survivor was waiting his chance and jumped at once, landing safely in the bows.

"Any more?" shouted Hornblower, and receiving a shake of the head in reply; they had saved three lives at the risk of eight.

"Let us go," said Hornblower, but the steersman needed no telling.

Already he had allowed the wind to drift the boat away from the wreck, away from the rocks — away from the

shore. An occasional strong pull at the oars sufficed to keep her bows to wind and wave. Hornblower looked down at the fainting survivors lying in the bottom of the boat with the water washing over them. He bent down and shook them into consciousness; he picked up the balers and forced them into their numb hands. They must keep active or die. It was astounding to find darkness closing about them, and it was urgent that they should decide on their next move immediately. The men at the oars were in no shape for any prolonged further rowing; if they tried to return to the sandy cove whence they had started they might be overtaken both by night and by exhaustion while still among the treacherous rocks off the shore there. Hornblower sat down beside the Galician captain, who laconically gave his views while vigilantly observing the waves racing down upon them.

"It's growing dark," said the captain, glancing round the sky. "Rocks. The men are tired."

"We had better not go back," said Hornblower.

"No."

"Then we must get out to sea."

Years of duty on blockade, of beating about off a lee shore, had ingrained into Hornblower the necessity for seeking searoom.

"Yes," said the captain, and he added something which Hornblower, thanks to the wind and his unfamiliarity with the language, was unable to catch. The captain roared the expression again, and accompanied his words with a vivid bit of pantomime with the one hand he could spare from the steering oar.

"A sea anchor," decided Hornblower to himself. "Quite right."

He looked back at the vanishing shore, and gauged the direction of the wind. It seemed to be backing a little southerly, the coast here trended away from them. They could ride to a sea anchor through the hours of darkness and run no risk of being cast ashore as long as these conditions persisted.

"Good," said Hornblower aloud.

He imitated the other's bit of pantomime and the captain gave him a glance of approval. At a bellow from him the two men forward took in their oars and set to work at constructing a sea anchor — merely a pair of oars attached to a long painter paid out over the bows. With this gale blowing the pressure of the wind on the boat set up enough drag on the float to keep their bows to the sea. Hornblower watched as the sea anchor began to take hold of the water.

"Good," he said again.

"Good," said the captain, taking in his steering oar.

Hornblower realized only now that he had been long exposed to a winter gale while wet to the skin. He was numb with cold, and he was shivering uncontrollably. At his feet one of the three survivors of the wreck was lying helpless; the other two had succeeded in baling out most of the water and as a result of their exertions were conscious and alert. The men who had been rowing sat drooping with weariness on their thwarts. The Galician captain was already down in the bottom of the boat lifting the helpless man in his arms. It was a common impulse of them all to huddle down into the bottom of the boat, beneath the thwarts, away from that shrieking wind.

So the night came down on them. Hornblower found himself welcoming the contact of other human bodies; he felt an arm round him and he put his arm round someone else. Around them a little water still surged about on the floorboards; above them the wind still shrieked and howled. The boat stood first on her head and then on her tail as the waves passed under them, and at the moment of climbing each crest she gave a shuddering jerk as she snubbed herself to the sea anchor. Every few seconds a new spat of spray whirled into the boat upon their shrinking bodies; it did not seem long before the accumulation of spray in the bottom of the boat made it necessary for them to disentangle themselves, and set about, groping in the darkness, the task of baling the water out again. Then they could huddle down again under the thwarts.

It was when they pulled themselves together for the third baling that in the middle of his nightmare of cold and exhaustion Hornblower was conscious that the body across which his arm lay was unnaturally stiff; the man the captain had been trying to revive had died as he lay there between the captain and Hornblower. The captain dragged the body away into the sternsheets in the darkness, and the night went on, cold wind and cold spray, jerk, pitch, and roll, sit up and bale and cower down and shudder. It was hideous torment; Hornblower could not trust himself to believe his eyes when he saw the first signs that the darkness was

lessening. And then the grey dawn came gradually over the grey sea, and they were free to wonder what to do next. But as the light increased the problem was solved for them, for one of the fishermen, raising himself up in the boat, gave a hoarse cry, and pointed to the northern horizon, and there, almost hull-up, was a ship, hove-to under storm canvas. The captain took one glance at her — his eyesight must have been marvellous — and identified her.

"The English frigate," he said.

She must have made nearly the same amount of leeway hove-to as the boat did riding to her sea anchor.

"Signal to her," said Hornblower, and no one raised any objections.

The only white object available was Hornblower's shirt, and he took it off, shuddering in the cold, and they tied it to an oar and raised the oar in the maststep. The captain saw Hornblower putting on his dripping coat over his bare ribs and in a single movement peeled off his thick blue jersey and offered it to him.

"Thank you, no," protested Hornblower, but the captain insisted; with a wide grin he pointed to the stiffened corpse lying in the sternsheets and announced he would replace the jersey with the dead man's clothing.

The argument was interrupted by a further cry from one of the fishermen. The frigate was coming to the wind; with treble-reefed fore and maintopsails she was heading for them under the impulse of the lessening gale.

Hornblower saw her running down on them; a glance in the other direction showed him the Galician mountains, faint on the southern horizon — warmth, freedom and friendship on the one hand; solitude and captivity on the other. Under the lee of the frigate the boat bobbed and heaved fantastically; many inquisitive faces looked down on them. They were cold and cramped; the frigate dropped a boat and a couple of nimble seamen scrambled on board. A line was flung from the frigate, a whip lowered a breeches ring into the boat, and the English seamen helped the Spaniards one by one into the breeches and held them steady as they were swung up to the frigate's deck.

"I go last," said Hornblower when they turned to him. "I am a King's officer."

"Good Lor' lumme," said the seamen.

"Send the body up, too," said Hornblower. "It can be given decent burial."

The stiff corpse was grotesque as it swayed through the air. The Galician captain tried to dispute with Hornblower the honour of going last, but Hornblower would not be argued with. Then finally the seamen helped him put his legs into the breeches, and secured him with a line round his waist. Up he soared, swaying dizzily with the roll of the ship; then they drew him in to the deck, lowering and shortening, until half a dozen strong arms took his weight and laid him gently on the deck.

"There you are, my hearty, safe and sound," said a bearded seaman.

"I am a King's officer," said Hornblower. "Where's the officer of the watch?"

Wearing marvellous dry clothing, Hornblower found himself soon drinking hot rum-and-water in the cabin of Captain George Crome, of His Majesty's frigate *Syrtis*. Crome was a thin pale man with a depressed expression, but Hornblower knew of him as a first-rate officer.

"These Galicians make good seamen," said Crome. "I can't press them. But perhaps a few will volunteer sooner than go to a prison hulk."

"Sir," said Hornblower, and hesitated. It is ill for a junior lieutenant to argue with a post captain.

"Well?"

"Those men came to sea to save life. They are not liable to capture."

Crome's cold grey eyes became actively frosty — Hornblower was right about it being ill for a junior lieutenant to argue with a post captain.

"Are you telling me my duty, sir?" he asked.

"Good heavens no, sir," said Hornblower hastily. "It's a long time since I read the Admiralty Instructions and I expect my memory's at fault."

"Admiralty Instructions, eh?" said Crome, in a slightly different tone of voice.

"I expect I'm wrong, sir," said Hornblower, "but I seem to remember the same instruction applied to the other two — the survivors."

Even a post captain could only contravene Admiralty Instructions at his peril.

"I'll consider it," said Crome.

"I had the dead man sent on board, sir," went on Hornblower, "in the hope that perhaps you might give him

proper burial. Those Galicians risked their lives to save him, sir, and I expect they'd be gratified."

"A Popish burial? I'll give orders to give 'em a free hand."

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower.

"And now as regards yourself. You say you hold a commission as lieutenant. You can do duty in this ship until we meet the admiral again. Then he can decide. I haven't heard of the *Indefatigable* paying off, and legally you may still be borne on her books."

And that was when the devil came to tempt Hornblower, as he took another sip of hot rum-and-water. The joy of being in a King's ship again was so keen as to be almost painful. To taste salt beef and biscuit again, and never again to taste beans and garbanzos. To have a ship's deck under his feet, to talk English. To be free — to be free! There was precious little chance of ever falling again into Spanish hands. Hornblower remembered with agonizing clarity the flat depression of captivity. All he had to do was not to say a word. He had only to keep silence for a day or two. But the devil did not tempt him long, only until he had taken his next sip of rum-and-water. Then he thrust the devil behind him and met Crome's eyes again.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said.

"What for?"

"I am here on parole. I gave my word before I left the beach."

"You did? That alters the case. You were within your rights, of course."

The giving of parole by captive British officers was so usual as to excite no comment.

"It was in the usual form, I suppose?" went on Crome. "That you would make no attempt to escape?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then what do you decide as a result?"

Of course Crome could not attempt to influence a gentleman's decision on a matter as personal as a parole.

"I must go back, sir," said Hornblower, "at the first opportunity."

He felt the sway of the ship, he looked round the homely cabin, and his heart was breaking.

"You can at least dine and sleep on board to-night," said Crome. "I'll not venture inshore again until the wind moderates. I'll send you to Corunna under a flag of truce when I can. And I'll see what the Instructions say about those prisoners."

It was a sunny morning when the sentry at Fort San Anton, in the harbour of Corunna, called his officer's attention to the fact that the British cruiser off the headland had hove-to out of gunshot and was lowering a boat. The sentry's responsibility ended there, and he could watch idly as his officer observed that the cutter, running smartly in under sail, was flying a white flag. She hove-to within musket shot, and it was a mild surprise to the sentry when in reply to the officer's hail someone rose up in the boat and replied in unmistakable Gallego dialect. Summoned alongside the landing slip, the cutter put ashore ten men and then headed out again to the frigate. Nine men were laughing and shouting; the tenth, the youngest, walked with a fixed expression on his face with never a sign of emotion — his expression did not change even when the others, with obvious affection, put their arms round his shoulders. No one ever troubled to explain to the sentry who the imperturbable young man was, and he was not very interested. After he had seen the group shipped off across Corunna Bay towards Ferrol he quite forgot the incident.

It was almost spring when a Spanish militia officer came into the barracks which served as a prison for officers in Ferrol.

"Señor Hornblower?" he asked — at least Hornblower, in the corner, knew that was what he was trying to say. He was used to the way Spaniards mutilated his name.

"Yes?" he said, rising.

"Would you please come with me? The commandant has sent me for you, sir."

The commandant was all smiles. He held a despatch in his hands.

"This, sir," he said, waving it at Hornblower, "is a personal order. It is countersigned by the Duke of Fuentesauco, Minister of Marine, but it is signed by the First Minister, Prince of the Peace and Duke of Alcudia."

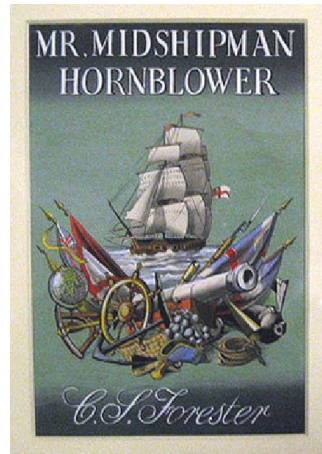
"Yes, sir," said Hornblower.

He should have begun to hope at that moment, but there comes a time in a prisoner's life when he ceases to

hope. He was more interested, even, in that strange title of Prince of the Peace which was now beginning to be heard in Spain.

"It says: 'We, Carlos Leonardo Luis Manuel de Godoy y Boegas, First Minister of His Most Catholic Majesty, Prince of the Peace, Duke of Alcudia and Grandee of the First Class, Count of Alcudia, Knight of the Most Sacred Order of the Golden Fleece, Knight of the Holy Order of Santiago, Knight of the Most Distinguished Order of Calatrava, Captain General of His Most Catholic Majesty's forces by Land and Sea, Colonel General of the Guardia de Corps, Admiral of the Two Oceans, General of the cavalry, of the infantry, and of the artillery' — in any event, sir, it is an order to me to take immediate steps to set you at liberty. I am to restore you under flag of truce to your fellow countrymen, in recognition of 'your courage and self-sacrifice in saving life at the peril of your own'."

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower.



Hornblower and the Widow McCool

(Published in the US as: "Hornblower's temptation")

C. S. Forester

(1950)

The Channel fleet was taking shelter at last. The roaring westerly gales had worked up to such a pitch that timber and canvas and cordage could withstand them no longer, and nineteen ships of the line and seven frigates, with Admiral Lord Bridport flying his flag in HMS *Victory*, had momentarily abandoned that watch over Brest which they had maintained for six years. Now they were rounding Berry Head and dropping anchor in the shelter of Tor Bay. A landsman, with that wind shrieking round him, might be pardoned for wondering how much shelter was to be found there, but to the weary and weather-beaten crews who had spent so long tossing in the Biscay waves and clawing away from the rocky coast of Brittany, that foam-whitened anchorage was like paradise. Boats could even be sent in to Brixham and Torquay to return with letters and fresh water; in most of the ships, officers and men had gone for three months without either. Even on that winter day there was intense physical pleasure in opening the throat and pouring down it a draught of fresh clear water, so different from the stinking green liquid doled out under guard yesterday.

The junior lieutenant in HMS *Renown* was walking the deck muffled in his heavy pea jacket while his ship wallowed at her anchor. The piercing wind set his eyes watering, but he continually gazed through his telescope nevertheless; for, as signal lieutenant, he was responsible for the rapid reading and transmission of messages, and this was a likely moment for orders to be given regarding sick and stores, and for captains and admirals to start chattering together, for invitations to dinner to be passed back and forth, and even for news to be disseminated.

He watched a small boat claw its way towards the ship from the French prize the fleet had snapped up yesterday on its way up-Channel. Hart, master's mate, had been sent on board from the *Renown*, as prizemaster, miraculously making the perilous journey. Now here was Hart, with the prize safely anchored amid the fleet, returning on board to make some sort of report. That hardly seemed likely to be of interest to a signal lieutenant, but Hart appeared excited as he came on board, and hurried below with his news after reporting himself in the briefest terms to the officer of the watch. But only a very few minutes passed before the signal lieutenant found himself called upon to be most active.

It was Captain Sawyer himself who came on deck, Hart following him, to supervise the transmission of the messages. "Mr Hornblower!"

"Sir!"

"Kindly send this signal."

It was for the admiral himself, from the captain; that part was easy; only two hoists were necessary to say '*Renown* to Flag'. And there were other technical terms which could be quickly expressed — 'prize' and 'French' and 'brig' — but there were names which would have to be spelled out letter for letter. 'Prize is French national brig *Espérance* having on board Barry McCool.'

"Mr James!" bellowed Hornblower. The signal midshipman was waiting at his elbow, but midshipmen should always be bellowed at, especially by a lieutenant with a very new commission.

Hornblower reeled off the numbers, and the signal went soaring up to the yardarm; the signal halyards vibrated wildly as the gale tore at the flags. Captain Sawyer waited on deck for the reply; this business must be important. Hornblower read the message again, for until that moment he had only studied it as something to be transmitted. But even on reading it he did not know why the message should be important. Until three months before, he had been a prisoner in Spanish hands for two weary years, and there were gaps in his knowledge of recent history. The name of Barry McCool meant nothing to him.

On the other hand, it seemed to mean a great deal to the admiral, for hardly had sufficient time elapsed for the message to be carried below to him than a question soared up to the *Victory*'s yardarm.

"Flag to *Renown*." Hornblower read those flags as they broke and was instantly ready for the rest of the message. "Is McCool alive?"

"Reply affirmative," said Captain Sawyer.

And the affirmative had hardly been hoisted before the next signal was fluttering in the *Victory*.

"Have him on board at once. Court martial will assemble."

A court martial! Who on earth was this man McCool? A deserter? The recapture of a mere deserter would not be a matter for the commander-in-chief. A traitor? Strange that a traitor should be court-martialled in the fleet. But there it was. A word from the captain sent Hart scurrying overside to bring this mysterious prisoner on board, while signal after signal went up from the *Victory* convening the court martial in the *Renown*.

Hornblower was kept busy enough reading the messages; he had only a glance to spare when Hart had his prisoner and his sea chest hoisted up over the port side. A youngish man, tall and slender, his hands were tied behind him — which was why he had to be hoisted in — and he was hatless, so that his long red hair streamed in the wind. He wore a blue uniform with red facings — a French infantry uniform, apparently. The name, the uniform, and the red hair combined to give Hornblower his first insight into the situation. McCool must be an Irishman. While Hornblower had been a prisoner in Ferrol, there had been, he knew, a bloody rebellion in Ireland. Irishmen who had escaped had taken service with France in large number. This must be one of them, but it hardly explained why the admiral should take it upon himself to try him instead of handing him over to the civil authorities.

Hornblower had to wait an hour for the explanation, until, at two bells in the next watch, dinner was served in the gun room.

"There'll be a pretty little ceremony tomorrow morning," said Clive, the surgeon. He put his hand to his neck in a gesture which Hornblower thought hideous.

"I hope the effect will be salutary," said Roberts, the second lieutenant. The foot of the table, where he sat, was for the moment the head, because Buckland, the first lieutenant, was absent attending to the preparations for the court martial.

"But why should we hang him?" asked Hornblower.

Roberts rolled an eye on him.

"Deserter," he said, and then went on. "Of course, you're a newcomer. I entered him myself, into this very ship, in '98. Hart spotted him at once."

"But I thought he was a rebel?"

"A rebel as well," said Roberts. "The quickest way out of Ireland — the only way, in fact — in '98 was to join the armed forces."

"I see," said Hornblower.

"We got a hundred hands that autumn," said Smith, another lieutenant.

And no questions would be asked, thought Hornblower. His country, fighting for her life, needed seamen as a drowning man needs air, and was prepared to make them out of any raw material that presented itself.

"McCool deserted one dark night when we were becalmed off the Penmarks," explained Roberts. "Got through a lower gunport with a grating to float him. We thought he was drowned until news came through from Paris that he was there, up to his old games. He boasted of what he'd done — that's how we knew him to be O'Shaughnessy, as he called himself when we had him."

"Wolfe Tone had a French uniform," said Smith. "And they'd have strung him up if he hadn't cut his own throat first."

"Uniform only aggravates the offence when he's a deserter," said Roberts.

Hornblower had much to think about. First there was the nauseating thought that there would be an execution in the morning. Then there was this eternal Irish problem, about which the more he thought the more muddled he became. If just the bare facts were considered, there could be no problem. In the world at the moment, Ireland could choose only between the domination of England and the domination of France; no other possibility existed in a world at war. And it seemed unbelievable that anyone would wish to escape from English overlordship — absentee landlords and Catholic disabilities notwithstanding — in order to submit to the rapacity and cruelty and venality of the French republic. To risk one's life to effect such an exchange would

be a most illogical thing to do, but logic, Hornblower concluded sadly, had no bearing upon patriotism, and the bare facts were the least considerable factors.

And in the same way the English methods were subject to criticism as well. There could be no doubt that the Irish people looked upon Wolfe Tone and Fitzgerald as martyrs, and would look upon McCool in the same light. There was nothing so effective as a few martyrdoms to ennoble and invigorate a cause.

The hanging of McCool would merely be adding fuel to the fire that England sought to extinguish. Two peoples actuated by the most urgent of motives — self-preservation and patriotism — were at grips in a struggle which could have no satisfactory ending for any lengthy time to come.

Buckland, the first lieutenant, came into the gun room with the preoccupied look commonly worn by first lieutenants with a weight of responsibility on their shoulders. He ran his glance over the assembled company, and all the junior officers, sensing that unpleasant duties were about to be allocated, did their unobtrusive best not to meet his eye. Inevitably it was the name of the most junior lieutenant which rose to Buckland's lips. "Mr Hornblower," he said.

"Sir!" replied Hornblower, doing his best now to keep resignation out of his voice.

"I am going to make you responsible for the prisoner."

"Sir?" said Hornblower, with a different intonation.

"Hart will be giving evidence at the court martial," explained Buckland — it was a vast condescension that he should deign to explain at all. "The master-at-arms is a fool, you know. I want McCool brought up for trial safe and sound, and I want him kept safe and sound afterwards. I'm repeating the captain's own words, Mr Hornblower."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Hornblower, for there was nothing else to be said.

"No Wolfe Tone tricks with McCool," said Smith.

Wolfe Tone had cut his own throat the night before he was due to be hanged, and had died in agony a week later.

"Ask me for anything you may need, Mr Hornblower," said Buckland.

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Side boys!" suddenly roared a voice on deck overhead, and Buckland hurried out; the approach of an officer of rank meant that the court martial was beginning to assemble.

Hornblower's chin was on his breast. It was a hard, unrelenting world, and he was an officer in the hardest and most unrelenting service in that world — a service in which a man could no more say 'I cannot' than he could say 'I dare not'.

"Bad luck, Horny," said Smith, with surprising gentleness, and there were other murmurs of sympathy from round the table.

"Obey orders, young man," said Roberts quietly.

Hornblower rose from his chair. He could not trust himself to speak, so that it was with a hurried bow that he quitted the company at the table.

"'E's 'ere, safe an' sound, Mr 'Ornblower," said the master-at-arms, halting in the darkness of the lower 'tween decks.

A marine sentry at the door moved out of the way, and the master-at-arms shone the light of his candle lantern on a keyhole in the door and inserted the key.

"I put 'im in this empty storeroom, sir," went on the master-at-arms. "'E's got two of my corporals along wit 'im."

The door opened, revealing the light of another candle lantern. The air inside the room was foul; McCool was sitting on a chest, while two of the ship's corporals sat on the deck with their backs to the bulkhead. The corporals rose at an officer's entrance, but even so, there was almost no room for the two newcomers. Hornblower cast a vigilant eye round the arrangements. There appeared to be no chance of escape or suicide. In the end, he steeled himself to meet McCool's eyes.

"I have been put in charge of you," he said.

"That is most gratifying to me, Mr — Mr —" said McCool, rising from the chest.

"Hornblower."

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr Hornblower."

McCool spoke in a cultured voice, with only enough of Ireland in it to betray his origin. He had tied back the red locks into a neat queue, and even in the faint candlelight his blue eyes gave strange reflections.

"Is there anything you need?" asked Hornblower.

"I could eat and I could drink," replied McCool. "Seeing that nothing has passed my lips since the *Espérance* was captured."

That was yesterday. The man had had neither food nor water for more than twenty-four hours.

"I will see to it," said Hornblower. "Anything more?"

"A mattress — a cushion — something on which I can sit," said McCool. He waved a hand towards his sea chest. "I bear an honoured name, but I have no desire to bear it imprinted on my person."

The sea chest was of a rich mahogany. The lid was a thick slab of wood whose surface had been chiselled down to leave his name — B. I. McCool — standing out in high relief.

"I'll send you in a mattress too," said Hornblower.

A lieutenant in uniform appeared at the door.

"I'm Payne, on the admiral's staff," he explained to Hornblower. "I have orders to search this man."

"Certainly," said Hornblower.

"You have my permission," said McCool.

The master-at-arms and his assistants had to quit the crowded little room to enable Payne to do his work, while Hornblower stood in the corner and watched. Payne was quick and efficient. He made McCool strip to the skin and examined his clothes with care — seams, linings, and buttons. He crumpled each portion carefully, with his ear to the material, apparently to hear if there were papers concealed inside. Then he knelt down to the chest; the key was already in the lock, and he swung it open. Uniforms, shirts, underclothing, gloves; each article was taken out, examined, and laid aside. There were two small portraits of children, to which Payne gave special attention without discovering anything.

"The things you are looking for," said McCool, "were all dropped overside before the prize crew could reach the *Espérance*. You'll find nothing to betray my fellow countrymen, and you may as well save yourself that trouble."

"You can put your clothes on again," said Payne curtly to McCool. He nodded to Hornblower and hurried out again.

"A man whose politeness is quite overwhelming," said McCool, buttoning his breeches.

"I'll attend to your requests," said Hornblower.

He paused only long enough to enjoin the strictest vigilance on the master-at-arms and the ship's corporals before hastening away to give orders for McCool to be given food and water, and he returned quickly. McCool drank his quart of water eagerly, and made effort to eat the ship's biscuit and meat.

"No knife. No fork," he commented.

"No," replied Hornblower in a tone devoid of expression.

"I understand."

It was strange to stand there gazing down at this man who was going to die tomorrow, biting not very efficiently at the lump of tough meat which he held to his teeth.

The bulkhead against which Hornblower leaned vibrated slightly, and the sound of a gun came faintly down to them. It was the signal that the court martial was about to open.

"Do we go?" asked McCool.

"Yes."

"Then I can leave this delicious food without any breach of good manners."

Up the ladders to the main deck, two marines leading, McCool following them, Hornblower following him, and two ship's corporals bringing up the rear.

"I have frequently traversed these decks," said McCool, looking round him, "with less ceremonial."

Hornblower was watching carefully lest he should break away and throw himself into the sea.

The court martial. Gold lace and curt efficient routine, as the *Renown* swung to her anchors and the timbers of the ship transmitted the sound of the rigging vibrating in the gale. Evidence of identification. Curt questions.

"Nothing I could say would be listened to amid these emblems of tyranny," said McCool in reply to the President of the Court.

It needed no more than fifteen minutes to condemn a man to death: "The sentence of this Court is that you, Barry Ignatius McCool, be hanged by the neck —"

The storeroom to which Hornblower escorted McCool back was now a condemned cell. A hurrying midshipman asked for Hornblower almost as soon as they arrived there.

"Captain's compliments, sir, and he'd like to speak to you."

"Very good," said Hornblower.

"The admiral's with him, sir," added the midshipman in a burst of confidence.

Rear-Admiral the Honourable Sir William Cornwallis was indeed in the captain's cabin, along with Payne and Captain Sawyer. He started to go straight to the point the moment Hornblower had been presented to him.

"You're the officer charged with carrying out the execution?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Now look'ee here, young sir —"

Cornwallis was a popular admiral, strict but kindly, and of unflinching courage and towering professional ability. Under his nickname of 'Billy Blue' he was the hero of uncounted anecdotes and ballads. But having got so far in what he was intending to say, he betrayed a hesitation alien to his character. Hornblower waited for him to continue.

"Look'ee here," said Cornwallis again. "There's to be no speechifying when he's strung up."

"No, sir?" said Hornblower.

"A quarter of the hands in this ship are Irish," went on Cornwallis. "I'd as lief have a light taken into the magazine as to have McCool make a speech to 'em."

"I understand, sir," said Hornblower.

But there was a ghastly routine about executions. From time immemorial the condemned man had been allowed to address his last words to the onlookers.

"String him up," said Cornwallis, "and that'll show 'em what to expect if they run off. But once let him open his mouth — That fellow has the gift of the gab, and we'll have this crew unsettled for the next six months."

"Yes, sir."

"So see to it, young sir. Fill him full o' rum, maybe. But let him speak at your peril."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Payne followed Hornblower out of the cabin when he was dismissed.

"You might stuff his mouth with oakum," he suggested. "With his hands tied he could not get it out."

"Yes," said Hornblower, his blood running cold.

"I've found a priest for him," went on Payne, "but he's Irish too. We can't rely on him to tell McCool to keep his mouth shut."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"McCool's devilish cunning. No doubt he'd throw everything overboard before they capture him."

"What was he intending to do?" asked Hornblower.

"Land in Ireland and stir up fresh trouble. Lucky we caught him. Lucky for that matter, we could charge him with desertion and make a quick business of it."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"Don't rely on making him drunk," said Payne, "although that was Billy Blue's advice. Drunk or sober, these Irishmen can always talk. I've given you the best hint."

"Yes," said Hornblower, concealing a shudder.

He went back into the condemned cell like a man condemned himself. McCool was sitting on the straw mattress Hornblower had had sent in, and the two ship's corporals still had him under their observation.

"Here comes Jack Ketch," said McCool with a smile that almost escaped appearing forced.

Hornblower plunged into the matter in hand; he could see no tactful way of approach

"Tomorrow —" he said.

"Yes, tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow you are to make no speeches," he said.

"None? No farewell to my countrymen?"

"No."

"You are robbing a condemned man of his last privilege."

"I have my orders," said Hornblower.

"And you propose to enforce them?"

"Yes."

"May I ask how?"

"I can stop your mouth with tow," said Hornblower brutally.

McCool looked at the pale, strained face. "You do not appear to me to be the ideal executioner," said McCool, and then a new idea seemed to strike him. "Supposing I were to save you that trouble?"

"How?"

"I could give you my parole to say nothing."

Hornblower tried to conceal his doubts as to whether he could trust a fanatic about to die.

"Oh, you wouldn't have to trust my bare word," said McCool bitterly. "We can strike a bargain, if you will. You need not carry out your half unless I have already carried out mine."

"A bargain?"

"Yes. Allow me to write to my widow. Promise me to send her the letter and my sea chest here — you can see it is of sentimental value — and I, on my side, promise to say no word from the time of leaving this place here until — until —" Even McCool faltered at that point. "Is that explicit enough?"

"Well —" said Hornblower.

"You can read the letter," added McCool. "You saw that other gentleman search my chest. Even though you send these things to Dublin, you can be sure that they contain nothing of what you would call treason."

"I'll read the letter before I agree," said Hornblower.

It seemed a way out of a horrible situation. There would be small trouble about finding a coaster destined for Dublin; for a few shillings he could send letter and chest there.

"I'll send you in pen and ink and paper," said Hornblower.

It was time to make the other hideous preparations. To have a whip rove at the portside fore yardarm, and to see that the line ran easily through the block. To weight the line and mark a ring with chalk on the gangway where the end rested. To see that the noose ran smooth. To arrange with Buckland for ten men to be detailed to pull when the time came. Hornblower went through it all like a man in a nightmare.

Back in the condemned cell, McCool was pale and wakeful, but he could still force a smile.

"You can see that I had trouble wooing the muse," he said.

At his feet lay a couple of sheets of paper, and Hornblower, glancing at them, could see that they were covered with what looked like attempts at writing poetry. The erasures and alterations were numerous.

"But here is my fair copy," said McCool, handing over another sheet.

'My darling wife,' the letter began. 'It is hard to find words to say farewell to my very dearest —'

It was not easy for Hornblower to force himself to read that letter. It was as if he had to peer through a mist to make out the words. But they were only the words of a man writing to his beloved, whom he would never see again. That at least was plain. He compelled himself to read through the affectionate sentences. At the end it said: 'I append a poor poem by which in the years to come you may remember me, my dearest love. And now goodbye, until we shall be together in heaven. Your husband, faithful unto death, Barry Ignatius McCool.'

Then came the poem.

'Ye heavenly powers! Stand by me when I die!

The bee ascends before my rolling eye.

Life still goes on within the heartless town.

Dark forces claim my soul. So strike 'em down.

The sea will rise, the sea will fall. So turn

Full circle. Turn again. And then will burn

The lambent flames while hell will lift its head.

So pray for me while I am numbered with the dead.'

Hornblower read through the turgid lines and puzzled over their obscure imagery. But he wondered if he would be able to write a single line that would make sense if he knew he was going to die in a few hours. "The superscription is on the other side," said McCool, and Hornblower turned the sheet over. The letter was addressed to the Widow McCool, in some street in Dublin. "Will you accept my word now?" asked McCool. "Yes," said Hornblower.

The horrible thing was done in the grey hours of the morning.

"Hands to witness punishment."

The pipes twittered and the hands assembled in the waist, facing forward. The marines stood in lines across the deck. There were masses and masses of white faces, which Hornblower saw when he brought McCool up from below. There was a murmur when McCool appeared. Around the ship lay boats from all the rest of the fleet, filled with men — men sent to witness the punishment, but ready also to storm the ship should the crew stir. The chalk ring on the gangway, and McCool standing in it. The signal gun; the rush of feet as the ten hands heaved away on the line. And McCool died, as he had promised, without saying a word.

The body hung at the yardarm, and as the ship rolled in the swell that came round Berry Head, so the body swung and dangled, doomed to hang there until nightfall, while Hornblower, sick and pale, began to seek out a coaster which planned to call at Dublin from Brixham, so that he could fulfill his half of the bargain. But he could not fulfil it immediately; nor did the dead body hang there for its allotted time. The wind was backing northerly and was showing signs of moderating. A westerly gale would keep the French fleet shut up in Brest; a northerly one might well bring them out, and the Channel fleet must hurry to its post again. Signals flew from the flagships.

"Hands to the capstan!" bellowed the bosun's mates in twenty-four ships. "Hands make sail!"

With double-reefed topsails set, the ships of the Channel fleet formed up and began their long slant down-Channel. In the *Renown* it had been, "Mr Hornblower, see that *that* is disposed of." While the hands laboured at the capstan the corpse was lowered from the yardarm and sewn into a weighted bit of sailcloth. Clear of Berry Head it was cast overside without ceremony or prayer. McCool had died a felon's death and must be given a felon's burial. And, close-hauled, the big ships clawed their way back to their posts amid the rocks and currents of the Brittany coast. And on board the *Renown* there was one unhappy lieutenant, at least, plagued by dreadful memories.

In the tiny cabin which he shared with Smith there was something that kept Hornblower continually reminded of that morning: the mahogany chest with the name 'B. I. McCool' in high relief on the lid. And in Hornblower's letter case lay that last letter and the rambling, delirious poem. Hornblower could send neither on to the widow until the *Renown* should return again to an English harbour, and he was irked that he had not yet fulfilled his half of the bargain. The sight of the chest under his cot jarred on his nerves; its presence in their little cabin irritated Smith.

Hornblower could not rid his memory of McCool; nor, beating about in a ship of the line on the dreary work of blockade, was there anything to distract him from his obsession. Spring was approaching and the weather was moderating. So that when he opened his leather case and found that letter staring at him again, he felt undiminished that revulsion of spirit. He turned the sheet over; in the half dark of the little cabin he could hardly read the gentle words of farewell. He knew that strange poem almost by heart, and he peered at it again, sacrilege though it seemed to try to analyse the thoughts of the brave and frightened man who had written it during his final agony of spirit. 'The bee ascends before my rolling eye.' What could possibly be the feeling that inspired that strange imagery? 'Turn full circle. Turn again.' Why should the heavenly powers do that?

A startling thought suddenly began to wake to life in Hornblower's mind. The letter, with its tender phrasing, had been written without correction or erasure. But this poem; Hornblower remembered the discarded sheets covered with scribbling. It had been written with care and attention. A madman, a man distraught with trouble, might produce a meaningless poem with such prolonged effort, but then he would not have written that letter. Perhaps —

Hornblower sat up straight instead of lounging back on his cot. 'So strike 'em down.' There was no apparent reason why McCool should have written 'em' instead of 'them'. Hornblower mouthed the words. To say 'them' did not mar either euphony or rhythm. There might be a code. But then why the chest? Why had

McCool asked for the chest to be forwarded with its uninteresting contents of clothing? There were two portraits of children; they could easily have been made into a package. The chest with its solid slabs of mahogany and its raised name was a handsome piece of furniture, but it was all very puzzling.

With the letter still in his hand, he got down from the cot and dragged out the chest. B. I. McCool. Barry Ignatius McCool. Payne had gone carefully through the contents of the chest. Hornblower unlocked it and glanced inside again; he could see nothing meriting particular attention, and he closed the lid again and turned the key. B. I. McCool. A secret compartment! In a fever, Hornblower opened the chest again, flung out the contents and examined sides and bottom. It called for only the briefest examination to assure him that there was no room there for anything other than a microscopic secret compartment. The lid was thick and heavy, but he could see nothing suspicious about it. He closed it again and fiddled with the raised letters, without result.

He had actually decided to replace the contents when a fresh thought occurred to him. 'The bee ascends!' Feverishly Hornblower took hold of the 'B' on the lid. He pushed it, tried to turn it. 'The bee ascends!' He put thumb and finger into the two hollows in the loops of the 'B', took a firm grip and pulled upward. He was about to give up when the letter yielded a little, rising up out of the lid half an inch. Hornblower opened the box again, and could see nothing different. Fool that he was! 'Before my rolling eye.' Thumb and forefinger on the 'I'. First this way, then that way — and it turned!

Still no apparent further result. Hornblower looked at the poem again. 'Life still goes on within the heartless town.' He could make nothing of that. 'Dark forces claim my soul.' No. Of course! 'Strike 'em down.' That 'em'. Hornblower put his hand on the 'M' of 'McCool' and pressed vigorously. It sank down into the lid. 'The sea will rise, the sea will fall.' Under firm pressure the first 'C' slid upward, the second 'C' slid downward. 'Turn full circle. Turn again.' Round went one 'O', and then round went the other in the opposite direction. There was only the 'L' now. Hornblower glanced at the poem. 'Hell will lift its head.' He guessed it at once; he took hold of the top of the 'L' and pulled; the letter rose out of the lid as though hinged along the bottom, and at the same moment there was a loud decisive click inside the lid. Nothing else was apparent, and Hornblower gingerly took hold of the lid and lifted it. Only half of it came up; the lower half stayed where it was, and in the oblong hollow between there lay a mass of papers, neatly packaged.

The first package was a surprise. Hornblower, peeping into it, saw that it was a great wad of five-pound notes — a very large sum of money. A second package was similar. Ample money here to finance the opening moves of a new rebellion. The first thing he saw inside the next package was a list of names, with brief explanations written beside each. Hornblower did not have to read very far before he knew that this package contained the information necessary to start the rebellion. In the last package was a draft proclamation ready for printing. 'Irishmen!' it began.

Hornblower took his seat on the cot again and tried to think, swaying with the motion of the ship. There was money that would make him rich for life. There was information which, if given to the government, would clutter every gallows in Ireland. Struck by a sudden thought, he put everything back into the chest and closed the lid.

For the moment it was a pleasant distraction, saving him from serious thought, to study the ingenious mechanism of the secret lock. Unless each operation was gone through in turn, nothing happened. The 'I' would not turn unless the 'B' was first pulled out, and it was most improbable that a casual investigator would pull at that 'B' with the necessary force. It was most unlikely that anyone without a clue would ever discover how to open the lid, and the joint in the wood was marvellously well concealed. It occurred to Hornblower that when he should announce his discovery matters would go badly with Payne, who had been charged with searching McCool's effects. Payne would be the laughing-stock of the fleet, a man both damned and condemned.

Hornblower thrust the chest back under the cot and, secure now against any unexpected entrance by Smith, went on to try to think about his discovery. That letter of McCool's had told the truth. 'Faithful unto death.' McCool's last thought had been for the cause in which he died. If the wind in Tor Bay had stayed westerly another few hours, that chest might have made its way to Dublin. On the other hand, now there would be commendation for him, praise, official notice — all very necessary to a junior lieutenant with no interests behind him to gain him his promotion to captain. And the hangman would have more work to do in Ireland.

Hornblower remembered how McCool had died, and felt fresh nausea at the thought. Ireland was quiet now. And the victories of St Vincent and the Nile and Camperdown had put an end to the imminent danger which England had gone through. England could afford to be merciful. He could afford to be merciful. And the money?

Later on, when Hornblower thought about this incident in his past life, he cynically decided that he resisted temptation because bank notes are tricky things, numbered and easy to trace, and the ones in the chest might even have been forgeries manufactured by the French government. But Hornblower misinterpreted his own motives, possibly in self-defence, because they were so vague and so muddled that he was ashamed of them. He wanted to forget about McCool. He wanted to think of the whole incident as closed.

There were many hours to come of pacing the deck before he reached his decision, and there were several sleepless nights. But Hornblower made up his mind in the end, and made his preparations thoughtfully, and when the time came he acted with decision. It was a quiet evening when he had the first watch; darkness had closed in on the Bay of Biscay, and the *Renown*, under easy sail, was loitering along over the black water with her consorts just in sight. Smith was at cards with the purser and the surgeon in the gun room. A word from Hornblower sent the two stupidest men of the watch down below to his cabin to carry up the sea chest, which he had laboriously covered with canvas in preparation for this night. It was heavy, for buried among the clothing inside were two twenty-four-pound shot. They left it in the scuppers at Hornblower's order. And then, when at four bells it was time for the *Renown* to tack, he was able, with one tremendous heave, to throw the thing overboard. The splash went unnoticed as the *Renown* tacked.

There was still that letter. It lay in Hornblower's writing case to trouble him when he saw it. Those tender sentences, that affectionate farewell; it seemed a shame that McCool's widow should not have the privilege of seeing them and treasuring them. But — but — When the *Renown* lay in the Hamoaze, completing for the West Indies, Hornblower found himself sitting at dinner next to Payne. It took a little while to work the conversation around in the right direction.

"By the way," said Hornblower with elaborate casualness, "did McCool leave a widow?"

"A widow? No. Before he left Paris he was involved in a notorious scandal with La Gitanita, the dancer. But no widow."

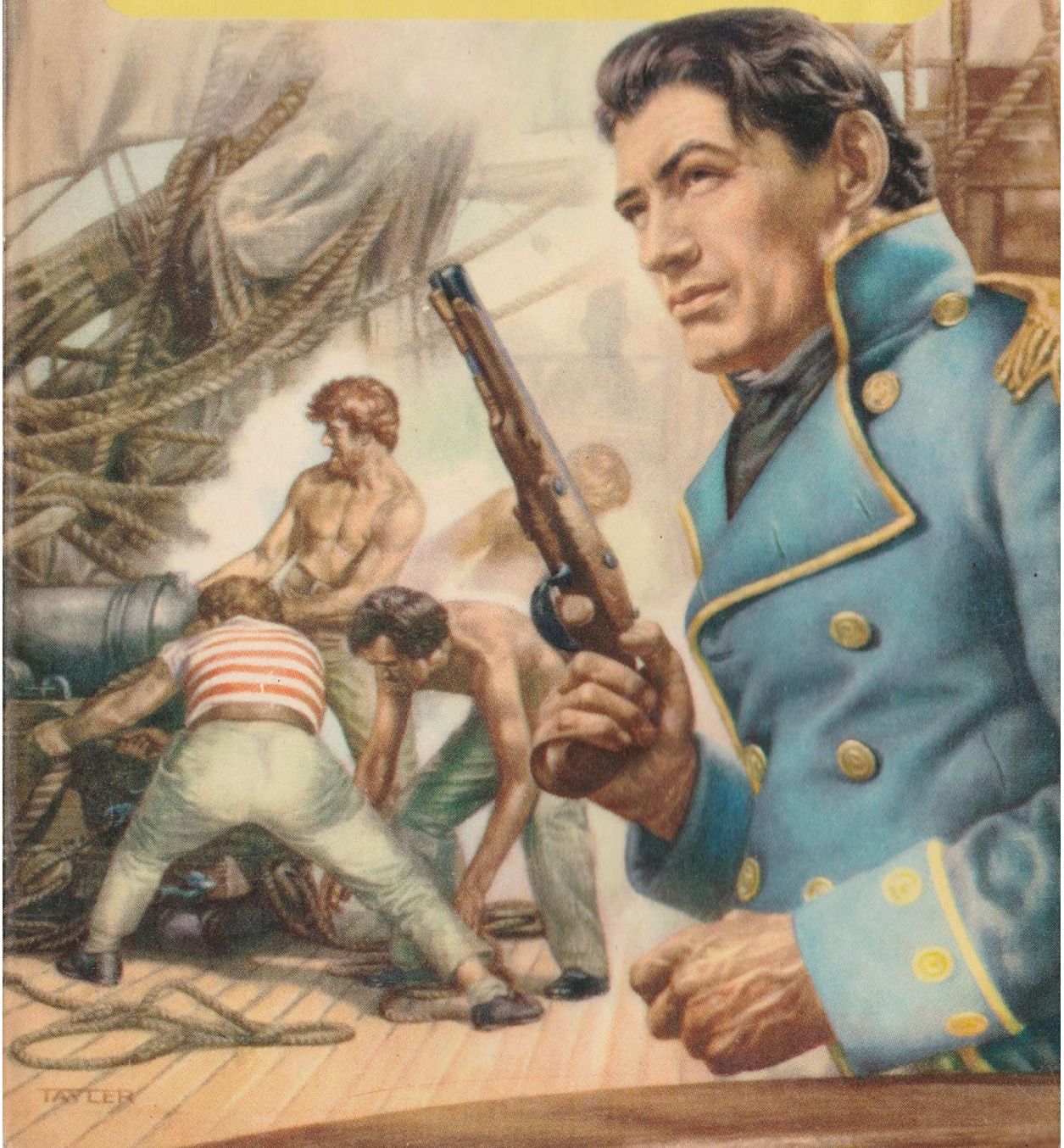
"Oh," said Hornblower.

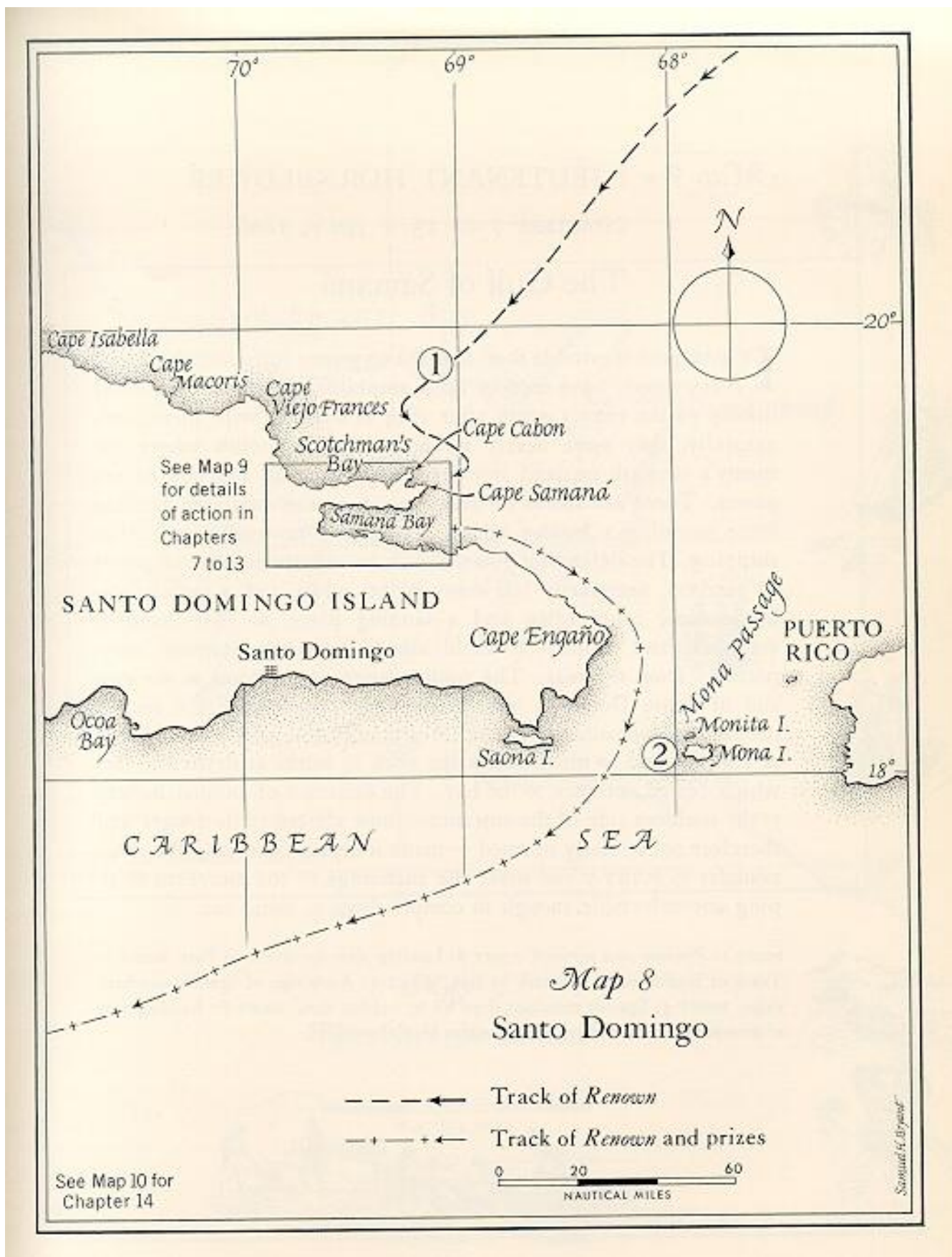
That letter, then, was as good a literary exercise as the poem had been. Hornblower realized that the arrival of a chest and a letter addressed to the Widow McCool at that particular house in Dublin would have received the attention it deserved from the people who lived there. It was a little irritating that he had given so much thought to the widow, but now the letter could follow the chest overside. And Payne would not be made the laughing-stock of the fleet.



LIEUTENANT HORNBLOWER

C.S. Forester

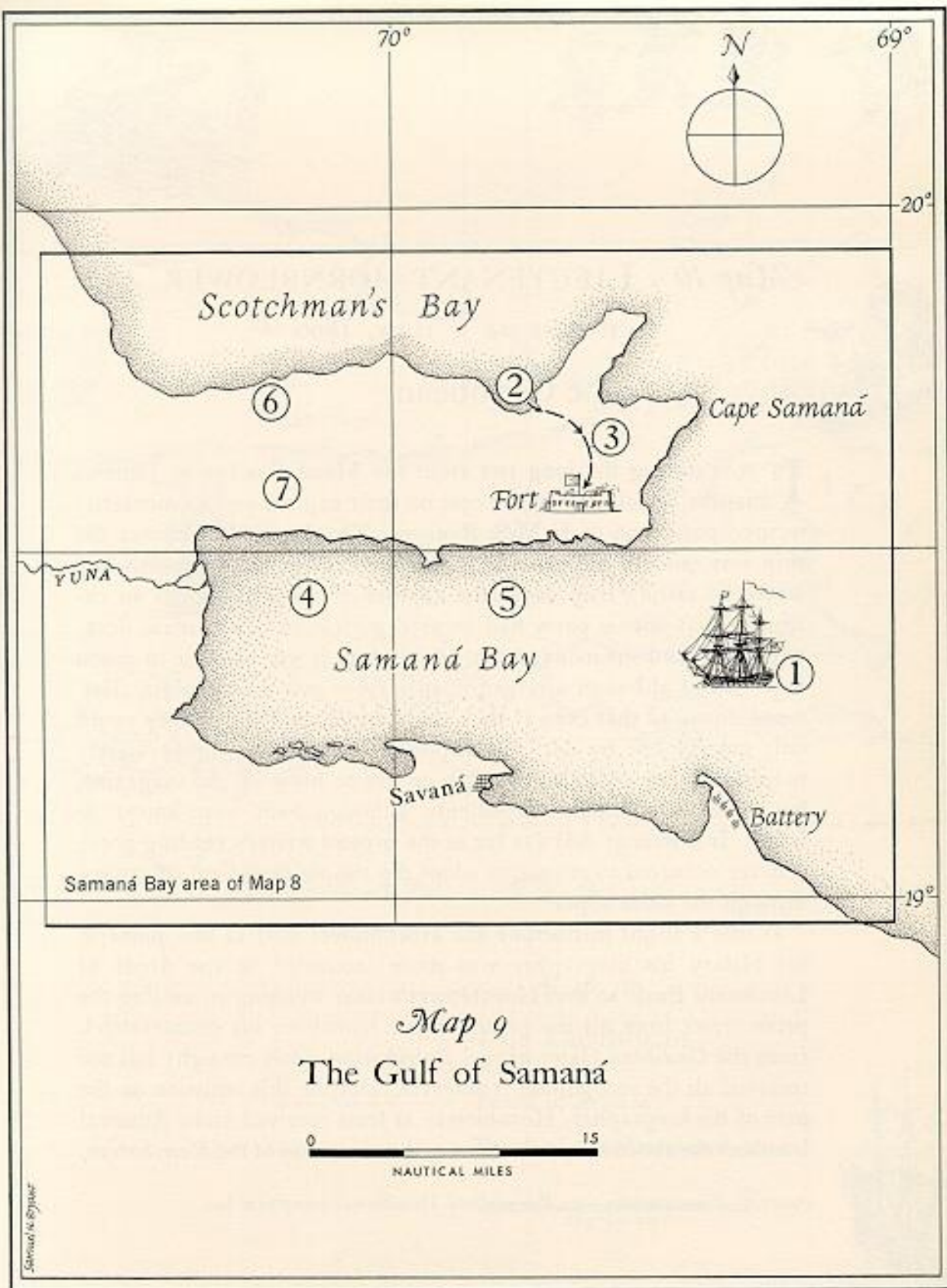




Lieutenant Hornblower Chapters 7 to 17 June to August, 1800 Map 8 - Santo Domingo

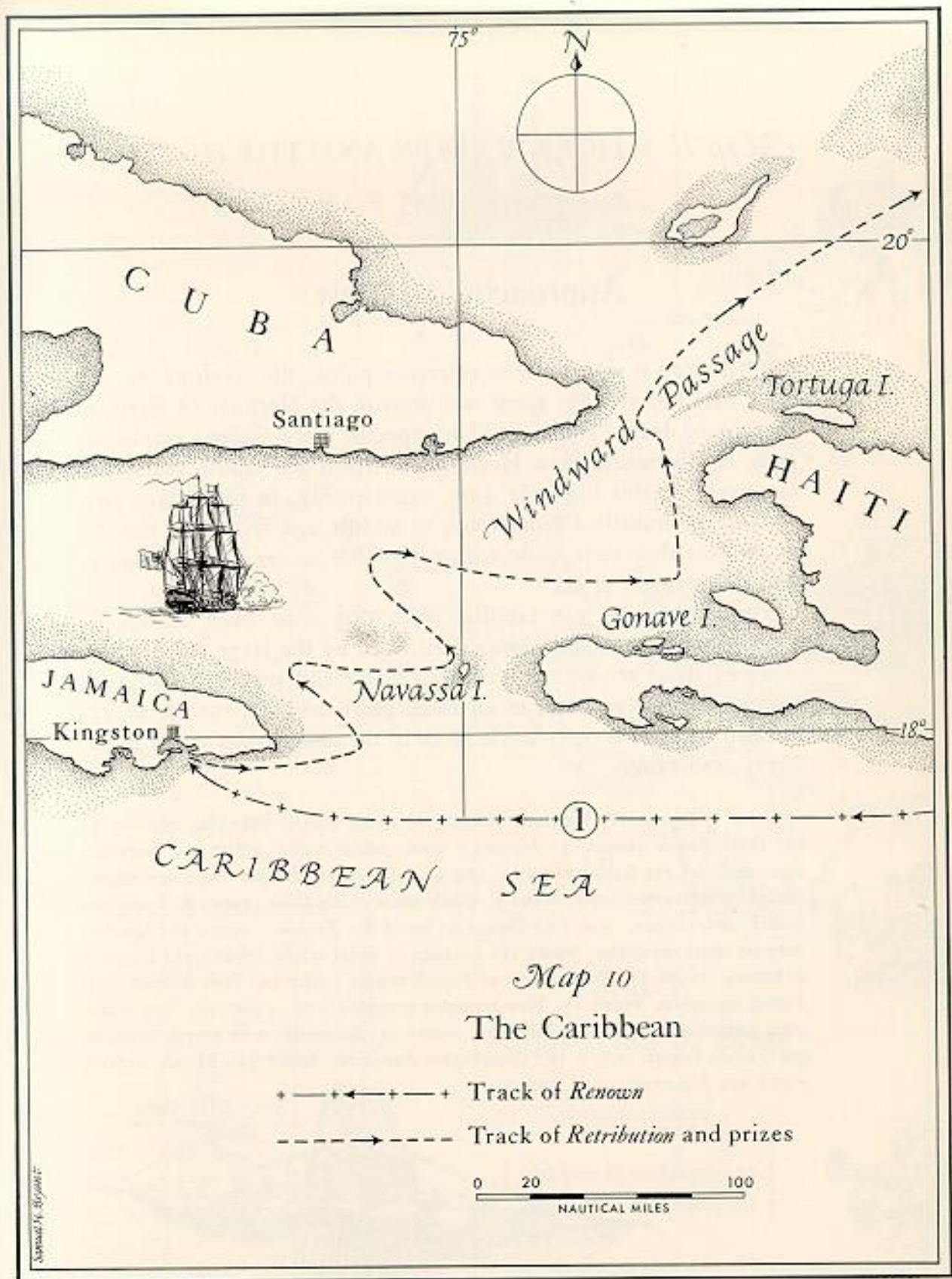
① Beginning of Chapter 7

② Encounter between *Renown* and *Clara*



Lieutenant Hornblower Chapters 7 to 13 July, 1800 Map 9 - The Gulf of Samaná

- ① Renown runs aground
- ② Landing place for attack on Fort.
- ③ Track of landing party in attack on fort.
- ④ Anchorage of Spanish merchant ships.
- ⑤ Spanish merchant ships hit by red-hot shot.
- ⑥ Landing spot of nine-pounder.
- ⑦ Firing position of nine-pounder.



① Prisoners take over *Renown* and Hornblower recaptures her.

Lieutenant Hornblower

C. S. Forester
(1952)

Chapter I

Lieutenant William Bush came on board HMS *Renown* as she lay at anchor in the Hamoaze and reported himself to the officer of the watch, who was a tall and rather gangling individual with hollow cheeks and a melancholy cast of countenance, whose uniform looked as if it had been put on in the dark and not readjusted since.

"Glad to have you aboard, sir," said the officer of the watch. "My name's Hornblower. The captain's ashore. First lieutenant went for'ard with the bosun ten minutes ago."

"Thank you," said Bush.

He looked keenly round him at the infinity of activities which were making the ship ready for a long period of service in distant waters.

"Hey there! You at the stay tackles! Handsomely! Handsomely! Belay!" Hornblower was bellowing this over Bush's shoulder. "Mr Hobbs! Keep an eye on what your men are doing there!"

"Aye aye, sir," came a sulky reply.

"Mr Hobbs! Lay aft here!"

A paunchy individual with a thick grey pigtail came rolling aft to where Hornblower stood with Bush at the gangway. He blinked up at Hornblower with the sun in his eyes; the sunlight lit up the sprouting grey beard on his tiers of chins.

"Mr Hobbs!" said Hornblower. He spoke quietly, but there was an intensity of spirit underlying his words that surprised Bush. "That powder's got to come aboard before nightfall and you know it. So don't use that tone of voice when replying to an order. Answer cheerfully another time. How are you going to get the men to work if you sulk? Get for'ard and see to it."

Hornblower was leaning a little forward as he spoke; the hands which he clasped behind him served apparently to balance the jutting chin, but his attitude was negligent compared with the fierce intensity with which he spoke, even though he was speaking in an undertone inaudible to all except the three of them.

"Aye aye, sir," said Hobbs, turning to go forward again.

Bush was making a mental note that this Hornblower was a firebrand when he met his glance and saw to his surprise a ghost of a twinkle in their melancholy depths. In a flash of insight he realised that this fierce young lieutenant was not fierce at all, and that the intensity with which he spoke was entirely assumed — it was almost as if Hornblower had been exercising himself in a foreign language.

"If they once start sulking you can't do anything with 'em," explained Hornblower, "and Hobbs is the worst of 'em — acting-gunner, and no good. Lazy as they make 'em."

"I see," said Bush.

The duplicity — play acting — of the young lieutenant aroused a momentary suspicion in Bush's mind. A man who could assume an appearance of wrath and abandon it again with so much facility was not to be trusted. Then, with an inevitable reaction, the twinkle in the brown eyes called up a responsive twinkle in Bush's frank blue eyes, and he felt a friendly impulse towards Hornblower, but Bush was innately cautious and checked the impulse at once, for there was a long voyage ahead of them and plenty of time for a more considered judgment. Meanwhile he was conscious of a keen scrutiny, and he could see that a question was imminent — and even Bush could guess what it would be. The next moment proved him right.

"What's the date of your commission?" asked Hornblower.

"July '96," said Bush.

"Thank you," said Hornblower in a flat tone that conveyed so little information that Bush had to ask the question in his turn.

"What's the date of yours?"

"August '97," said Hornblower. "You're senior to me. You're senior to Smith, too — January '97."

"Are you the junior lieutenant, then?"

"Yes," said Hornblower.

His tone did not reveal any disappointment that the newcomer had proved to be senior to him, but Bush could guess at it. Bush knew by very recent experience what it was to be the junior lieutenant in a ship of the line.

"You'll be third," went on Hornblower. "Smith fourth, and I'm fifth."

"I'll be third?" mused Bush, more to himself than to anyone else.

Every lieutenant could at least dream, even lieutenants like Bush with no imagination at all. Promotion was at least theoretically possible; from the caterpillar stage of lieutenant one might progress to the butterfly stage of captain, sometimes even without a chrysalis period as commander. Lieutenants undoubtedly were promoted on occasions; most of them, as was to be expected, being men who had friends at Court, or in Parliament, or who had been fortunate enough to attract the attention of an admiral and then lucky enough to be under that admiral's command at the moment when a vacancy occurred. Most of the captains on the list owed their promotion to one or other of such causes. But sometimes a lieutenant won his promotion through merit — through a combination of merit and good fortune, at least — and sometimes sheer blind chance brought it about. If a ship distinguished herself superlatively in some historic action the first lieutenant might be promoted (oddly enough, that promotion was considered a compliment to her captain), or if the captain should be killed in the action even a moderate success might result in a step for the senior surviving lieutenant who took his place. On the other hand some brilliant boat-action, some dashing exploit on shore, might win promotion for the lieutenant in command — the senior, of course. The chances were few enough in all conscience, but there were at least chances.

But of those few chances the great majority went to the senior lieutenant, to the first lieutenant; the chances of the junior lieutenant were doubly few. So that whenever a lieutenant dreamed of attaining the rank of captain, with its dignity and security and prize money, he soon found himself harking back to the consideration of his seniority as lieutenant. If this next commission of the *Renown's* took her away to some place where other lieutenants could not be sent on board by an admiral with favourites, there were only two lives between Bush and the position of first lieutenant with all its added chances of promotion. Naturally he thought about that; equally naturally he did not spare a thought for the fact that the man with whom he was conversing was divided by four lives from that same position.

"But still, it's the West Indies for us, anyway," said Hornblower philosophically. "Yellow fever. Ague.

Hurricanes. Poisonous serpents. Bad water. Tropical heat. Putrid fever. And ten times more chances of action than with the Channel fleet."

"That's so," agreed Bush, appreciatively.

With only three and four years' seniority as lieutenants, respectively, the two young men (and with young men's confidence in their own immortality) could face the dangers of West Indian service with some complacency.

"Captain's coming off, sir," reported the midshipman of the watch hurriedly.

Hornblower whipped his telescope to eye and trained it on the approaching shore boat.

"Quite right," he said. "Run for'ard and tell Mr Buckland. Bosun's mates! Sideboys! Lively, now!"

Captain Sawyer came up through the entry port, touched his hat to the quarterdeck, and looked suspiciously around him. The ship was in the condition of confusion to be expected when she was completing for foreign service, but that hardly justified the sidelong, shifty glances which Sawyer darted about him. He had a big face and a prominent hawk nose which he turned this way and that as he stood on the quarterdeck. He caught sight of Bush, who came forward and reported himself

"You came aboard in my absence, did you?" asked Sawyer.

"Yes, sir," said Bush, a little surprised.

"Who told you I was on shore?"

"No one, sir."

"How did you guess it, then?"

"I didn't guess it, sir. I didn't know you were on shore until Mr Hornblower told me."

"Mr Hornblower? So you know each other already?"

"No, sir. I reported to him when I came on board."

"So that you could have a few private words without my knowledge?"

"No, sir."

Bush bit off the 'of course not' which he was about to add. Brought up in a hard school, Bush had learned to utter no unnecessary words when dealing with a superior officer indulging in the touchiness superior officers might be expected to indulge in. Yet this particular touchiness seemed more unwarranted even than usual.

"I'll have you know I allow no one to conspire behind my back, Mr — ah — Bush," said the captain.

"Aye aye, sir."

Bush met the captain's searching stare with the composure of innocence, but he was doing his best to keep his surprise out of his expression, too, and as he was no actor the struggle may have been evident.

"You wear your guilt on your face, Mr Bush," said the captain. "I'll remember this."

With that he turned away and went below, and Bush, relaxing from his attitude of attention, turned to express his surprise to Hornblower. He was eager to ask questions about this extraordinary behaviour, but they died away on his lips when he saw that Hornblower's face was set in a wooden unresponsiveness. Puzzled and a little hurt, Bush was about to note Hornblower down as one of the captain's toadies — or as a madman as well — when he caught sight out of the tail of his eye of the captain's head reappearing above the deck. Sawyer must have swung round when at the foot of the companion and come up again simply for the purpose of catching his officers off their guard discussing him — and Hornblower knew more about his captain's habits than Bush did. Bush made an enormous effort to appear natural.

"Can I have a couple of hands to carry my sea-chest down?" he asked, hoping that the words did not sound nearly as stilted to the captain as they did to his own ears.

"Of course, Mr Bush," said Hornblower, with a formidable formality. "See to it, if you please, Mr James."

"Ha!" snorted the captain, and disappeared once more down the companion.

Hornblower flicked one eyebrow at Bush, but that was the only indication he gave, even then, of any recognition that the captain's actions were at all unusual, and Bush, as he followed his sea-chest down to his cabin, realised with dismay that this was a ship where no one ventured on any decisive expression of opinion. But the *Renown* was completing for sea, amid all the attendant bustle and confusion, and Bush was on board, legally one of her officers, and there was nothing he could do except reconcile himself philosophically to his fate. He would have to live through this commission, unless any of the possibilities catalogued by Hornblower in their first conversation should save him the trouble.

Chapter II

HMS *Renown* was clawing her way southward under reefed topsails, a westerly wind laying her over as she thrashed along, heading for those latitudes where she would pick up the north-east trade wind and be able to run direct to her destination in the West Indies. The wind sang in the taut weather-rigging, and blustered around Bush's ears as he stood on the starboard side of the quarterdeck, balancing to the roll as the roaring wind sent one massive grey wave after another hurrying at the ship; the starboard bow received the wave first, beginning a leisurely climb, heaving the bowsprit up towards the sky, but before the pitch was in any way completed the ship began her roll, heaving slowly over, slowly, slowly, while the bowsprit rose still more steeply. And then as she still rolled the bows shook themselves free and began to slide down the far side of the wave, with the foam creaming round them; the bowsprit began the downward portion of its arc as the ship rose ponderously to an even keel again, and as she heeled a trifle into the wind with the send of the sea under her keel her stern rose while the last of the wave passed under it, her bows dipped, and she completed the

corkscrew roll with the massive dignity to be expected of a ponderous fabric that carried five hundred tons of artillery on her decks. Pitch — roll — heave — roll; it was magnificent, rhythmic, majestic, and Bush, balancing on the deck with the practiced ease of ten years' experience, would have felt almost happy if the freshening of the wind did not bring with it the approaching necessity for another reef, which meant, in accordance with the ship's standing orders, that the captain should be informed.

Yet there were some minutes of grace left him, during which he could stand balancing on the deck and allow his mind to wander free. Not that Bush was conscious of any need for meditation — he would have smiled at such a suggestion were anyone to make it to him. But the last few days had passed in a whirl, from the moment when his orders had arrived and he had said goodbye to his mother and sisters (he had had three weeks with them after the *Conqueror* had paid off) and hurried to Plymouth, counting the money he had left in his pockets to make sure he could pay the post-chaise charges. The *Renown* had been in all the flurry of completing for the West Indian station, and during the thirty-six hours that elapsed before she sailed Bush had hardly time to sit down, let alone sleep — his first good night's rest had come while the *Renown* clawed her way across the bay. Yet almost from the moment of his first arrival on board he had been harassed by the fantastic moods of the captain, now madly suspicious and again stupidly easygoing. Bush was not a man sensitive to atmosphere — he was a sturdy soul philosophically prepared to do his duty in any of the difficult conditions to be expected at sea — but he could not help but be conscious of the tenseness and fear that pervaded life in the *Renown*. He knew that he felt dissatisfied and worried, but he did not know that these were his own forms of tenseness and fear. In three days at sea he had hardly come to know a thing about his colleagues: he could vaguely guess that Buckland, the first lieutenant, was capable and steady, and that Roberts, the second, was kindly and easygoing; Hornblower seemed active and intelligent, Smith a trifle weak; but these deductions were really guesses. The wardroom officers — the lieutenants and the master and the surgeon and the purser — seemed to be secretive and very much inclined to maintain a strict reserve about themselves. Within wide limits this was right and proper — Bush was no frivolous chatterer himself — but the silence was carried to excess when conversation was limited to half a dozen words, all strictly professional. There was much that Bush could have learned speedily about the ship and her crew if the other officers had been prepared to share with him the results of their experience and observations during the year they had been on board, but except for the single hint Bush had received from Hornblower when he came on board no one had uttered a word. If Bush had been given to Gothic flights of imagination he might have thought of himself as a ghost at sea with a company of ghosts, cut off from the world and from each other, ploughing across an endless sea to an unknown destination. As it was he could guess that the secretiveness of the wardroom was the result of the moods of the captain: and that brought him back abruptly to the thought that the wind was still freshening and a second reef was now necessary. He listened to the harping of the rigging, felt the heave of the deck under his feet, and shook his head regretfully. There was nothing for it.

"Mr Wellard," he said to the volunteer beside him. "Go and tell the captain that I think another reef is necessary."

"Aye aye, sir."

It was only a few seconds before Wellard was back on deck again.

"Cap'n's coming himself, sir."

"Very good," said Bush.

He did not meet Wellard's eyes as he said the meaningless words; he did not want Wellard to see how he took the news, nor did he want to see any expression that Wellard's face might wear. Here came the captain, his shaggy long hair whipping in the wind and his hook nose turned this way and that as usual.

"You want to take in another reef, Mr Bush?"

"Yes, sir," said Bush, and waited for the cutting remark that he expected. It was a pleasant surprise that none was forthcoming. The captain seemed almost genial.

"Very good, Mr Bush. Call all hands."

The pipes shrilled along the decks.

"All hands! All hands! All hands to reef tops'ls. All hands!"

The men came pouring out; the cry of 'All hands' brought out the officers from the wardroom and the cabins and the midshipmen's berths, hastening with their station-bills in their pockets to make sure that the

reorganised crew were properly at their stations. The captain's orders pealed against the wind. Halliards and reef tackles were manned; the ship plunged and rolled over the grey sea under the grey sky so that a landsman might have wondered how a man could keep his footing on deck, far less venture aloft. Then in the midst of the evolution a young voice, soaring with excitement to a high treble, cut through the captain's orders.

"Vast hauling there! 'Vast hauling!"

There was a piercing urgency about the order, and obediently the men ceased to pull. Then the captain bellowed from the poop:

"Who's that countermanding my orders?"

"It's me, sir — Wellard."

The young volunteer faced aft and screamed into the wind to make himself heard. From his station aft Bush saw the captain advance to the poop rail; Bush could see he was shaking with rage, his nose pointing forward as though seeking a victim.

"You'll be sorry, Mr Wellard. Oh yes, you'll be sorry."

Hornblower now made his appearance at Wellard's side. He was green with seasickness, as he had been ever since the *Renown* left Plymouth Sound.

"There's a reef point caught in the reef tackle block, sir — weather side," he hailed, and Bush, shifting his position, could see that this was so; if the men had continued to haul on the tackle, damage to the sail might easily have followed.

"What d'you mean by coming between me and a man who disobeys me?" shouted the captain. "It's useless to try to screen him."

"This is my station, sir," replied Hornblower. "Mr Wellard was doing his duty."

"Conspiracy!" replied the captain. "You two are in collusion!"

In the face of such an impossible statement Hornblower could only stand still, his white face turned towards the captain.

"You go below, Mr Wellard," roared the captain, when it was apparent that no reply would be forthcoming, "and you too, Mr. Hornblower. I'll deal with you in a few minutes. You hear me? Go below! I'll teach you to conspire."

It was a direct order, and had to be obeyed. Hornblower and Wellard walked slowly aft: it was obvious that Hornblower was rigidly refraining from exchanging a glance with the midshipman, lest a fresh accusation of conspiracy should be hurled at him. They went below while the captain watched them. As they disappeared down the companion the captain raised his big nose again.

"Send a hand to clear that reef tackle!" he ordered, in a tone as nearly normal as the wind permitted. "Haul away!"

The topsails had their second reef, and the men began to lay in off the yards. The captain stood by the poop rail looking over the ship as normal as any man could be expected to be.

"Wind's coming aft," he said to Buckland. "Aloft there! Send a hand to bear those backstays abreast the top-brim. Hands to the weather-braces. After guard! Haul in the weather main brace! Haul together, men! Well with the fore-yard! Well with the main yard! Belay every inch of that!"

The orders were given sensibly and sanely, and the hands stood waiting for the watch below to be dismissed.

"Bosun's mate! My compliments to Mr Lomax and I'll be glad to see him on deck."

Mr Lomax was the purser, and the officers on the quarterdeck could hardly refrain from exchanging glances; it was hard to imagine any reason why the purser should be wanted on deck at this moment.

"You sent for me, sir?" said the purser, arriving short of breath on the quarterdeck.

"Yes, Mr Lomax. The hands have been hauling in the weather main brace."

"Yes, sir?"

"Now we'll splice it."

"Sir?"

"You heard me. We'll splice the main brace. A tot of rum to every man. Aye, and to every boy."

"Sir?"

"You heard me. A tot of rum, I said. Do I have to give my orders twice? A tot of rum for every man. I'll give you five minutes, Mr Lomax, and not a second longer."

The captain pulled out his watch and looked at it significantly.

"Aye aye, sir," said Lomax, which was all he could say. Yet he still stood for a second or two, looking first at the captain and then at the watch, until the big nose began to lift in his direction and the shaggy eyebrows began to come together. Then he turned and fled; if the unbelievable order had to be obeyed five minutes would not be long in which to collect his party together, unlock the spirit room, and bring up the spirits. The conversation between captain and purser could hardly have been overheard by more than half a dozen persons, but every hand had witnessed it, and the men were looking at each other unbelievably, some with grins on their faces which Bush longed to wipe off.

"Bosun's mate! Run and tell Mr Lomax two minutes have gone. Mr Buckland! I'll have the hands aft here, if you please."

The men came trooping along the waist; it may have been merely Bush's overwrought imagination that made him think their manner slack and careless. The captain came forward to the quarterdeck rail, his face beaming in smiles that contrasted wildly with his scowls of a moment before.

"I know where loyalty's to be found, men," he shouted, "I've seen it. I see it now. I see your loyal hearts. I watch your unremitting labours. I've noticed them as I notice everything that goes on in this ship. Everything, I say. The traitors meet their deserts and the loyal hearts their reward. Give a cheer, you men."

The cheer was given, halfheartedly in some cases, with over-exuberance in others. Lomax made his appearance at the main hatchway, four men with him each carrying a two-gallon anker.

"Just in time, Mr Lomax. It would have gone hard with you if you had been late. See to it that the issue is made with none of the unfairness that goes on in some ships. Mr Booth! Lay aft here."

The bulky bosun came hurrying on his short legs.

"You have your rattan with you, I hope?"

"Aye aye, sir."

Booth displayed his long silver-mounted cane, ringed at every two inches by a pronounced joint. The dilatory among the crew knew that cane well and not only the dilatory — at moments of excitement Mr Booth was likely to make play with it on all within reach.

"Pick the two sturdiest of your mates. Justice will be executed."

Now the captain was neither beaming nor scowling. There was a smile on his heavy lips, but it might be a smile without significance as it was not re-echoed in his eyes.

"Follow me," said the captain to Booth and his mates, and he left the deck once more to Bush, who now had leisure to contemplate ruefully the disorganization of the ship's routine and discipline occasioned by this strange whim.

When the spirits had been issued and drunk he could dismiss the watch below and set himself to drive the watch on deck to their duties again, slashing at their sulkiness and indifference with bitter words. And there was no pleasure now in standing on the heaving deck watching the corkscrew roll of the ship and the hurrying Atlantic waves, the trim of the sails and the handling of the wheel — Bush still was unaware that there was any pleasure to be found in these everyday matters, but he was vaguely aware that something had gone out of his life.

He saw Booth and his mates making their way forward again, and here came Wellard on to the quarterdeck.

"Reporting for duty, sir," he said.

The boy's face was white, set in a strained rigidity, and Bush, looking keenly at him, saw that there was a hint of moisture in his eyes. He was walking stiffly, too, holding himself inflexibly; pride might be holding back his shoulders and holding up his head, but there was some other reason for his not bending at the hips.

"Very good, Mr Wellard," said Bush.

He remembered those knots on Booth's cane. He had known injustice often enough. Not only boys but grown men were beaten without cause on occasions, and Bush had nodded sagely when it happened, thinking that contact with injustice in a world that was essentially unjust was part of everyone's education. And grown men smiled to each other when boys were beaten, agreeing that it did all parties good; boys had been beaten since history began, and it would be a bad day for the world if ever, inconceivably, boys should cease to be beaten. This was all very true, and yet in spite of it Bush felt sorry for Wellard. Fortunately there was something waiting to be done which might suit Wellard's mood and condition.

"Those sandglasses need to be run against each other, Mr Wellard," said Bush, nodding over to the binnacle. "Run the minute glass against the half-hour glass as soon as they turn it at seven bells."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Mark off each minute on the slate unless you want to lose your reckoning," added Bush.

"Aye aye, sir."

It would be something to keep Wellard's mind off his troubles without calling for physical effort, watching the sand run out of the minute glass and turning it quickly, marking the slate and watching again. Bush had his doubts about that half-hour glass and it would be convenient to have both checked. Wellard walked stiffly over to the binnacle and made preparation to begin his observations.

Now here was the captain coming back again, the big nose pointing to one side and the other. But now the mood had changed again; the activity, the restlessness, had evaporated. He was like a man who had dined well. As etiquette dictated, Bush moved away from the weather rail when the captain appeared and the captain proceeded to pace slowly up and down the weather side of the quarterdeck, his steps accommodating themselves by long habit to the heave and pitch of the ship. Wellard took one glance and then devoted his whole attention to the matter of the sandglasses; seven bells had just struck and the half-hour glass had just been turned. For a short time the captain paced up and down. When he halted he studied the weather to windward, felt the wind on his cheek, looked attentively at the dogvane and up at the topsails to make sure that the yards were correctly trimmed, and came over and looked into the binnacle to check the course the helmsman was steering. It was all perfectly normal behaviour; any captain in any ship would do the same when he came on deck. Wellard was aware of the nearness of his captain and tried to give no sign of disquiet; he turned the minute glass and made another mark on the slate.

"Mr Wellard at work?" said the captain.

His voice was thick and a little indistinct, the tone quite different from the anxiety-sharpened voice with which he had previously spoken. Wellard, his eyes on the sandglasses, paused before replying. Bush could guess that he was wondering what would be the safest, as well as the correct, thing to say.

"Aye aye, sir."

In the navy no one could go far wrong by saying that to a superior officer.

"Aye aye, sir," repeated the captain. "Mr Wellard has learned better now perhaps than to conspire against his captain, against his lawful superior set in authority over him by the Act of His Most Gracious Majesty King George II?"

That was not an easy suggestion to answer. The last grains of sand were running out of the glass and Wellard waited for them; a 'yes' or a 'no' might be equally fatal.

"Mr Wellard is sulky," said the captain. "Perhaps Mr Wellard's mind is dwelling on what lies behind him. Behind him. 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept.' But proud Mr Wellard hardly wept. And he did not sit down at all. No, he would be careful not to sit down. The dishonourable part of him has paid the price of his dishonour. The grown man guilty of an honourable offence is flogged upon his back, but a boy, a nasty dirty-minded boy, is treated differently. Is not that so, Mr Wellard?"

"Yes, sir," murmured Wellard. There was nothing else he could say, and an answer was necessary.

"Mr Booth's cane was appropriate to the occasion. It did its work well. The malefactor bent over the gun could consider of his misdeeds."

Wellard inverted the glass again while the captain, apparently satisfied, took a couple of turns up and down the deck, to Bush's relief. But the captain checked himself in mid-stride beside Wellard and went on talking; his tone now was high-pitched.

"So you chose to conspire against me?" he demanded. "You sought to hold me up to derision before the hands?"

"No, sir," said Wellard in sudden new alarm. "No, sir, indeed not, sir."

"You and that cub Hornblower. *Mister* Hornblower. You plotted and you planned, so that my lawful authority should be set at naught."

"No, sir!"

"It is only the hands who are faithful to me in this ship where everyone else conspires against me. And cunningly you seek to undermine my influence over them. To make me a figure of fun in their sight. Confess

it!"

"No, sir. I didn't, sir."

"Why attempt to deny it? It is plain, it is logical. Who was it who planned to catch that reef point in the reef tackle block?"

"No one, sir. It —"

"Then who was it that countermanded my orders? Who was it who put me to shame before both watches, with all hands on deck? It was a deep-laid plot. It shows every sign of it."

The captain's hands were behind his back, and he stood easily balancing on the deck with the wind flapping his coattails and blowing his hair forward over his cheeks, but Bush could see he was shaking with rage again — if it was not fear. Wellard turned the minute glass again and made a fresh mark on the slate.

"So you hide your face because of the guilt that is written on it?" blared the captain suddenly. "You pretend to be busy so as to deceive me. Hypocrisy!"

"I gave Mr Wellard orders to test the glasses against each other, sir," said Bush.

He was intervening reluctantly, but to intervene was less painful than to stand by as a witness. The captain looked at him as if this was his first appearance on deck.

"You, Mr Bush? You're sadly deceived if you believe there is any good in this young fellow. Unless" — the captain's expression was one of sudden suspicious fear — "unless you are part and parcel of this infamous affair. But you are not, are you, Mr Bush? Not you. I have always thought better of you, Mr Bush."

The expression of fear changed to one of ingratiating good fellowship.

"Yes, sir," said Bush.

"With the world against me I have always counted on you, Mr Bush," said the captain, darting restless glances from under his eyebrows. "So you will rejoice when this embodiment of evil meets his deserts. We'll get the truth out of him."

Bush had the feeling that if he were a man of instant quickness of thought and readiness of tongue he would take advantage of this new attitude of the captain's to free Wellard from his peril; by posing as the captain's devoted companion in trouble and at the same time laughing off the thought of danger from any conspiracy, he might modify the captain's fears. So he felt, but he had no confidence in himself.

"He knows nothing, sir," he said, and he forced himself to grin. "He doesn't know the bobstay from the spankerboom."

"You think so?" said the captain doubtfully, teetering on his heels with the roll of the ship. He seemed almost convinced, and then suddenly a new line of argument presented itself to him.

"No, Mr Bush. You're too honest. I could see that the first moment I set eyes on you. You are ignorant of the depths of wickedness into which this world can sink. This lout has deceived you. Deceived you!"

The captain's voice rose again to a hoarse scream, and Wellard turned a white face towards Bush, lopsided with terror.

"Really, sir —" began Bush, still forcing a death's-head grin.

"No, no, no!" roared the captain. "Justice must be done! The truth must be brought to light! I'll have it out of him! Quartermaster! Quartermaster! Run for'ard and tell Mr Booth to lay aft here. And his mates!"

The captain turned away and began to pace the deck as if to offer a safety valve to the pressure within him, but he turned back instantly.

"I'll have it out of him! Or he'll jump overboard! You hear me? Where's that bosun?"

"Mr Wellard hasn't finished testing the glasses, sir," said Bush in one last feeble attempt to postpone the issue.

"Nor will he," said the captain.

Here came the bosun hurrying aft on his short legs, his two mates striding behind him.

"Mr Booth!" said the captain; his mood had changed again and the mirthless smile was back on his lips. "Take that miscreant. Justice demands that he be dealt with further. Another dozen from your cane, properly applied. Another dozen, and he'll coo like a dove."

"Aye aye, sir," said the bosun, but he hesitated.

It was a momentary tableau: the captain with his flapping coat; the bosun looking appealingly at Bush and the burly bosun's mates standing like huge statues behind him; the helmsman apparently imperturbable while all this went on round him, handling the wheel and glancing up at the topsails; and the wretched boy beside the

binnacle — all this under the grey sky, with the grey sea tossing about them and stretching as far as the pitiless horizon.

"Take him down to the maindeck, Mr Booth," said the captain.

It was the utterly inevitable; behind the captain's words lay the authority of Parliament, the weight of ages-old tradition. There was nothing that could be done. Wellard's hands rested on the binnacle as though they would cling to it and as though he would have to be dragged away by force. But he dropped his hands to his sides and followed the bosun while the captain watched him, smiling.

It was a welcome distraction that came to Bush as the quartermaster reported, "Ten minutes before eight bells, sir."

"Very good. Pipe the watch below."

Hornblower made his appearance on the quarterdeck and made his way towards Bush.

"You're not my relief," said Bush.

"Yes I am. Captain's orders."

Hornblower spoke without any expression — Bush was used to the ship's officers by now being as guarded as that, and he knew why it was. But his curiosity made him ask the question.

"Why?"

"I'm on watch and watch," said Hornblower stolidly. "Until further orders."

He looked at the horizon as he spoke, showing no sign of emotion.

"Hard luck," said Bush, and for a moment felt a twinge of doubt as to whether he had not ventured too far in offering such an expression of sympathy. But no one was within earshot.

"No wardroom liquor for me," went on Hornblower, "until further orders either. Neither my own nor anyone else's."

For some officers that would be a worse punishment than being put on watch and watch — four hours on duty and four hours off day and night — but Bush did not know enough about Hornblower's habits to judge whether this was the case with him. He was about to say 'hard luck' again, when at that moment a wild cry of pain reached their ears, cutting its way through the whistling wind. A moment later it was repeated, with even greater intensity. Hornblower was looking out at the horizon and his expression did not change. Bush watched his face and decided not to pay attention to the cries.

"Hard luck," he said.

"It might be worse," said Hornblower.

Chapter III

It was Sunday morning. The *Renown* had caught the northeast trades and was plunging across the Atlantic at her best speed, with studding sails set on both sides, the roaring trades driving her along with a steady pitch and heave, her bluff bows now and then raising a smother of spray that supported momentary rainbows. The rigging was piping loud and clear, the treble and the tenor to the baritone and bass of the noises of the ship's fabric as she pitched — a symphony of the sea. A few clouds of startling white dotted the blue of the sky, and the sun shone down from among them, revivifying and rejuvenating, reflected in dancing facets from the imperial blue of the sea.

The ship was a thing of exquisite beauty in an exquisite setting, and her bluff bows and her rows of guns added something else to the picture. She was a magnificent fighting machine, the mistress of the waves over which she was sailing in solitary grandeur. Her very solitude told the story; with the fleets of her enemies cooped up in port, blockaded by vigilant squadrons eager to come to grips with them, the *Renown* could sail the seas in utter confidence that she had nothing to fear. No furtive blockade-runner could equal her in strength; nowhere at sea was there a hostile squadron which could face her in battle. She could flout the hostile coasts; with the enemy blockaded and helpless she could bring her ponderous might to bear in a blow struck wherever she might choose. At this moment she was heading to strike such a blow, perhaps, despatched across the ocean at the word of the Lords of the Admiralty.

And drawn up in ranks on her maindeck was the ship's company, the men whose endless task it was to keep this fabric at the highest efficiency, to repair the constant inroads made upon her material by sea and weather and the mere passage of time. The snow-white decks, the bright paintwork, the exact and orderly arrangement of the lines and ropes and spars severe proofs of the diligence of their work; and when the time came for the *Renown* to deliver the ultimate argument regarding the sovereignty of the seas, it would be they who would man the guns — the *Renown* might be a magnificent fighting machine, but she was so only by virtue of the frail humans who handled her. They, like the *Renown* herself, were only cogs in the greater machine which was the Royal Navy, and most of them, caught up in the time-honoured routine and discipline of the service, were content to be cogs, to wash decks and set up rigging, to point guns or to charge with cutlasses over hostile bulwarks, with little thought as to whether the ship's bows were headed north or south, whether it was Frenchman or Spaniard or Dutchman who received their charge. Today only the captain knew the mission upon which the Lords of the Admiralty — presumably in consultation with the Cabinet — had despatched the *Renown*. There had been the vague knowledge that she was headed for the West Indies, but whereabouts in that area, and what she was intended to do there was known only to one man in the seven hundred and forty on the *Renown's* decks.

Every possible man was drawn up on this Sunday morning on the maindeck, not merely the two watches, but every 'idler' who had no place in the watches — the holders, who did their work so far below decks that for some of them it was literally true that they did not see the sun from one week's end to another, the cooper and his mates, the armourer and his mates, sail-maker and cook and stewards, all in their best clothes with the officers with their cocked hats and swords beside their divisions. Only the officer of the watch and his assistant warrant officer, the quartermasters at the wheel and the dozen hands necessary for lookouts and to handle the ship in a very sudden emergency were not included in the ranks that were drawn up in the waist at rigid attention, the lines swaying easily and simultaneously with the motion of the ship.

It was Sunday morning, and every hat was off, every head was bare as the ship's company listened to the words of the captain. But it was no church service; these bareheaded men were not worshipping their Maker. That could happen on three Sundays in every month, but on those Sundays there would not be quite such a strict inquisition throughout the ship to compel the attendance of every hand — and a tolerant Admiralty had lately decreed that Catholics and Jews and even Dissenters might be excused from attending church services. This was the fourth Sunday, when the worship of God was set aside in favour of a ceremonial more strict, more solemn, calling for the same clean shirts and bared heads, but not for the downcast eyes of the men in the ranks. Instead every man was looking to his front as he held his hat before him with the wind ruffling his hair; he was listening to laws as all-embracing as the Ten Commandments, to a code as rigid as Leviticus, because on the fourth Sunday of every month it was the captain's duty to read the Articles of War aloud to the ship's company, so that not even the illiterates could plead ignorance of them; a religious captain might squeeze in a brief church service as well, but the Articles of War had to be read.

The captain turned a page.

"Nineteenth Article," he read. "If any person in or belonging to the fleet shall make or endeavour to make any mutinous assembly upon any offence whatsoever, every person offending therein, and being convicted by the sentence of the court-martial, shall suffer death."

Bush, standing by his division, heard these words as he had heard them scores of times before. He had, in fact, heard them so often that he usually listened to them with inattention; the words of the previous eighteen Articles had flowed past him practically without his hearing them. But he heard this Nineteenth Article distinctly; it was possible that the captain read it with special emphasis, and in addition Bush raising his eyes in the blessed sunshine, caught sight of Hornblower, the officer of the watch, standing at the quarterdeck rail listening as well. And there was that word 'death'. It struck Bush's ear with special emphasis, as emphatic and as final as the sound of a stone dropped into a well, which was strange, for the other articles which the captain had read had used the word freely — death for holding back from danger, death for sleeping while on duty.

The captain went on reading.

"And if any person shall utter any words of sedition or mutiny he shall suffer death . . ."

"And if any officer, mariner, or soldier shall behave himself with contempt to his superior officer . . ."

Those words had a fuller meaning for Bush now, with Hornblower looking down at him; he felt a strange

stirring within him. He looked at the captain, unkempt and seedy in his appearance, and went back in his memory through the events of the past few days; if ever a man had shown himself unfit for duty it was the captain, but he was maintained in his position of unlimited power by these Articles of War which he was reading. Bush glanced up at Hornblower again; he felt that he knew for certain what Hornblower was thinking about as he stood there by the quarterdeck rail, and it was strange to feel this sympathy with the ungainly angular young lieutenant with whom he had had such little contact.

"And if any officer, mariner, or soldier or other person in the fleet" — the captain had reached the Twenty-Second Article now — "shall presume to quarrel with any of his superior officers, or shall disobey any lawful command, every such person shall suffer death."

Bush had not realised before how the Articles of War harped on this subject. He had served contentedly under discipline, and had always philosophically assured himself that injustice or mismanagement could be lived through. He could see now very special reasons why they should be. And as if to clinch the argument, the captain was now reading the final Article of War, the one which filled in every gap.

"All other crimes committed by any person or persons in the fleet which are not mentioned in this Act . . ."

Bush remembered that article; by its aid an officer could accomplish the ruin of an inferior who was clever enough to escape being pinned down by any of the others.

The captain read the final solemn words and looked up from the page. The big nose turned like a gun being trained round as he looked at each officer in turn; his face with its unshaven cheeks bore an expression of coarse triumph. It was as if he had gained by this reading of the Articles reassurance regarding his fears. He inflated his chest; he seemed to rise on tiptoe to make his concluding speech.

"I'll have you all know that these Articles apply to my officers as much as to anyone else."

Those were words which Bush could hardly believe he had heard. It was incredible that a captain could say such a thing in his crew's hearing. If ever a speech was subversive of discipline it was this one. But the captain merely went on with routine.

"Carry on, Mr Buckland."

"Aye aye, sir." Buckland took a pace forward in the grip of routine himself.

"On hats!"

Officers and men covered their heads now that the ceremonial was completed.

"Division Officers, dismiss your divisions!"

The musicians of the marine band had been waiting for this moment. The drum sergeant waved his baton and the drumsticks crashed down on the side drums in a long roll. Piercing and sweet the fifes joined in — 'The Irish Washerwoman,' jerky and inspiring. Smack — smack — smack; the marine soldiers brought their ordered muskets up to their shoulders. Whiting, the captain of marines, shouted the orders which sent the scarlet lines marching and counter-marching in the sunshine over the limited area of the quarterdeck.

The captain had been standing by watching this orderly progress of this ship's routine. Now he raised his voice.

"Mr Buckland!"

"Sir!"

The captain mounted a couple of steps of the quarterdeck ladder so that he might be clearly seen, and raised his voice so that as many as possible could hear his words.

"Rope-yarn Sunday today."

"Aye aye, sir."

"And double rum for these good men."

"Aye aye, sir."

Buckland did his best to keep the discontent out of his voice. Coming on top of the captain's previous speech this was almost too much. A rope-yarn Sunday meant that the men would spend the rest of the day in idleness. Double rum in that case most certainly meant fights and quarrels among the men. Bush, coming aft along the maindeck, was well aware of the disorder that was spreading among the crew, pampered by their captain. It was impossible to maintain discipline when every adverse report made by the officers was ignored by the captain. Bad characters and idlers were going unpunished; the willing hands were beginning to sulk, while the unruly ones were growing openly restless. "These good men," the captain had said. The men knew well enough how bad their record had been during the last week. If the captain called them 'good men' after

that, worse still could be expected next week. And besides all this the men most certainly knew about the captain's treatment of his lieutenants, of the brutal reprimands dealt out to them, the savage punishments. 'Today's wardroom joint is tomorrow's lower-deck stew,' said the proverb, meaning that whatever went on aft was soon being discussed in a garbled form forward; the men could not be expected to be obedient to officers whom they knew to be treated with contempt by the captain. Bush was worried as he mounted the quarterdeck.

The captain had gone in under the half-deck to his cabin; Buckland and Roberts were standing by the hammock nettings deep in conversation, and Bush joined them.

"These articles apply to my officers," said Buckland as he approached.

"Rope-yarn Sunday and double rum," added Roberts. "All for these good men."

Buckland shot a furtive glance round the deck before he spoke next. It was pitiful to see the first lieutenant of a ship of the line taking precautions lest what he should say should be overheard. But Hornblower and Wellard were on the other side of the wheel. On the poop the master was assembling the midshipmen's navigation class with their sextants to take their noon sights.

"He's mad," said Buckland in as low a voice as the northeast trade wind would allow.

"We all know that," said Roberts.

Bush said nodding. He was too cautious to commit himself at present.

"Clive won't lift a finger," said Buckland. "He's a ninny if there ever was one."

Clive was the surgeon.

"Have you asked him?" asked Roberts.

"I tried to. But he wouldn't say a word. He's afraid."

"Don't move from where you are standing, gentlemen," broke in a loud harsh voice; the well-remembered voice of the captain, speaking apparently from the level of the deck on which they stood. All three officers started in surprise.

"Every sign of guilt," blared the voice. "Bear witness to it, Mr Hobbs."

They looked round them. The skylight of the captain's fore cabin was open a couple of inches, and through the gap the captain was looking at them; they could see his eyes and his nose. He was a tall man and by standing on anything low, a book or a footstool, he could look from under the skylight over the coaming. Rigid, the officers waited while another pair of eyes appeared under the skylight beside the captain's. They belonged to Hobbs, the acting-gunner.

"Wait there until I come to you, gentlemen," said the captain, with a sneer as he said the word 'gentlemen'.

"Very good, Mr Hobbs."

The two faces vanished from under the skylight, and the officers had hardly time to exchange despairing glances before the captain came striding up the ladder to them.

"A mutinous assembly, I believe," he said.

"No, sir," replied Buckland. Any word that was not a denial would be an admission of guilt, on a charge that could put a rope round his neck.

"Do you give me the lie on my own quarterdeck?" roared the captain. "I was right in suspecting my officers. Plotting. Whispering. Scheming. Planning. And now treating me with gross disrespect. I'll see that you regret this from this minute, Mr Buckland."

"I intended no disrespect, sir," protested Buckland.

"You give me the lie again to my face! And you others stand by and abet him! You keep him in countenance! I thought better of you, Mr Bush, until now."

Bush thought it wise to say nothing.

"Dumb insolence, eh?" said the captain. "Eager enough to talk when you think my eye isn't on you, all the same."

The captain glowered round the quarterdeck.

"And you, Mr Hornblower," he said. "You did not see fit to report this assembly to me. Officer of the watch, indeed! And of course Wellard is in it too. That is only to be expected. But I fancy you will be in trouble with these gentlemen now, Mr Wellard. You did not keep a sharp enough lookout for them. In fact you are in serious trouble now, Mr Wellard, without a friend in the ship except for the gunner's daughter, whom you will

be kissing again soon."

The captain stood towering on the quarterdeck with his gaze fixed on the unfortunate Wellard, who shrank visibly away from him. To kiss the gunner's daughter was to be bent over a gun and beaten.

"But later will still be sufficient time to deal with you, Mr Wellard. The lieutenants first, as their lofty rank dictates."

The captain looked round at the lieutenants, fear and triumph strangely alternating in his expression.

"Mr Hornblower is already on watch and watch," he said. "You others have enjoyed idleness in consequence, and Satan found mischief for your idle hands. Mr Buckland does not keep a watch. The high and mighty and aspiring first lieutenant."

"Sir —" began Buckland, and then bit off the words which were about to follow. That word 'aspiring' undoubtedly implied that he was scheming to gain command of the ship, but a court-martial would not read that meaning into it. Every officer was expected to be an aspiring officer and it would be no insult to say so.

"Sir!" jeered the captain. "Sir! So you have grace enough still to guard your tongue. Cunning, maybe. But you will not evade the consequences of your actions. Mr Hornblower can stay on watch and watch. But these two gentlemen can report to you when every watch is called, and at two bells, at four bells, and at six bells in every watch. They are to be properly dressed when they report to you, and you are to be properly awake. Is that understood?"

Not one of the dumbfounded trio could speak for a moment.

"Answer me!"

"Aye aye, sir," said Buckland.

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush and Roberts as the captain turned his eyes on them.

"Let there be no slackness in the execution of my orders," said the captain. "I shall have means of knowing if I am obeyed or not."

"Aye aye, sir," said Buckland.

The captain's sentence had condemned him, Bush and Roberts to be roused and awakened every hour, day and night.

Chapter IV

It was pitch dark down here, absolutely dark, not the tiniest glimmer of light at all. Out over the sea was the moonless night, and here it was three decks down, below the level of the sea's surface — through the oaken skin of the ship could be heard the rush of the water alongside, and the impact of the waves over which the ship rode; the fabric of the ship grumbled to itself with the alternating stresses of the pitch and the roll. Bush hung on to the steep ladder in the darkness and felt for foothold; finding it, he stepped off among the water barrels, and, crouching low, he began to make his way aft through the solid blackness. A rat squeaked and scurried past him, but rats were only to be expected down here in the hold, and Bush went on feeling his way aft unshaken. Out of the blackness before him, through the multitudinous murmurings of the ship, came a slight hiss, and Bush halted and hissed in reply. He was not self-conscious about these conspiratorial goings on. All precautions were necessary, for this was something very dangerous that he was doing.

"Bush!" whispered Buckland's voice.

"Yes."

"The others are here."

Ten minutes before, at two bells, in the middle watch Bush and Roberts had reported to Buckland in his cabin in obedience to the captain's order. A wink, a gesture, a whisper, and the appointment to meet here was made; it was an utterly fantastic state of affairs that the lieutenants of a King's ship should have to act in such a fashion for fear of spies and eavesdroppers, but it had been necessary. Then they had dispersed and by devious routes and different hatchways had made their way here. Hornblower, relieved by Smith on watch, had preceded them.

"We mustn't be here long," whispered Roberts.

Even by his whisper, even in the dark, one could guess at his nervousness. There could be no doubt about this being a mutinous assembly. They could all hang for what they were doing.

"Suppose we declare him unfit for command?" whispered Buckland. "Suppose we put him in irons?"

"We'd have to do it quick and sharp if we do it at all," whispered Hornblower. "He'll call on the hands and they might follow him. And then —"

There was no need for Hornblower to go on with that speech. Everyone who heard it formed a mental picture of corpses swaying at the yard-arms.

"Supposing we do it quick and sharp?" agreed Buckland. "Supposing we get him into irons?"

"Then we go on to Antigua," said Roberts.

"And a court-martial," said Bush, thinking as far ahead as that for the first time in this present crisis.

"Yes," whispered Buckland.

Into that flat monosyllable were packed various moods — inquiry and despair, desperation and doubt.

"That's the point," whispered Hornblower. "He'll give evidence. It'll sound different in court. We've been punished — watch and watch, no liquor. That could happen to anybody. It's not grounds for mutiny."

"But he's spoiling the hands."

"Double rum. Make and mend. It'll sound quite natural in court. It's not for us to criticise the captain's methods — so the court will think."

"But they'll see him."

"He's cunning. And he's no raving lunatic. He can talk — he can find reasons for everything. You've heard him. He'll be plausible."

"But he's held us up to contempt before the hands. He's set Hobbs to spy on us."

"That'll be a proof of how desperate his situation was, surrounded by us criminals. If we arrest him we're guilty until we've proved ourselves innocent. Any court's bound to be on the captain's side. Mutiny means hanging." Hornblower was putting into words all the doubts that Bush felt in his bones and yet had been unable to express.

"That's right," whispered Bush.

"What about Wellard?" whispered Roberts. "Did you hear him scream the last time?"

"He's only a volunteer. Not even a midshipman. No friends. No family. What's the court going to say when they hear the captain had a boy beaten half a dozen times? They'll laugh. So would we if we didn't know. Do him good, we'd say, the same as it did the rest of us good."

A silence followed this statement of the obvious, broken in the end by Buckland whispering a succession of filthy oaths that could give small vent to his despair.

"He'll bring charges against us," whispered Roberts. "The minute we're in company with other ships. I know he will."

"Twenty-two years I've held my commission," said Buckland. "Now he'll break me. He'll break you as well."

There would be no chance at all for officers charged before a court-martial by their captain with behaving with contempt towards him in a manner subversive of discipline. Every single one of them knew that. It gave an edge to their despair. Charges pressed by the captain with the insane venom and cunning he had displayed up to now might not even end in dismissal from the service — they might lead to prison and the rope.

"Ten more days before we make Antigua," said Roberts. "If this wind holds fair — and it will."

"But we don't know we're destined for Antigua," said Hornblower. "That's only our guess. It might be weeks — it might be months."

"God help us!" said Buckland.

A slight clatter farther aft along the hold — a noise different from the noises of the working of the ship — made them all start. Bush clenched his hairy fists. But they were reassured by a voice calling softly to them.

"Mr Buckland — Mr Hornblower — sir!"

"Wellard, by God!" said Roberts.

They could hear Wellard scrambling towards them.

"The captain, sir!" said Wellard. "He's coming!"

"Holy God!"

"Which way?" snapped Hornblower.

"By the steerage hatchway. I got to the cockpit and came down from here. He was sending Hobbs —"
"Get for'ard, you three," said Hornblower, cutting into the explanation. "Get for'ard and scatter when you're on deck. Quick!"

Nobody stopped to think that Hornblower was giving orders to officers immensely his senior. Every instant of time was of vital importance, and not to be wasted in indecision or in silly blasphemy. That was apparent as soon as he spoke. Bush turned with the others and plunged forward in the darkness, barking his shins painfully as he fell over unseen obstructions. Bush heard Hornblower say, "Come along, Wellard," as he parted from them in his mad flight with the others beside him.

The cable tier — the ladder — and then the extraordinary safety of the lower gundeck. After the utter blackness of the hold there was enough light here for him to see fairly distinctly. Buckland and Roberts continued to ascend to the maindeck; Bush turned to make his way aft. The watch below had been in their hammocks long enough to be sound asleep; here to the noises of the ship was added the blended snoring of the sleepers as the close-hung rows of hammocks swayed with the motion of the ship in such a coincidence of timing as to appear like solid masses. Far down between the rows a light was approaching. It was a horn lantern with a lighted purser's dip inside it, and Hobbs, the acting-gunner, was carrying it, and two seamen were following him as he hurried along. There was an exchange of glances as Bush met the party. A momentary hesitation on Hobbs' part betrayed the fact that he would have greatly liked to ask Bush what he was doing on the lower gundeck, but that was something no acting-warrant officer, even with the captain's favour behind him, could ask of a lieutenant. And there was annoyance in Hobbs' expression, too; obviously he was hurrying to secure all the exits from the hold, and was exasperated that Bush had escaped him. The seamen wore expressions of simple bewilderment at these goings on in the middle watch. Hobbs stood aside to let his superior pass, and Bush strode past him with no more than that one glance. It was extraordinary how much more confident he felt now that he was safely out of the hold and disassociated from any mutinous assembly. He decided to head for his cabin; it would not be long before four bells, when by the captain's orders he had to report again to Buckland. The messenger sent by the officer of the watch to rouse him would find him lying on his cot. But as Bush went on and had progressed as far as the mainmast he arrived in the midst of a scene of bustle which he would most certainly have taken notice of if he had been innocent and which consequently he must (so he told himself) ask about now that he had seen it — he could not possibly walk by without a question or two. This was where the marines were berthed, and they were all of them out of their hammocks hastily equipping themselves — those who had their shirts and trousers on were putting on their crossbelts ready for action.

"What's all this?" demanded Bush, trying to make his voice sound as it would have sounded if he had no knowledge of anything irregular happening in the ship except this.

"Dunno, sir," said the private he addressed. "We was just told to turn out — muskets an' side arms and ball cartridge, sir."

A sergeant of marines looked out through the screen which divided the non-commissioned officers' bay from the rest of the deck.

"Captain's orders, sir," he said; and then with a roar at the men, "Come on! Slap it about, there!"

"Where's the captain, then?" asked Bush with all the innocence he could muster.

"Aft some'eres, sir. 'E sent for the corpril's guard same time as we was told to turn out."

Four marine privates and a corporal supplied the sentry who stood day and night outside the captain's cabin. A single order was all that was needed to turn out the guard and provide the captain with at least a nucleus of armed and disciplined men ready for action.

"Very well, sergeant," said Bush, and he tried to look puzzled and to hurry naturally aft to find out what was going on. But he knew what fear was. He felt he would do anything rather than continue this walk to encounter whatever was awaiting him at the end of it. Whiting, the captain of marines, made his appearance, sleepy and unshaven, belting on his sword over his shirt.

"What in hell?" he began as he saw Bush.

"Don't ask me!" said Bush, striving after that natural appearance. So tense and desperate was he at that moment that his normally quiescent imagination was hard at work. He could imagine the prosecutor in the deceptive calm of a court-martial saying to Whiting, "Did Mr Bush appear to be his usual self?" and it was

frightfully necessary that Whiting should be able to answer, "Yes." Bush could even imagine the hairy touch of a rope round his neck. But next moment there was no more need for him to simulate surprise or ignorance. His reactions were genuine.

"Pass the word for the doctor," came the cry. "Pass the word, there."

And here came Wellard, white-faced, hurrying.

"Pass the word for the doctor. Call Dr Clive."

"Who's hurt, Wellard?" asked Bush.

"The c-captain, sir."

Wellard looked distraught and shaken, but now Hornblower made his appearance behind him. Hornblower was pale, too, and breathing hard, but he seemed to have command of himself. The glance which he threw round him in the dim light of the lanterns passed over Bush without apparent recognition.

"Get Dr Clive!" he snapped at one midshipman peering out from the midshipmen's berth; and then to another,

"You there. Run for the first lieutenant. Ask him to come below here. Run!"

Hornblower's glance took in Whiting and travelled forward to where the marines were snatching their muskets from the racks.

"Why are your men turning out, Captain Whiting?"

"Captain's orders."

"Then you can form them up. But I do not believe there is any emergency."

Only then did Hornblower's glance comprehend Bush.

"Oh, Mr Bush. Will you take charge, sir, now that you're here? I've sent for the first lieutenant. The captain's hurt — badly hurt, I'm afraid, sir."

"But what's happened?" asked Bush.

"The captain's fallen down the hatchway, sir," said Hornblower.

In the dim light Hornblower's eyes stared straight into Bush's, but Bush could read no message in them. This after part of the lower gundeck was crowded now, and Hornblower's definite statement, the first that had been made, raised a buzz of excitement. It was the sort of undisciplined noise that most easily roused Bush's wrath, and, perhaps fortunately, it brought a natural reaction from him.

"Silence, there!" he roared. "Get about your business."

When Bush glowered round at the excited crowd it fell silent.

"With your permission I'll go below again, sir," said Hornblower. "I must see after the captain."

"Very well, Mr Hornblower," said Bush; the stereotyped phrase had been uttered so often before that it escaped sounding stilted.

"Come with me, Mr Wellard," said Hornblower, and turned away.

Several new arrivals made their appearance as he did so — Buckland, his face white and strained, Roberts at his shoulder, Clive in his shirt and trousers walking sleepily from his cabin. All of them started a little at the sight of the marines forming line on the cumbered deck, their musket barrels glinting in the feeble light of the lanterns.

"Would you come at once, sir?" asked Hornblower, turning back at sight of Buckland.

"I'll come," said Buckland.

"What in the name of God is going on?" asked Clive.

"The captain's hurt," said Hornblower curtly. "Come at once. You'll need a light."

"The captain?" Clive blinked himself wider awake. "Where is he? Give me that lantern, you. Where are my mates? You there, run and rouse my mates. They sling their hammocks in the sick bay."

So it was a procession of half a dozen that carried their lanterns down the ladder — the four lieutenants, Clive and Wellard. While waiting at the head of the ladder Bush stole a side glance at Buckland; his face was working with anxiety. He would infinitely rather have been walking a shot-torn deck with grape flying round him. He rolled an inquiring eye at Bush, but with Clive within earshot Bush dared say no word — he knew no more than Buckland did, for that matter. There was no knowing what was awaiting them at the foot of the ladder — arrest, ruin, disgrace, perhaps death.

The faint light of a lantern revealed the scarlet tunic and white crossbelts of a marine, standing by the hatchway. He wore the chevrons of a corporal.

"Anything to report?" demanded Hornblower.

"No, sir. Nothink, sir."

"Captains down there unconscious. There are two marines guarding him," said Hornblower to Clive, pointing down the hatchway, and Clive swung his bulk painfully on to the ladder and descended.

"Now, corporal," said Hornblower, "tell the first lieutenant all you know about this."

The corporal stood stiffly to attention. With no fewer than four lieutenants eyeing him he was nervous, and he probably had a gloomy feeling based on his experience of the service that when there was trouble among the higher ranks it was likely to go ill with a mere corporal who was unfortunate enough to be involved, however innocently. He stood rigid, trying not to meet anybody's eye.

"Speak up, man," said Buckland, testily. He was nervous as well, but that was understandable in a first lieutenant whose captain had just met with a serious accident.

"I was corporal of the guard, sir. At two bells I relieved the sentry at the captain's door."

"Yes?"

"An.' — an' — then I went to sleep again."

"Damn it," said Roberts. "Make your report."

"I was woke up, sir," went on the corporal, "by one of the gentlemen. Gunner, I think 'e is."

"Mr Hobbs?"

"That may be 'is name, sir. 'E said, 'Cap'n's orders, and guard turn out.' So I turns out the guard, sir, an' there's the cap'n with Wade, the sentry I'd posted. 'E 'ad pistols in 'is 'ands, sir."

"Who — Wade?"

"No, sir, the cap'n, sir."

"What was his manner like?" demanded Hornblower.

"Well, sir —" The corporal did not want to offer any criticism of a captain, not even to a lieutenant.

"Belay that, then. Carry on."

"Cap'n says, sir, 'e says 'e says, sir, 'Follow me'; an' then 'e says to the gennelman, 'e says, 'Do your duty, Mr Hobbs.' So Mr Hobbs, 'e goes one way, sir, and we comes with the captain down 'ere, sir. 'There's mutiny brewing,' says the cap'n, 'black bloody mutiny. We've got to catch the mutineers. Catch 'em red-'anded,' says the cap'n."

The surgeon's head appeared in the hatchway.

"Give me another of those lanterns," he said.

"How's the captain?" demanded Buckland.

"Concussion and some fractures, I would say."

"Badly hurt?"

"No knowing yet. Where are my mates? Ah, there you are, Coleman. Splints and bandages, man, as quick as you can get 'em. And a carrying-plank and a canvas and lines. Run, man! You, Pierce, come on down and help me."

So the two surgeon's mates had hardly made their appearance than they were hurried away.

"Carry on, corporal," said Buckland.

"I dunno what I said, sir."

"The captain brought you down here."

"Yessir. 'E 'ad 'is pistols in 'is 'ands, sir, like I said, sir. 'E sent one file for'ard. 'Stop every bolt'ole,' 'e says; an' 'e says, 'You, corporal, take these two men down an' search.' 'E — 'e was yellin', like. 'E 'ad 'is pistols in 'is 'ands.' The corporal looked anxiously at Buckland as he spoke.

"That's all right, corporal," said Buckland. "Just tell the truth."

The knowledge that the captain was unconscious and perhaps badly hurt had reassured him, just as it had reassured Bush.

"So I took the other file down the ladder, sir," said the corporal. "I went first with the lantern, seein' as 'ow I didn't 'ave no musket with me. We got down to the foot of the ladder in among those cases down there, sir. The cap'n, 'e was yellin' down the hatchway. 'Urry,' he says. 'Urry. Don't let 'em escape. 'Urry.' So we started climbin' for'ard over the stores, sir."

The corporal hesitated as he approached the climax of his story. He might possibly have been seeking a crude

dramatic effect, but more likely he was still afraid of being entangled in circumstances that might damage him despite his innocence.

"What happened then?" demanded Buckland.

"Well, sir —"

Coleman reappeared at this moment, encumbered with various gear, including a light six-foot plank he had been carrying on his shoulder. He looked to Buckland for permission to carry on, received a nod, laid the plank on the deck along with the canvas and lines, and disappeared with the rest down the ladder.

"Well?" said Buckland to the corporal.

"I dunno what 'appened, sir."

"Tell us what you know."

"I 'eard a yell, sir. An' a crash. I 'adn't 'ardly gone ten yards, sir. So I came back with the lantern."

"What did you find?"

"It was the cap'n, sir. Layin' there at the foot of the ladder. Like 'e was dead, sir. 'E'd fallen down the 'archway, sir."

"What did you do?"

"I tried to turn 'im over, sir. 'Is face was all bloody-like. 'E was stunned, sir. I thought 'e might be dead but I could feel 'is 'eart."

"Yes?"

"I didn't know what I ought to do, sir. I didn't know nothink about this 'ere meeting, sir."

"But what *did* you do, in the end?"

"I left my two men with the cap'n, sir, an' I come up to give the alarm. I didn't know who to trust, sir."

There was irony in this situation — the corporal frightened lest he should be taken to task about a petty question as to whether he should have sent a messenger or come himself, while the four lieutenants eyeing him were in danger of hanging.

"Well?"

"I saw Mr Hornblower, sir." The relief in the corporal's voice echoed the relief he must have felt at finding someone to take over his enormous responsibility. "'E was with young Mr Wellard, I think 'is name is. Mr Hornblower, 'e told me to stand guard 'ere, sir, after I told 'im about the cap'n."

"It sounds as if you did right, corporal," said Buckland, judicially.

"Thank 'ee, sir. Thank 'ee, sir."

Coleman came climbing up the ladder, and with another glance at Buckland for permission passed the gear he had left down to someone else under the hatchway. Then he descended again. Bush was looking at the corporal, who, now his tale was told, was self-consciously awkward again under the concentrated gaze of four lieutenants.

"Now, corporal," said Hornblower, speaking unexpectedly and with deliberation. "You have no idea how the captain came to fall down the hatchway?"

"No, sir. Indeed I haven't, sir."

Hornblower shot one single glance at his colleagues, one and no more. The corporal's words and Hornblower's glance were vastly reassuring.

"He was excited, you say? Come on, man, speak up."

"Well, yessir." The corporal remembered his earlier unguarded statement, and then in a sudden flood of loquacity he went on: "'E was yellin' after us down the hatchway, sir. I expect 'e was leanin' over. 'E must 'ave been leanin' when the ship pitched, sir. 'E could catch 'is foot on the coamin' and fall 'ead first, sir."

"That's what must have happened," said Hornblower.

Clive came climbing up the ladder and stepped stiffly over the coaming.

"I'm going to sway him up now," he said. He looked at the four lieutenants and then put his hand in the bosom of his shirt and took out a pistol. "This was lying at the captain's side."

"I'll take charge of that," said Buckland.

"There ought to be another one down there, judging by what we've just heard," said Roberts, speaking for the first time. He spoke overloudly, too; excitement had worked on him, and his manner might appear suspicious to anyone with anything to suspect. Bush felt a twinge of annoyance and fear.

"I'll have 'em look for it after we've got the captain up," said Clive. He leaned over the hatchway and called down, "Come on up."

Coleman appeared first, climbing the ladder with a pair of lines in his hand, and after him a marine, clinging awkwardly to the ladder with one arm while the other supported a burden below him.

"Handsomely, handsomely, now," said Clive.

Coleman and the marine, emerging, drew the end of the plank up after them; swathed mummy-like in the canvas and bound to the plank was the body of the captain. That was the best way in which to mount ladders carrying a man with broken bones. Pierce, the other surgeon's mate, came climbing up next, holding the foot of the plank steady. The lieutenants clustered round to give a hand as the plank was hoisted over the coaming. In the light of the lanterns Bush could see the captain's face above the canvas. It was still and expressionless, what there was to be seen of it, for a white bandage concealed one eye and the nose. One temple was still stained with the traces of blood which the doctor had not entirely wiped away.

"Take him to his cabin," said Buckland.

That was the definitive order. This was an important moment. The captain being incapacitated, it was the first lieutenant's duty to take command, and those five words indicated that he had done so. In command, he could even give orders for dealing with the captain. But although this was a momentous step, it was one of routine; Buckland had assumed temporary command of the ship, during the captain's absences, a score of times before. Routine had carried him through this present crisis; the habits of thirty years of service in the navy, as midshipman and lieutenant, had enabled him to carry himself with his usual bearing towards his juniors, to act normally even though he did not know what dreadful fate awaited him at any moment in the immediate future.

And yet Bush, turning his eyes on him now that he had assumed command, was not too sure about the permanence of the effect of habit. Buckland was clearly a little shaken. That might be attributed to the natural reaction of an officer with responsibility thrust upon him in such startling circumstances. So an unsuspecting person — someone without knowledge of the hidden facts — might conclude. But Bush, with fear in his heart, wondering and despairing about what the captain would do when he recovered consciousness, could see that Buckland shared his fear. Chains — a court-martial — the hangman's rope; thoughts of these were unmaning Buckland. And the lives, certainly the whole futures, of the officers in the ship might depend on Buckland's actions.

"Pardon, sir," said Hornblower.

"Yes?" said Buckland; and then with an effort, "Yes, Mr Hornblower?"

"Might I take the corporal's statement in writing now, while the facts are clear in his memory?"

"Very good. Mr Hornblower "

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower. There was nothing to be read in his expression at all, nothing except a respectful attention to duty. He turned to the corporal. "Report to me in my berth after you have re-posted the sentry."

The doctor and his party had already carried the captain away. Buckland was making no effort to move from the spot. It was as if he was paralysed.

"There's the matter of the captain's other pistol, sir," said Hornblower, respectfully as ever.

"Oh yes." Buckland looked round him.

"Here's Wellard, sir."

"Oh yes. He'll do."

"Mr Wellard," said Hornblower, "go down with a lantern and see if you can find the other pistol. Bring it to the first lieutenant on the quarterdeck."

"Aye aye, sir."

Wellard had recovered from most of his agitation; he had not taken his eyes from Hornblower for some time. Now he picked up the lantern and went down the ladder with it. What Hornblower had said about the quarterdeck penetrated into Buckland's mind, and he began to move off with the others following him. On the lower gundeck Captain Whiting saluted him.

"Any orders, sir?"

No doubt the word that the captain was incapacitated and that Buckland was in command had sped through

the ship like wildfire. It took Buckland's numbed brain a second or two to function.

"No, captain," he said at length; and then, "Dismiss your men."

When they reached the quarterdeck the trade wind was still blowing briskly from over the starboard quarter, and the *Renown* was soaring along over the magic sea. Over their heads the great pyramids of sails were reaching up — up — up towards the uncounted stars; with the easy motion of the ship the mastheads were sweeping out great circles against the sky. On the port quarter a half-moon had just lifted itself out of the sea and hung, miraculously, above the horizon, sending a long glittering trail of silver towards the ship. The dark figures of the men on deck stood out plainly against the whitened planks.

Smith was officer of the watch. He came eagerly up to them as they came up the companionway. For the last hour and more he had been pacing about in a fever, hearing the noise and bustle down below, hearing the rumours which had coursed through the ship, and yet unable to leave his post to find out what was really going on.

"What's happened, sir?" he asked.

Smith had not been in the secret of the meeting of the other lieutenants. He had been less victimised by the captain, too. But he could not help being aware of the prevailing discontent; he must know that the captain was insane. Yet Buckland was not prepared for this question. He had not thought about it and had no particular reply. In the end it was Hornblower who answered.

"The captain fell down the hold," he said; his tone was even and with no particular stress. "They've just carried him to his cabin unconscious."

"But how in God's name did he come to fall down the hold?" asked the bewildered Smith.

"He was looking for mutineers," said Hornblower, in that same even tone.

"I see," said Smith. "But —"

There he checked himself. That even tone of Hornblower's had warned him that this was a delicate subject; if he pursued it the question of the captain's sanity would arise, and he would be committed to an opinion on it. He did not want to ask any more questions in that case.

"Six bells, sir," reported the quartermaster to him.

"Very good," said Smith, automatically.

"I must take the marine corporal's deposition, sir," said Hornblower. "I come on watch at eight bells."

If Buckland were in command he could put an end to the ridiculous order that Hornblower should stand watch and watch, and that Bush and Roberts should report to him hourly. There was a moment's awkward pause. No one knew how long; the captain would remain unconscious nor in what condition he would regain consciousness. Wellard came running up to the quarterdeck.

"Here's the other pistol, sir," he said, handing it to Buckland, who took it, at the same time drawing its fellow from his pocket; he stood rather helplessly with them in his hands.

"Shall I relieve you of those, sir?" asked Hornblower, taking them. "And Wellard might be of help to me with the marine's deposition. Can I take him with me, sir?"

"Yes," said Buckland.

Hornblower turned to go below, followed by Wellard.

"Oh, Mr Hornblower " said Buckland.

"Sir?"

"Nothing," said Buckland, the inflection in his voice revealing the indecision under which he laboured.

"Pardon, sir, but I should take some rest if I were you," said Hornblower, standing at the head of the companionway. "You've had a tiring night."

Bush was in agreement with Hornblower; not that he cared at all whether Buckland had had a tiring night or not, but because if Buckland were to retire to his cabin there would be no chance of his betraying himself — and his associates — by an unguarded speech. Then it dawned upon Bush that this was just what Hornblower had in mind. And at the same time he was aware of regret at Hornblower's leaving them, and knew that Buckland felt the same regret. Hornblower was levelheaded, thinking fast whatever danger menaced him. It was his example which had given a natural appearance to the behaviour of all of them since the alarm down below. Perhaps Hornblower had a secret unshared with them; perhaps he knew more than they did about how the captain came to fall down the hold — Bush was puzzled and anxious about that — but if such was the case

Hornblower had given no sign of it.

"When in God's name is that damned doctor going to report?" said Buckland, to no one in particular.

"Why don't you turn in, sir, until he does?" said Bush.

"I will." Buckland hesitated before he went on speaking. "You gentlemen had best continue to report to me every hour as the captain ordered."

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush and Roberts.

That meant, as Bush realised, that Buckland would take no chances; the captain must hear, when he should recover consciousness, that his orders had been carried out. Bush was anxious — desperate — as he went below to try to snatch half an hour's rest before he would next have to report. He could not hope to sleep. Through the slight partition that divided his cabin from the next he could hear a drone of voices as Hornblower took down the marine corporal's statement in writing.

Chapter V

Breakfast was being served in the wardroom. It was a more silent and less cheerful meal even than breakfast there usually was. The master, the purser, the captain of marines, had said their conventional 'good mornings' and had sat down to eat without further conversation. They had heard — as had everyone in the ship — that the captain was recovering consciousness.

Through the scuttles in the side of the ship came two long shafts of sunlight, illuminating the crowded little place, and swinging back and forward across the wardroom with the easy motion of the ship; the fresh, delightful air of the northeast trades came in through the hooked-open door. The coffee was hot; the biscuit, only three weeks on board, could not have been more than a month or two in store before that, because it had hardly any weevils in it. The wardroom cook had intelligently taken advantage of the good weather to fry the remains of last night's salt pork with some of the ship's dwindling store of onions. A breakfast of fried slivers of salt pork with onions, hot coffee and good biscuit, fresh air and sunshine and fair weather; the wardroom should have been a cheerful place. Instead there was brooding anxiety, apprehension, tense uneasiness. Bush looked across the table at Hornblower, drawn and pale and weary; there were many things Bush wanted to say to him but they had to remain unsaid, at least at present, while the shadow of the captain's madness darkened the sunlit ship.

Buckland came walking into the wardroom with the surgeon following him, and everyone looked up questioningly — practically everyone stood up to hear the news.

"He's conscious," said Buckland, and looked round at Clive for him to elaborate on that statement.

"Weak," said Clive.

Bush looked round at Hornblower, hoping that he would ask the questions that Bush wanted asked.

Hornblower's face was set in a mask without expression. His glance was fixed penetratingly on Clive, but he did not open his mouth. It was Lomax, the purser, who asked the question in the end.

"Is he sensible?"

"Well —" said Clive, glancing sidelong at Buckland. Clearly the last thing Clive wanted to do was to commit himself definitely regarding the captain's sanity. "He's too weak at present to be sensible."

Lomax, fortunately, was inquisitive enough and bullheaded enough not to be deterred by Clive's reluctance.

"What about this concussion?" he asked. "What's it done to him?"

"The skull is intact," said Clive. "There are extensive scalp lacerations. The nose is broken. The clavicle — that's the collar-bone — and a couple of ribs. He must have fallen headfirst down the hatchway, as might be expected if he tripped over the roaming."

"But how on earth did he come to do that?" asked Lomax.

"He has not said," answered Clive. "I think he does not remember."

"What?"

"That is a usual state of affairs," said Clive. "One might almost call it symptomatic. After a severe concussion the patient usually displays a lapse of memory, extending back to many hours before the injury."

Bush stole a glance at Hornblower again. His face was still expressionless, and Bush tried to follow his example, both in betraying no emotion and in leaving the questioning to others. And yet this was great, glorious, magnificent news which could not be too much elaborated on for Bush's taste.

"Where does he think he is?" went on Lomax.

"Oh, he knows he's in this ship," said Clive, cautiously.

Now Buckland turned upon Clive; Buckland was hollow-cheeked, unshaven, weary, but he had seen the captain in his berth, and he was in consequence a little more ready to force the issue.

"In your opinion is the captain fit for duty?" he demanded.

"Well —" said Clive again.

"Well?"

"Temporarily, perhaps not."

That was an unsatisfactory answer, but Buckland seemed to have exhausted all his resolution in extracting it. Hornblower raised a mask-like face and stared straight at Clive.

"You mean he is incapable at present of commanding this ship?"

The other officers murmured their concurrence in this demand for a quite definite statement, and Clive, looking round at the determined faces, had to yield.

"At present, yes."

"Then we all know where we stand," said Lomax, and there was satisfaction in his voice which was echoed by everyone in the wardroom except Clive and Buckland.

To deprive a captain of his command was a business of terrible, desperate importance. King and Parliament had combined to give Captain Sawyer command of the *Renown*, and to reverse their appointment savoured of treason, and anyone even remotely connected with the transaction might be tainted for the rest of his life with the unsavoury odour of insubordination and rebellion. Even the most junior master's mate in later years applying for some new appointment might be remembered as having been in the *Renown* when Sawyer was removed from his command and might have his application refused in consequence. It was necessary that there should be the appearance of the utmost legality in an affair which, under the strictest interpretation, could never be entirely legal.

"I have here Corporal Greenwood's statement, sir," said Hornblower, "signed with his mark and attested by Mr Wellard and myself."

"Thank you," said Buckland, taking the paper; there was some slight hesitation in Buckland's gesture, as though the document were a firecracker likely to go off unexpectedly. But only Bush, who was looking for it, could have noticed the hesitation. It was only a few hours since Buckland had been a fugitive in peril of his life, creeping through the bowels of the ship trying to avoid detection, and the names of Wellard and Greenwood, reminding him of this, were a shock to his ears. And like a demon conjured up by the saying of his name, Wellard appeared at that moment at the wardroom door.

"Mr Roberts sent me down to ask for orders, sir," he said.

Roberts had the watch and must be fretting with worry about what was going on below decks. Buckland stood in indecision.

"Both watches are on deck, sir," said Hornblower, deferentially.

Buckland looked an inquiry at him.

"You could tell this news to the hands, sir," went on Hornblower.

He was making a suggestion, unasked, to his superior officer, and so courting a snub. But his manner indicated the deepest respect, and nothing besides but eagerness to save his superior all possible trouble.

"Thank you," said Buckland.

Anyone could read in his face the struggle that was going on within him; he was still shrinking from committing himself too deeply — as if he was not already committed! — and he was shrinking from the prospect of making a speech to the assembled hands, even while he realised the necessity of doing so. And the necessity grew greater the more he thought about it — rumours must be flying about the lower deck, where the crew, already unsettled by the captain's behaviour, must be growing more restive still in the prevailing uncertainty. A hard, definite statement must be made to them; it was vitally necessary. Yet the greater the necessity the greater the responsibility that Buckland bore, and he wavered obviously between these two frightening forces.

"All hands, sir?" prompted Hornblower, very softly.

"Yes," said Buckland, desperately taking the plunge.

"Very well, Mr Wellard," said Hornblower.

Bush caught the look that Hornblower threw to Wellard with the words. There was a significance in it which might be interpreted as of a nature only to be expected when one junior officer was telling another to do something quickly before a senior could change his mind — that was how an uninitiated person would naturally interpret it — but to Bush, clairvoyant with fatigue and worry, there was some other significance in that glance. Wellard was pale and weak with fatigue and worry too; he was being reassured. Possibly he was being told that a secret was still safe.

"Aye aye, sir," said Wellard, and departed.

The pipes twittered through the ship.

"All hands! All hands!" roared the bosun's mates. "All hands fall in abaft the mainmast! All hands!"

Buckland went nervously up on deck, but he acquitted himself well enough at the moment of trial. In a harsh, expressionless voice he told the assembled hands that the accident to the captain, which they all must have heard about, had rendered him incapable at present of continuing in command.

"But we'll all go on doing our duty," said Buckland, staring down at the level plain of upturned faces.

Bush, looking with him, picked out the grey head and paunchy figure of Hobbs, the acting-gunner, the captain's toady and informer. Things would be different for Mr Hobbs in future — at least as long as the captain's disability endured. That was the point: as long as the captain's disability endured. Bush looked down at Hobbs and wondered how much he knew, how much he guessed — how much he would swear to at a court-martial. He tried to read the future in the fat old man's face, but his clairvoyance failed him. He could guess nothing.

When the hands were dismissed there was a moment of bustle and confusion, as the watches resumed their duties and the idlers streamed off below. It was there, in the noise and confusion of a crowd, that momentary privacy and freedom from observation could best be found. Bush intercepted Hornblower by the mizzenmast bitts and could ask the question that he had been wanting to ask for hours; the question on which so much depended.

"How did it happen?" asked Bush.

The bosun's mates were bellowing orders; the hands were scurrying hither and thither; all round the two of them was orderly confusion, a mass of people intent on their own business, while they stood face to face, isolated, with the beneficent sunshine streaming down on them, lighting up the set face which Hornblower turned towards his questioner.

"How did *what* happen, Mr Bush?" said Hornblower.

"How did the captain fall down the hatchway?"

As soon as he had said the words Bush glanced back over his shoulder in sudden fright lest he should have been overheard. These might be hanging words. When he looked back Hornblower's face was quite expressionless.

"I think he must have overbalanced," he said, evenly, looking straight into Bush's eyes; and then he went on,

"If you will excuse me, sir, I have some duties to attend to."

Later in the day every wardroom officer was introduced in turn to the captain's cabin to see with his own eyes what sort of wreck lay there. Bush saw only a feeble invalid, lying in the half-light of the cabin, his face almost covered with bandages, the fingers of one hand moving minutely, the other hand concealed in a sling.

"He's under an opiate," explained Clive in the wardroom. "I had to administer a heavy dose to enable me to try and set the fractured nose."

"I expect it was spread all over his face," said Lomax brutally. "It was big enough."

"The fracture was very extensive and comminuted," agreed Clive.

There were screams the next morning from the captain's cabin, screams of terror as well as of pain, and Clive and his mates emerged eventually sweating and worried. Clive went instantly to report confidentially to Buckland, but everyone in the ship had heard those screams or had been told about them by men who had; the surgeon's mates, questioned eagerly in the gunroom by the other warrant officers, could not maintain the monumental discretion that Clive aimed at in the wardroom. The wretched invalid was undoubtedly insane; he

had fallen into a paroxysm of terror when they had attempted to examine the fractured nose, flinging himself about with a madman's strength so that, fearing damage to the other broken bones, they had had to swathe him in canvas as in a strait-jacket, leaving only his left arm out. Laudanum and an extensive bleeding had reduced him to insensibility in the end, but later in the day when Bush saw him he was conscious again, a weeping, pitiful object, shrinking in fear from every face that he saw, persecuted by shadows, sobbing — it was a dreadful thing to see that burly man sobbing like a child — over his troubles, and trying to hide his face from a world which to his tortured mind held no friendship at all and only grim enmity.

"It frequently happens," said Clive pontifically — the longer the captain's illness lasted the more freely he would discuss it — "that an injury, a fall, or a burn, or a fracture, will completely unbalance a mind that previously was a little unstable."

"A little unstable!" said Lomax. "Did he turn out the marines in the middle watch to hunt for mutineers in the hold? Ask Mr Hornblower here, ask Mr Bush, if they thought he was a little unstable. He had Hornblower doing watch and watch, and Bush and Roberts and Buckland himself out of bed every hour day and night. He was as mad as a hatter even then."

It was extraordinary how freely tongues wagged now in the ship, now that there was no fear of reports being made to the captain.

"At least we can make seamen out of the crew now," said Carberry, the master, with a satisfaction in his voice that was echoed round the wardroom. Sail drill and gun drill, tautened discipline and hard work, were pulling together a crew that had fast been disintegrating. It was what Buckland obviously delighted in, what he had been itching to do from the moment they had left the Eddystone behind, and exercising the crew helped to lift his mind out of the other troubles that beset it.

For now there was a new responsibility, that all the wardroom discussed freely in Buckland's absence — Buckland was already fenced in by the solitude that surrounds the captain of a ship of war. This was Buckland's sole responsibility, and the wardroom could watch Buckland wrestling with it, as they would watch a prizefighter in the ring; there even were bets laid on the result, as to whether or not Buckland would take the final plunge, whether or not he would take the ultimate step that would proclaim himself as in command of the *Renown* and the captain as incurable.

Locked in the captain's desk were the captain's papers, and among those papers were the secret orders addressed to him by the Lords of the Admiralty. No other eyes than the captain's had seen those orders as yet; not a soul in the ship could make any guess at their contents. They might be merely routine orders, directing the *Renown* perhaps to join Admiral Bickerton's squadron; but also they might reveal some diplomatic secret of the kind that no mere lieutenant could be entrusted with. On the one hand Buckland could continue to head for Antigua, and there he could turn over his responsibilities to whoever was the senior officer. There might be some junior captain who could be transferred to the *Renown*, to read the orders and carry off the ship on whatever mission was allotted her. On the other hand Buckland could read the orders now; they might deal with some matter of the greatest urgency. Antigua was a convenient landfall for ships to make from England, but from a military point of view it was not so desirable, being considerably to leeward of most of the points of strategic importance.

If Buckland took the ship down to Antigua and then she had to beat back to windward he might be sharply rapped on the knuckles by My Lords of the Admiralty; yet if he read the secret orders on that account he might be reprimanded for his presumption. The wardroom could guess at his predicament and each individual officer could congratulate himself upon not being personally involved while wondering what Buckland would do about it.

Bush and Hornblower stood side by side on the poop, feet wide apart on the heaving deck, as they steadied themselves and looked through their sextants at the horizon. Through the darkened glass Bush could see the image of the sun reflected from the mirror. With infinite pains he moved the arm round, bringing the image down closer and closer to the horizon. The pitch of the ship over the long blue rollers troubled him, but he persevered, decided in the end that the image of the sun was just sitting on the horizon, and clamped the sextant. Then he could read and record the measurement. As a concession to newfangled prejudices, he decided to follow Hornblower's example and observe the altitude also from the opposite point of the horizon. He swung round and did so, and as he recorded this reading he tried to remember what he had to do about

half the difference between the two readings. And the index error, and the 'dip'. He looked round to find that Hornblower had already finished his observation and was standing waiting for him.

"That's the greatest altitude I've ever measured," remarked Hornblower. "I've never been as far south as this before. What's your result?"

They compared readings.

"That's accurate enough," said Hornblower. "What's the difficulty?"

"Oh, I can shoot the sun," said Bush. "No trouble about that. It's the calculations that bother me — those damned corrections."

Hornblower raised an eyebrow for a moment. He was accustomed to taking his own observations each noon and making his own calculations of the ship's position, in order to keep himself in practice. He was aware of the mechanical difficulty of taking an accurate observation in a moving ship, but — although he knew plenty of other instances he still could not believe that any man could really find the subsequent mathematics difficult. They were so simple to him that when Bush had asked him if he could join him in their noontime exercise for the sake of improving himself he had taken it for granted that it was only the mechanics of using a sextant that troubled Bush. But he politely concealed his surprise.

"They're easy enough," he said, and then he added "sir." A wise officer, too, did not make too much display of his superior ability when speaking to his senior. He phrased his next speech carefully.

"If you were to come below with me, sir, you could check through my calculations."

Bush listened in patience to Hornblower's explanation. They made the problem perfectly clear for the moment — it was by a hurried last-minute reading up that Bush had been able to pass his examination for lieutenant, although it was seamanship and not navigation that got him through — but Bush knew by bitter experience that tomorrow it would be hazy again.

"Now we can plot the position," said Hornblower, bending over the chart.

Bush watched as Hornblower's capable fingers worked the parallel rulers across the chart; Hornblower had long bony hands with something of beauty about them, and it was actually fascinating to watch them doing work at which they were so supremely competent. The powerful fingers picked up the pencil and ruled a line.

"There's the point of interception," said Hornblower. "Now we can check against the dead reckoning."

Even Bush could follow the simple steps necessary to plot the ship's course by dead reckoning since noon yesterday. The pencil in the steady fingers made a tiny x on the chart.

"We're still being set to the s'uth'ard, you see," said Hornblower. "We're not far enough east yet for the Gulf Stream to set us to the nor'ard."

"Didn't you say you'd never navigated these waters before?" asked Bush.

"Yes."

"Then how — ? Oh, I suppose you've been studying."

To Bush it was as strange that a man should read up beforehand and be prepared for conditions hitherto unknown as it was strange to Hornblower that a man should find trouble in mathematics.

"At any rate, there we are," said Hornblower, tapping the chart with the pencil.

"Yes," said Bush.

They both looked at the chart with the same thought in mind.

"What d'ye think Number One'll do?" asked Bush.

Buckland might be legally in command of the ship, but it was too early yet to speak of him as the captain — 'the capain' was still that weeping figure swathed in canvas on the cot in the cabin.

"Can't tell," answered Hornblower, "but he makes up his mind now or never. We lose ground to loo'ard every day from now, you see."

"What'd *you* do?" Bush was curious about this junior lieutenant who had shown himself ready of resources and so guarded in speech.

"I'd read those orders," said Hornblower instantly. "I'd rather be in trouble for having done something than for not having done anything."

"I wonder," said Bush. On the other hand a definite action could be made the subject of a court-martial charge far more easily than the omission to do something; Bush felt this, but he had not the facility with words to express it easily.

"Those orders may detach us on independent service," went on Hornblower. "God, what a chance for Buckland!"

"Yes," said Bush.

The eagerness in Hornblower's expression was obvious. If ever a man yearned for an independent command and the consequent opportunity to distinguish himself it was Hornblower. Bush wondered faintly if he himself was as anxious to have the responsibility of the command of a ship of the line in troubled waters. He looked at Hornblower with an interest which he knew to be constantly increasing. Hornblower was a man always ready to adopt the bold course, a man who infinitely preferred action to inaction; widely read in his profession and yet a practical seaman, as Bush had already had plenty of opportunity to observe. A student, yet a man of action; a fiery spirit and yet discreet — Bush remembered how tactfully he had acted during the crisis following the captain's injury and how dexterously he had handled Buckland.

And — and — what was the truth about that injury to the captain? Bush darted a more searching glance than ever at Hornblower as he followed up that train of thought. Bush's mind did not consciously frame the words 'motive' and 'opportunity' to itself — it was not that type of mind — but it felt its way along an obscure path of reasoning which might well have been signposted with those words. He wanted to ask again the question he had asked once before, but to do so would not merely invite but would merit a rebuff. Hornblower was established in a strong position and Bush could be sure that he would never abandon it through indiscretion or impatience. Bush looked at the lean eager face, at the long fingers drumming on the chart. It was not right or fit or proper that he should feel any admiration or even respect for Hornblower, who was not merely his junior in age by a couple of years — that did not matter — but was his junior as a lieutenant. The dates on their respective commissions really did matter; a junior was someone for whom it should be impossible to feel respect by the traditions of the service. Anything else would be unnatural, might even savour of the equalitarian French ideas which they were engaged in fighting. The thought of himself as infected with Red Revolutionary notions made Bush actually uneasy, and yet as he stirred uncomfortably in his chair he could not wholly discard those notions.

"I'll put these things away," said Hornblower, rising from his chair. "I'm exercising my lower-deck guns' crews after the hands have had their dinner. And I have the first dogwatch after that."

Chapter VI

The lower-deck guns had been secured, and the sweating crews came pouring up on deck. Now that the *Renown* was as far south as 30° north latitude the lower gundeck, even with the ports open for artillery exercise, was a warm place, and hauling those guns in and running them out was warm work. Hornblower had kept the crews hard at it, one hundred and eighty men, who afterwards came pouring up into the sunshine and the fresh air of the trade wind to receive the good-humoured chaff of the rest of the crew who had not been working so hard but who knew perfectly well that their turn would come soon.

The guns' crews wiped their steaming foreheads and flung jests — jagged and unpolished like the flints in the soil from which they had sprung — back at their tormentors. It was exhilarating to an officer to see the high spirits of the men and to be aware of the good temper that prevailed; in the three days that had elapsed since the change in command the whole atmosphere of the ship had improved. Suspicion and fear had vanished; after a brief sulkiness the hands had found that exercise and regular work were stimulating and satisfactory. Hornblower came aft, the sweat running down him, and touched his hat to Roberts, who was officer of the watch, where he stood chatting with Bush at the break of the poop. It was an unusual request that Hornblower made, and Roberts and Bush stared at him with surprise.

"But what about the deck, Mr Hornblower?" asked Roberts.

"A hand can swab it off in two minutes, sir," replied Hornblower, wiping his face and looking at the blue sea overside with a longing that was obvious to the most casual glance. "I have fifteen minutes before I relieve you, sir — plenty of time."

"Oh, very well, Mr Hornblower."

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower, and he turned eagerly away with another touch of his hat, while Roberts and Bush exchanged glances which were as much amused as puzzled. They watched Hornblower give his orders.

"Captain of the waist! Captain of the waist, there!"

"Sir?"

"Get the wash-deck pump rigged at once."

"Rig the wash-deck pump, sir?"

"Yes. Four men for the handles. One for the hose. Jump to it, now. I'll be with you in two minutes."

"Aye aye, sir."

The captain of the waist set about obeying the strange order after a glance at the receding figure. Hornblower was as good as his word; it was only two minutes before he returned, but now he was naked except for a towel draped sketchily round him. This was all very strange.

"Give way," he said to the men at the pump handles.

They were dubious about all this, but they obeyed the order, and in alternate pairs they threw their weight upon the handles. Up — down, up — down; clank — clank. The seaman holding the hose felt it stir in his hands as the water from far overside came surging up along it; and next moment a clear stream of water came gushing out of it.

"Turn it on me," said Hornblower, casting his towel aside and standing naked in the sunshine. The hoseman hesitated.

"Hurry up, now!"

As dubiously as ever the hoseman obeyed orders, turning the jet upon his officer, who rotated first this way and then that as it splashed upon him; an amused crowd was gathering to watch.

"Pump, you sons of seacooks!" said Hornblower; and obediently the men at the pump handles, now grinning broadly, threw all their weight on the handles, with such enthusiasm that their feet left the deck as they hauled down upon them and the clear water came hurtling out through the hose with considerable force. Hornblower twirled round and round under the stinging impact, his face screwed up in painful ecstasy. Buckland had been standing aft at the taffrail, lost in thought and gazing down at the ship's wake, but the clanking of the pump attracted his attention and he strolled forward to join Roberts and Bush and to look at the strange spectacle.

"Hornblower has some odd fancies," he remarked, but he smiled as he said it — a rather pathetic smile, for his face bore the marks of the anxieties he was going through.

"He seems to be enjoying himself, sir," said Bush.

Bush, looking at Hornblower revolving under the sparkling stream, was conscious of a prickling under his shirt in his heavy uniform coat, and actually had the feeling that it might be pleasurable to indulge in that sort of shower bath, however injurious it might be to the health.

"Vast pumping!" yelled Hornblower. "Avast, there!"

The hands at the pumps ceased their labours, and the jet from the hose died away to a trickle, to nothing.

"Captain of the waist! Secure the pump. Get the deck swabbed."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower grabbed his towel and came trotting back along the maindeck. He looked up at the group of officers with a grin which revealed his exhilaration and high spirits.

"Dunno if it's good for discipline," commented Roberts, as Hornblower disappeared; and then, with a tardy flash of insight, "I suppose it's all right."

"I suppose so," said Buckland. "Let's hope he doesn't get himself a fever, checking the perspiration like that."

"He showed no sign of one, sir," said Bush; lingering in Bush's mind's eye was the picture of Hornblower's grin. It blended with his memory of Hornblower's eager expression when they were discussing what Buckland had best do in the dilemma in which he found himself.

"Ten minutes to eight bells, sir," reported the quartermaster.

"Very well!" said Roberts.

The wet patch on the deck was now almost dry; a faint steam rose from it as the sun, still fierce at four o'clock in the afternoon, beat on it.

"Call the watch," said Roberts.

Hornblower came running up to the quarterdeck with his telescope; he must have pulled on his clothes with the orderly rapidity that marked all his actions. He touched his hat to the quarterdeck and stood by to relieve Roberts.

"You feel refreshed after your bath?" asked Buckland.

"Yes, sir, thank you."

Bush looked at the pair of them, the elderly, worried first lieutenant and the young fifth lieutenant, the older man pathetically envying the youngster's youth. Bush was learning something about personalities. He would never be able to reduce the results of his observations to a tabular system, and it would never occur to him to do so, but he could learn without doing so; his experience and observations would blend with his native wit to govern his judgments, even if he were too self-conscious to philosophise over them. He was aware that naval officers (he knew almost nothing of mankind on land) could be divided into active individuals and passive individuals, into those eager for responsibility and action and into those content to wait until action was forced on them. Before that he had learned the simpler lesson that officers could be divided into the efficient and the blunderers, and also into the intelligent and the stupid — this last division was nearly the same as the one immediately preceding, but not quite. There were the officers who could be counted on to act quickly and correctly in an emergency, and those who could not — again the dividing line did not quite coincide with the preceding. And there were officers with discretion and officers with none, patient officers and impatient ones, officers with strong nerves and officers with weak nerves. In certain cases Bush's estimates had to contend with his prejudices — he was liable to be suspicious of brains and of originality of thought and of eagerness for activity, especially because in the absence of some of the other desirable qualities these things might be actual nuisances. The final and most striking difference Bush had observed during ten years of continuous warfare was that between the leaders and the led, but that again was a difference of which Bush was conscious without being able to express it in words, and especially not in words as succinct or as definite as these; but he was actually aware of the difference even though he was not able to bring himself to define it.

But he had that difference at the back of his mind, all the same, as he looked at Buckland and Hornblower chatting together on the quarterdeck. The afternoon watch had ended, and the first dogwatch had begun, with Hornblower as officer of the watch. It was the traditional moment for relaxation; the heat of the day had passed, and the hands collected forward, some of them to gaze down at the dolphins leaping round the bows, while the officers who had been dozing during the afternoon in their cabins came up to the quarterdeck for air and paced up and down in little groups deep in conversation.

A ship of war manned for active service was the most crowded place in the world — more crowded than the most rundown tenement in Seven Dials — but long and hard experience had taught the inhabitants how to live even in those difficult conditions. Forward there were groups of men yarning, men skylarking; there were solitary men who had each pre-empted a square yard of deck for himself and sat, cross-legged, with tools and materials about them, doing scrimshaw work — delicate carvings on bone — or embroidery or whittling at models oblivious to the tumult about them. Similarly aft on the crowded quarterdeck the groups of officers strolled and chatted, avoiding the other groups without conscious effort.

It was in accordance with the traditions of the service that these groups left the windward side of the quarterdeck to Buckland as long as he was on deck; and Buckland seemed to be making a long stay this afternoon. He was deep in conversation with Hornblower, the two of them pacing up and down beside the quarterdeck carronades, eight yards forward, eight yards back again; long ago the navy had discovered that when the walking distance was so limited conversation must not be interrupted by the necessarily frequent turns. Every pair of officers turned inwards as they reached the limits of their walk, facing each other momentarily and continuing the conversation without a break, and walking with their hands clasped behind them as a result of the training they had all received as midshipmen not to put their hands in their pockets. So walked Buckland and Hornblower, and curious glances were cast at them by the others, for even on this golden evening, with the blue-enamel sea overside and the sun sinking to starboard with the promise of a magnificent sunset, everyone was conscious that in the cabin just below their feet lay a wretched insane man, half-swathed in a straitjacket; and Buckland had to make up his mind how to deal with him. Up and down, up and down walked Buckland and Hornblower. Hornblower seemed to be as deferential as ever, and Buckland

seemed to be asking questions; but some of the replies he received must have been unexpected, for more than once Buckland stopped in the middle of a turn and stood facing Hornblower, apparently repeating his question, while Hornblower seemed to be standing his ground both literally and figuratively, sturdy and yet respectful, as Buckland stood with the sun illuminating his haggard features.

Perhaps it had been a fortunate chance that had made Hornblower decide to take a bath under the wash-deck pump — this conversation had its beginnings in that incident.

"Is that a council of war?" said Smith to Bush, looking across at the pair.

"Not likely," said Bush.

A first lieutenant would not deliberately ask the advice or even the opinion of one so junior. Yet — yet — it might be possible, starting with idle conversation about different matters.

"Don't tell me they're discussing Catholic Emancipation," said Lomax.

It was just possible, Bush realised guiltily, that they were discussing something else — that question as to how the captain had come to fall down the hatchway. Bush found himself automatically looking round the deck for Wellard when that thought occurred to him. Wellard was skylarking in the main rigging with the midshipmen and master's mates as if he had not a care in the world. But it could not be that question which Buckland and Hornblower were discussing. Their attitudes seemed to indicate that theories and not facts were the subject of the debate.

"Anyway, they've settled it," said Smith.

Hornblower was touching his hat to Buckland, and Buckland was turning to go below again. Several curious pairs of eyes looked across at Hornblower now that he was left solitary, and as he became conscious of their regard he strolled over to them.

"Affairs of state?" asked Lomax, asking the question which everyone wanted asked.

Hornblower met his gaze with a level glance.

"No," he said, and smiled.

"It certainly looked like matters of importance," said Smith.

"That depends on the definition," answered Hornblower.

He was still smiling, and his smile gave no clue at all regarding his thoughts. It would be rude to press him further; it was possible that he and Buckland had been discussing some private business. Nobody looking at him could guess.

"Come off those hammocks, there!" bellowed Hornblower; the skylarking midshipmen were not breaking one of the rules of the ship, but it was a convenient moment to divert the conversation.

Three bells rang out; the first dogwatch was three-quarters completed.

"Mr Roberts, sir!" suddenly called the sentry at the smokers' slow match by the hatchway. "Passing the word for Mr Roberts!"

Roberts turned from the group.

"Who's passing the word for me?" he asked, although with the captain ill there could only be one man in the ship who could pass the word for the second lieutenant.

"Mr Buckland, sir. Mr Buckland passing the word for Mr Roberts."

"Very well," said Roberts, hurrying down the companion.

The others exchanged glances. This might be the moment of decision. Yet on the other hand it might be only a routine matter. Hornblower took advantage of the distraction to turn away from the group and continue his walk on the weather side of the ship; he walked with his chin nearly down on his breast, his drooping head balanced by the hands behind his back. Bush thought he looked weary.

Now there came a fresh cry from below, repeated by the sentry at the hatchway.

"Mr Clive! Passing the word for Mr Clive. Mr Buckland passing the word for Mr Clive!"

"Oh-ho!" said Lomax in significant tones, as the surgeon hurried down.

"Something happens," said Carberry, the master.

Time went on without either the second lieutenant or the surgeon reappearing. Smith, under his arm the telescope that was the badge of his temporary office, touched his hat to Hornblower and prepared to relieve him as officer of the watch as the second dogwatch was called. In the east the sky was turning dark, and the sun was setting over the starboard quarter in a magnificent display of red and gold; from the ship towards the

sun the surface of the sea was gilded and glittering, but close overside it was the richest purple. A flying fish broke the surface and went skimming along, leaving a transient, momentary furrow behind it like a groove in enamel.

"Look at that!" exclaimed Hornblower to Bush.

"A flying fish," said Bush, indifferently

"Yes! There's another!"

Hornblower leaned over to get a better view.

"You'll see plenty of them before this voyage is over," said Bush.

"But I've never seen one before."

The play of expression on Hornblower's face was curious. One moment he was full of eager interest; the next he assumed an appearance of stolid indifference, as a man might pull on a glove. His service at sea so far, varied though it might be, had been confined to European waters; years of dangerous activity on the French and Spanish coasts in a frigate, two years in the *Renown* in the Channel fleet, and he had been eagerly looking forward to the novelties he would encounter in tropical waters. But he was talking to a man to whom these things were no novelty, and who evinced no excitement at the sight of the first flying fish of the voyage. Hornblower was not going to be outdone in stolidity and self-control; if the wonders of the deep failed to move Bush they were not going to evoke any childish excitement in Hornblower, at least any apparent excitement if Hornblower could suppress it. He was a veteran, and he was not going to appear like a raw hand. Bush looked up to see Roberts and Clive ascending the companionway in the gathering night, and turned eagerly towards them. Officers came from every part of the quarterdeck to hear what they had to say.

"Well, sir?" asked Lomax.

"He's done it," said Roberts.

"He's read the secret orders, sir?" asked Smith.

"As far as I know, yes."

"Oh!"

There was a pause before someone asked the inevitable silly question.

"What did they say?"

"They are secret orders," said Roberts, and now there was a touch of pomposity in his voice — it might be to compensate for his lack of knowledge, or it might be because Roberts was now growing more aware of the dignity of his position as second in command. "If Mr Buckland had taken me into his confidence I still could not tell you."

"True enough," said Carberry.

"What did the captain do?" asked Lomax.

"Poor devil," said Clive. With all attention turned to him Clive grew expansive. "We might be fiends from the pit! You should have seen him cower away when we came in. Those morbid terrors grow more acute."

Clive awaited a request for further information, and even though none was forthcoming he went on with his story.

"We had to find the key to his desk. You would have thought we were going to cut his throat, judging by the way he wept and tried to hide. All the sorrows of the world — all the terrors of hell torment that wretched man."

"But you found the key?" persisted Lomax.

"We found it. And we opened his desk."

"And then?"

"Mr Buckland found the orders. The usual linen envelope with the Admiralty seal. The envelope had been already opened."

"Naturally," said Lomax. "Well?"

"And now, I suppose," said Clive, conscious of the anticlimax, "I suppose he's reading them."

"And we are none the wiser."

There was a disappointed pause.

"Bless my soul!" said Carberry. "We've been at war since '93. Nearly ten years of it. D'ye still expect to know what lies in store for you? The West Indies today — Halifax tomorrow. We obey orders. Helm-a-lee — let go

and haul. A bellyful of grape or champagne in a captured flagship. Who cares? We draw our four shillings a day, rain or shine."

"Mr Carberry!" came the word from below. "Mr Buckland passing the word for Mr Carberry."

"Bless my soul!" said Carberry again.

"Now you can earn your four shillings a day," said Lomax.

The remark was addressed to his disappearing back, for Carberry was already hastening below.

"A change of course," said Smith. "I'll wager a week's pay on it."

"No takers," said Roberts.

It was the most likely new development of all, for Carberry, the master, was the officer charged with the navigation of the ship.

Already it was almost full night, dark enough to make the features of the speakers indistinct, although over to the westward there was still a red patch on the horizon, and a faint red trail over the black water towards the ship. The binnacle lights had been lit and the brighter stars were already visible in the dark sky, with the mastheads seeming to brush past them, with the motion of the ship, infinitely far over their heads. The ship's bell rang out, but the group showed no tendency to disperse. And then interest quickened. Here were Buckland and Carberry returning, ascending the companionway; the group drew on one side to clear them a passage.

"Officer of the watch!" said Buckland.

"Sir!" said Smith, coming forward in the darkness.

"We're altering course two points. Steer southwest."

"Aye aye, sir. Course southwest. Mr Abbott, pipe the hands to the braces."

The *Renown* came round on her new course, with her sails trimmed to the wind, which was now no more than a point on her port quarter. Carberry walked over to the binnacle and looked into it to make sure the helmsman was exactly obeying his orders.

"Another pull on the weather forebrace, there!" yelled Smith. "Belay!"

The bustle of the change of course died away.

"Course sou'west, sir," reported Smith.

"Very good. Mr Smith." said Buckland, by the rail.

"Pardon, sir," said Roberts, greatly daring, addressing him as he loomed in the darkness. "Can you tell us our mission, sir?"

"Not our mission. That is still secret, Mr Roberts."

"Very good, sir."

"But I'll tell you where we're bound. Mr Carberry knows already."

"Where, sir?"

"Santo Domingo. Scotchman's Bay."

There was a pause while this information was being digested.

"Santo Domingo," said someone, meditatively.

"Hispaniola," said Carberry, explanatorily.

"Hayti," said Hornblower.

"Santo Domingo — Hayti — Hispaniola," said Carberry. "Three names for the same island."

"Hayti!" exclaimed Roberts, some chord in his memory suddenly touched. "That's where the blacks are in rebellion."

"Yes," agreed Buckland.

Anyone could guess that Buckland was trying to say that word in as noncommittal a tone as possible; it might be because there was a difficult diplomatic situation with regard to the blacks, and it might be because fear of the captain was still a living force in the ship.

Chapter VII

Lieutenant Buckland, in acting command of HMS *Renown*, of seventy-four guns, was on the quarterdeck of his ship peering through his telescope at the low mountains of Santo Domingo. The ship was rolling in a fashion unnatural and disturbing, for the long Atlantic swell, driven by the northeast trades, was passing under her keel while she lay hove-to to the final puffs of the land breeze which had blown since midnight and was now dying away as the fierce sun heated the island again. The *Renown* was actually wallowing, rolling her lower deck gunports under, first on one side and then on the other, for what little breeze there was was along the swell and did nothing to stiffen her as she lay with her mizzen topsail backed. She would lie right over on one side, until the gun tackles creaked with the strain of holding the guns in position, until it was hard to keep a foothold on the steep-sloping deck; she would lie there for a few harrowing seconds, and then slowly right herself, making no pause at all at the moment when she was upright and her deck horizontal, and continue, with a clattering of blocks and a rattle of gear, in a sickening swoop until she was as far over in the opposite direction, gun tackles creaking and unwary men slipping and siding, and he there unresponsive until the swell had rolled under her and she repeated her behaviour.

"For God's sake," said Hornblower, hanging on to a belaying pin in the mizzen fife rail to save himself from sliding down the deck into the scuppers, "can't he make up his mind?"

There was something in Hornblower's stare that made Bush look at him more closely.

"Seasick?" he asked, with curiosity.

"Who wouldn't be?" replied Hornblower. "How she rolls!"

Bush's cast-iron stomach had never given him the least qualm, but he was aware that less fortunate men suffered from seasickness even after weeks at sea, especially when subjected to a different kind of motion. This funereal rolling was nothing like the free action of the *Renown* under sail.

"Buckland has to see how the land lies," he said in an effort to cheer Hornblower up.

"How much more does he want to see?" grumbled Hornblower. "There's the Spanish colours flying on the fort up there. Everyone on shore knows now that a ship of the line is prowling about, and the Dons won't have to be very clever to guess that we're not here on a yachting trip. Now they've all the time they need to be ready to receive us."

"But what else could he do?"

"He could have come in in the dark with the sea breeze. Landing parties ready. Put them ashore at dawn. Storm the place before they knew there was any danger. Oh, God!"

The final exclamation had nothing to do with what went before. It was wrenched out of Hornblower by the commotion of his stomach. Despite his deep tan there was a sickly green colour in his cheeks.

"Hard luck," said Bush.

Buckland still stood trying to keep his telescope trained on the coast despite the rolling of the ship. This was Scotchman's Bay — the Bahía de Escocesa, as the Spanish charts had it. To the westward lay a shelving beach; the big rollers here broke far out and ran in creamy white up to the water's edge with diminishing force, but to the eastward the shore line rose in a line of tree-covered hills standing bluffly with their feet in blue water; the rollers burst against them in sheets of spray that climbed far up the cliffs before falling back in a smother of white. For thirty miles those hills ran beside the sea, almost due east and west; they constituted the Samaná peninsula, terminating in Samaná Point. According to the charts the peninsula was no more than ten miles wide; behind them, round Samaná Point, lay Samaná Bay, opening into the Mona Passage and a most convenient anchorage for privateers and small ships of war which could lie there, under the protection of the fort on the Samaná peninsula, ready to slip out and harass the West Indian convoys making use of the Mona Passage. The *Renown* had been given orders to clear out this raiders' lair before going down to leeward to Jamaica — everyone in the ship could guess that — but now that Buckland confronted the problem he was not at all sure how to solve it. His indecision was apparent to all the curious lookers-on who clustered on the *Renown's* deck.

The main topsail suddenly flapped like thunder, and the ship began to turn slowly head to sea; the land breeze was expiring, and the trade winds, blowing eternally across the Atlantic, were resuming their dominion.

Buckland shut his telescope with relief. At least that was an excuse for postponing action.

"Mr Roberts!"

"Sir!"

"Lay her on the port tack. Full and by!"

"Aye aye, sir."

The after guard came running to the mizzen braces, and the ship slowly paid off. Gradually the topsails caught the wind, and she began to lie over, gathering way as she did so. She met the next roller with her port bow, thrusting boldly into it in a burst of spray. The tautened weather-rigging began to sing a more cheerful note, blending with the music of her passage through the water. She was a live thing again, instead of rolling like a corpse in the trough. The roaring trade wind pressed her over, and she went surging along, rising and swooping as if with pleasure, leaving a creamy wake behind her on the blue water while the sea roared under the bows.

"Better?" asked Bush of Hornblower.

"Better in one way," was the reply. Hornblower looked over at the distant hills of Santo Domingo. "I could wish we were going into action and not running away to think about it."

"What a fire-eater!" said Bush.

"A fire-eater? Me? Nothing like that — quite the opposite. I wish — oh, I wish for too much, I suppose."

There was no explaining some people, thought Bush, philosophically. He was content to bask in the sunshine now that its heat was tempered by the ship's passage through the wind. If action and danger lay in the future he could await it in stolid tranquillity; and he certainly could congratulate himself that he did not have to carry Buckland's responsibility of carrying a ship of the line and seven hundred and twenty men into action. The prospect of action at least took one's mind off the horrid fact that confined below lay an insane captain. At dinner in the wardroom he looked over at Hornblower, fidgety and nervous. Buckland had announced his intention of taking the bull by the horns the next morning, of rounding Samaná Point and forcing his way straight up the bay. It would not take many broadsides from the *Renown* to destroy any shipping that lay there at anchor. Bush thoroughly approved of the scheme. Wipe out the privateers, burn them, sink them, and then it would be time to decide what, if anything, should be done next. At the meeting in the wardroom, when Buckland asked if any officer had any questions, Smith had asked sensibly about the tides, and Carberry had given him the information; Roberts had asked a question or two about the situation on the south shore of the bay; but Hornblower at the foot of the table had kept his mouth shut, although looking with eager attention at each speaker in turn.

During the dogwatches Hornblower had paced the deck by himself, head bent in meditation; Bush noticed the fingers of the hands behind his back twisting and twining nervously, and he experienced a momentary doubt. Was it possible that this energetic young officer was lacking in physical courage? That phrase was not Bush's own — he had heard it used maliciously somewhere or other years ago. It was better to use it now than to tell himself outright that he suspected Hornblower might be a coward. Bush was not a man of large tolerance; if a man were a coward he wanted no more to do with him.

Half way through next morning the pipes shrilled along the decks; the drums of the marines beat a rousing roll. "Clear the decks for action! Hands to quarters! Clear for action!"

Bush came down to the lower gundeck, which was his station for action; under his command was the whole deck and the seventeen twenty-four-pounders of the starboard battery, while Hornblower commanded under him those of the port side. The hands were already knocking down the screens and removing obstructions. A little group of the surgeon's crew came along the deck; they were carrying a strait-jacketed figure bound to a plank. Despite the jacket and the lashings it writhed feebly and wept pitifully — the captain being carried down to the safety of the cable tier while his cabin was cleared for action. A hand or two in the bustle found time to shake their heads over the unhappy figure, but Bush checked them soon enough. He wanted to be able to report the lower gundeck cleared for action with creditable speed.

Hornblower made his appearance, touched his hat to Bush, and stood by to supervise his guns. Most of this lower deck was in twilight, for the stout shafts of sunlight that came down the hatchways did little to illuminate the farther parts of the deck with its sombre red paint. Half a dozen ship's boys came along, each one carrying a bucket of sand, which they scattered in handfuls over the deck. Bush kept a sharp eye on them, because the guns' crews depended on that sand for firm foothold. The water buckets beside each gun were

filled; they served a dual purpose, to dampen the swabs that cleaned out the guns and for immediate use against fire. Round the mainmast stood a ring of extra fire buckets; in tubs at either side of the ship smouldered the slow matches from which the gun captains could rekindle their linstocks when necessary. Fire and water. The marine sentries came clumping along the deck in their scarlet coats and white crossbelts, the tops of their shakos brushing the deck beams over their heads. Corporal Greenwood posted one at each hatchway, bayonet fixed and bucket loaded. Their duty was to see that no unauthorized person ran down to take shelter in the safety of that part of the ship comfortably below waterline. Mr Hobbs, the acting-gunner, with his mates and helpers made a momentary appearance on their way down to the magazine. They were all wearing list slippers to obviate any chance of setting off loose powder which would be bound to be strewn about down there in the heat of action.

Soon the powder boys came running up, each with a charge for the guns. The breechings of the guns were cast off and the crews stood by the tackles, waiting for the word to open the ports and run out the guns. Bush darted his glance along both sides. The gun captains were all at their posts. Ten men stood by every gun on the starboard side, five by every gun on the port side — maximum and minimum crews for twenty-four-pounders. It was Bush's responsibility to see to it that whichever battery came into action the guns were properly manned. If both sides had to be worked at once he had to make a fair division, and when the casualties began and guns were put out of service he had to redistribute the crews. The petty officers and warrant officers were reporting their subdivisions ready for action, and Bush turned to the midshipman beside him whose duty was to carry messages.

"Mr Abbott, report the lower deck cleared for action. Ask if the guns should be run out."

"Aye aye, sir."

A moment before the ship had been full of noise and bustle, and now everything down here was still and quiet save for the creaking of the timbers; the ship was rising and swooping rhythmically over the sea — Bush as he stood by the mainmast was automatically swaying with the ship's motion. Young Abbott came running down the ladder again.

"Mr Buckland's compliments, sir, and don't run the guns out yet."

"Very good."

Hornblower was standing farther aft, in line with the ringbolts of the train tackles; he had looked round to hear what message Abbott bore, and now he turned back again. He stood with his feet apart, and Bush saw him put one hand into the other, behind his back, and clasp it thinly. There was a rigidity about the set of his shoulders and in the way he held his head that might be significant of anything, eagerness for action or the reverse. A gun captain addressed a remark to Hornblower, and Bush watched him turn to answer it. Even in the half light of the lower deck Bush could see there were signs of strain in his expression, and that smile might be forced.

Oh well, decided Bush, as charitably as he could, men often looked like that before going into action.

Silently the ship sailed on; even Bush had his ears cocked, trying to hear what was going on above him so as to draw deductions about the situation. Faintly down the hatchway came the call of a seaman.

"No bottom, sir. No bottom with this line."

So there was a man in the chains taking casts with the lead, and they must be drawing near the land; everyone down on the lower deck drew the same conclusion and started to remark about it to his neighbour.

"Silence, there!" snapped Bush.

Another cry from the leadsman, and then a bellowed order. Instantly the lower deck seemed to be filled solid with noise. The maindeck guns were being run out; in the confined space below every sound was multiplied and reverberated by the ship's timbers so that the gun-trucks rolling across the planking made a noise like thunder. Everyone looked to Bush for orders, but he stood steady; he had received none. Now a midshipman appeared descending the ladder.

"Mr Buckland's compliments, sir, and please to run your guns out."

He had squealed his message without ever setting foot on deck, and everyone had heard it. There was an instant buzz round the deck, and excitable people began to reach for the gunports to open them.

"Still!" bellowed Bush. Guiltily all movement ceased.

"Up ports!"

The twilight of the lower deck changed to daylight as the ports opened; little rectangles of sunshine swayed

about on the deck on the port side, broadening and narrowing with the motion of the ship.

"Run out!"

With the ports open the noise was not so great; the crews flung their weight on the tackles and the trucks roared as the guns thrust their muzzles out. Bush stepped to the nearest gun and stooped to peer out through the open port. There were the green hills of the island at extreme gunshot distance; here the cliffs were not nearly so abrupt, and there was a jungle-covered shelf at their feet.

"Hands wear ship!"

Bush could recognise Roberts' voice hailing from the quarterdeck. The deck under his feet steadied to the horizontal, and the distant hills seemed to swing with the vessel. The masts creaked as the yards came round. That must be Samaná Point which they were rounding. The motion of the ship had changed far more than would be the result of mere alteration of course. She was not only on an even keel but she was in quiet water, gliding along into the bay. Bush squatted down on his heels by the muzzle of a gun and peered at the shore. This was the south side of the peninsula at which he was looking, presenting a coastline towards the bay nearly as steep as the one on the seaward side. There was the fort on the crest and the Spanish flag waving over it. The excited midshipman came scuttling down the ladder like a squirrel.

"Sir! Sir! Will you try a ranging shot at the batteries when your guns bear?"

Bush ran a cold eye over him.

"Whose orders?" he asked.

"M — Mr Buckland's, sir."

"Then say so. Very well. My respects to Mr Buckland, and it will be a long time before my guns are within range."

"Aye aye, sir."

There was smoke rising from the fort, and not powder smoke either. Bush realised with something like a quiver of apprehension that probably it was smoke from a furnace for heating shot; soon the fort would be hurling red-hot shot at them, and Bush could see no chance of retaliation; he would never be able to elevate his guns sufficiently to reach the fort, while the fort, from its commanding position on the crest, could reach the ship easily enough. He straightened himself up and walked over to the port side to where Hornblower, in a similar attitude, was peering out beside a gun.

"There's a point running out here," said Hornblower. "See the shallows there? The channel must bend round them. And there's a battery on the point — look at the smoke. They're heating shot."

"I daresay," said Bush.

Soon they would be under a sharp crossfire. He hoped they would not be subjected to it for too long. He could hear orders being shouted on deck, and the masts creaked as the yards came round; they were working the *Renown* round the bend.

"The fort's opened fire, sir," reported the master's mate in charge of the forward guns on the starboard side.

"Very well, Mr Purvis." He crossed over and looked out. "Did you see where the shot fell?"

"No, sir."

"They're firing on this side, too, sir," reported Hornblower.

"Very well."

Bush saw the fort spurting white cannon smoke. Then straight in the line between his eye and the fort, fifty yards from the side of the ship, a pillar of water rose up from the golden surface, and within the same instant of time something crashed into the side of the ship just above Bush's head. A ricochet had bounded from the surface and had lodged somewhere in the eighteen inches of oak that constituted the ship's side. Then followed a devil's tattoo of crashes; a well-aimed salvo was striking home.

"I might just reach the battery on this side now, sir," said Hornblower.

"Then try what you can do."

Now here was Buckland himself, hailing fretfully down the hatchway.

"Can't you open fire yet, Mr Bush?"

"This minute, sir."

Hornblower was standing by the centre twenty-fourpounder. The gun captain slid the rolling handspike under the gun carriage, and heaved with all his weight. Two men at each side tackle tugged under his direction to

point the gun true. With the elevating coign quite free from the breech the gun was at its highest angle of elevation. The gun captain flipped up the iron apron over the touchhole, saw that the hole was filled with powder, and with a shout of "Stand clear" he thrust his smouldering linstock into it. The gun bellowed loud in the confined space; some of the smoke came drifting back through the port.

"Just below, sir," reported Hornblower, standing at the next port. "When the guns are hot they'll reach it."

"Carry on, then."

"Open fire, first division!" yelled Hornblower.

The four foremost guns crashed out almost together.

"Second division!"

Bush could feel the deck heaving under him with the shock of the discharge and the recoil. Smoke came billowing back into the confined space, acrid, bitter; and the din was paralyzing.

"Try again, men!" yelled Hornblower. "Division captains, see that you point true!"

There was a frightful crash close beside Bush and something screamed past him to crash into the deck beam near kits head. Something flying through an open gunport had struck a gun on its reinforced breech. Two men had fallen close beside it, one lying still and the other twisting and turning in agony. Bush was about to give an order regarding them when his attention was drawn to something more important. There was a deep gash in the deck beam by his head and from the depths of the gash smoke was curling. It was a red-hot shot that had struck the breech of the gun and had apparently flown into fragments. A large part — the largest part — had sunk deep into the beam and already the wood was smouldering.

"Fire buckets here!" roared Bush.

Ten pounds of red-hot glowing metal lodged in the dry timbers of the ship could start a blaze in a few seconds. At the same time there was a rush of feet overhead, the sound of gear being moved about, and then the clank-clank of pumps. So on the maindeck they were fighting fires too. Hornblower's guns were thundering on the port side, the gun-trucks roaring over the planking. Hell was unchained, and the smoke of hell was eddying about him.

The masts creaked again with the swing of the yards; despite everything, the ship had to be sailed up the tortuous channel. He peered out through a port, but his eye told him, as he forced himself to gauge the distance calmly, that the fort on the crest was still beyond range. No sense in wasting ammunition. He straightened himself and looked round the murky deck. There was something strange in the feel of the ship under his feet. He teetered on his toes to put his wild suspicions to the test. There was the slightest perceptible slope to the deck — a strange rigidity and permanence about it. Oh my God! Hornblower was looking round at him and making an urgent gesture downwards to confirm the awful thought. The *Renown* was aground. She must have run so smoothly and slowly up a mudbank as to lose her speed without any jerk perceptible. But she must have put her bows far up on the bank for the slope of the deck to be noticeable. There were more rending crashes as other shots from the shore struck home, a fresh hurrying and bustle as the fire parties ran to deal with the danger. Hard aground, and doomed to be slowly shot to pieces by those cursed forts, if the shots did not set them on fire to roast alive on the mudbank. Hornblower was beside him, his watch in his hand.

"Tide's still rising," he said. "It's an hour before high water. But I'm afraid we're pretty hard aground."

Bush could only look at him and swear, pouring out filth from his mouth as the only means of relieving his overwrought feelings.

"Steady there, Duff!" yelled Hornblower, looking away from him at a gun's crew gathered round their gun.

"Swab that out properly! D'ye want your hands blown off when you load?"

By the time Hornblower looked round at Bush again the latter had regained his self-control.

"An hour to high water, you say?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. According to Carberry's calculations."

"God help us!"

"My shot's just reaching the battery on that point, sir. If I can keep the embrasures swept I'll slow their rate of fire even if I don't silence them."

Another crash as a shot struck home, and another.

"But the one across the channel's out of range."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

The powder boys were running through all the bustle with fresh charges for the guns. And here was the messenger-midshipman threading his way through them.

"Mr Bush, sir! Will you please report to Mr Buckland, sir? And we're aground, under fire, sir."

"Shut your mouth. I leave you in charge here, Mr Hornblower."

"Aye aye, sir."

The sunlight on the quarterdeck was blinding. Buckland was standing hatless at the rail, trying to control the working of his features. There was a roar and a spluttering of steam as someone turned the jet of a hose on a fiery fragment lodged in the bulkhead. Dead men in the scuppers; wounded being carried off. A shot, or the splinters it had sent flying, must have killed the man at the wheel so that the ship, temporarily out of control, had run aground.

"We have to kedge off," said Buckland.

"Aye aye, sir."

That meant putting out an anchor and heaving in on the cable with the capstan to haul the ship off the mud by main force. Bush looked round him to confirm what he had gathered regarding the ship's position from his restricted view below. Her bows were on the mud; she would have to be hauled off stern first. A shot howled close overhead, and Bush had to exert his self-control not to jump.

"You'll have to get a cable out aft through a stern port."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Roberts'll take the stream anchor off in the launch."

"Aye aye, sir."

The fact that Buckland omitted the formal 'Mister' was significant of the strain he was undergoing and of the emergency of the occasion.

"I'll take the men from my guns, sir," said Bush.

"Very good."

Now was the time for discipline and training to assert themselves; the *Renown* was fortunate in having a crew more than half composed of seasoned men drilled in the blockade of Brest. At Plymouth she had only been filled up with pressed men. What had merely been a drill, an evolution, when the *Renown* was one of the Channel Fleet, was now an operation on which the life of the ship depended, not something to be done perfunctorily in competition with the rest of the squadron. Bush gathered his guns' crews around him and set about the task of rousing out a cable and getting it aft to a port, while overhead Roberts' men were manning stay tackles and yard tackles to sway out the launch.

Down below the heat between the decks was greater even than above with the sun glaring down. The smoke from Hornblower's guns was eddying thick under the beams; Hornblower was holding his hat in his hand and wiping his streaming face with his handkerchief. He nodded as Bush appeared; there was no need for Bush to explain the duty on which he was engaged. With the guns still thundering and the smoke still eddying, powder boys still running with fresh charges and fire parties bustling with their buckets, Bush's men roused out the cable. The hundred fathoms of it weighed a trifle over a couple of tons; clear heads and skilled supervision were necessary to get the unwieldy cable laid out aft, but Bush was at his best doing work which called for single-minded attention to a single duty. He had it clear and faked down along the deck by the time the cutter was under the stern to receive the end, and then he watched the vast thing gradually snake out through the after port without a hitch. The launch came into his line of vision as he stood looking out, with the vast weight of the stream anchor dangling astern; it was a relief to know that the tricky business of getting the anchor into her had been successfully carried out. The second cutter carried the spring cable from the hawsehole. Roberts was in command; Bush heard him hail the cutter as the three boats drew off astern. There was a sudden jet of water among the boats; one or other, if not both, of the batteries ashore had shifted targets; a shot now into the launch would be a disaster, and one into a cutter would be a serious setback.

"Pardon, sir," said Hornblower's voice beside him, and Bush turned back from looking out over the glittering water.

"Well?"

"I could take some of the foremost guns and run 'em aft," said Hornblower. "Shifting the weight would help."

"So it would," agreed Bush; Hornblower's face was streaked and grimy with his exertions, as Bush noted while he considered if he had sufficient authority to give the order on his own responsibility. "Better get Buckland's permission. Ask him in my name if you like."

"Aye aye, sir."

These lower-deck twenty-four-pounders weighed more than two tons each; the transfer of some from forward aft would be an important factor in getting the bows off the mudbank. Bush took another glance through the port. James, the midshipman in the first cutter, was turning to look back to check that the cable was out in exact line with the length of the ship. There would be a serious loss of tractive effort if there was an angle in the cable from anchor to capstan. Launch and cutter were coming together in preparation for dropping the anchor. All round them the water suddenly boiled to a salvo from the shore; the skipping jets of the ricochets showed that it was the fort on the hill that was firing at them — and making good practice for that extreme range. The sun caught an axe blade as it turned in the air in the sternsheets of the launch; Bush saw the momentary flash. They were letting the anchor drop from where it hung from the gallows in the stern. Thank God.

Hornblower's guns were still bellowing out, making the ship tremble with their recoil, and at the same time a splintering crash over his head told him that the other battery was still firing on the ship and still scoring hits. Everything was still going on at once; Hornblower had a gang of men at work dragging aft the foremost twenty-four-pounder on the starboard side — a ticklish job with the rolling handspike under the transom of the carriage. The trucks squealed horribly as the men struggled to turn the cumbersome thing and thread their way along the crowded deck. But Bush could spare Hornblower no more than a glance as he hurried up to the maindeck to see for himself what was happening at the capstan.

The men were already taking their places at the capstan bars under the supervision of Smith and Booth; the maindeck guns were being stripped of the last of their crews to supply enough hands. Naked to the waist, the men were spitting on their hands and testing their foothold — there was no need to tell them how serious the situation was; no need for Booth's knotted rattan.

"Heave away!" hailed Buckland from the quarterdeck.

"Heave away!" yelled Booth. "Heave, and wake the dead!"

The men flung their weight on the bars and the capstan came round, the pawls clanking rapidly as the capstan took up the slack. The boys with the nippers at the messenger had to hurry to keep pace. Then the intervals between the clanking of the pawls became longer as the capstan turned more slowly. More slowly; clank — clank — clank. Now the strain was coming; the bitts creaked as the cable tightened. Clank — clank. That was a new cable, and it could be expected to stretch a trifle.

The sudden howl of a shot — what wanton fate had directed it here of all places in the ship? Flying splinters and prostrate men; the shot had ploughed through the whole crowded mass. Red blood was pouring out, vivid in the sunshine; in understandable confusion the men drew away from the bloody wrecks.

"Stand to your posts!" yelled Smith. "You, boys! Get those men out of the way. Another capstan bar here! Smartly now!"

The ball which had wrought such fearful havoc had not spent all its force on human flesh; it had gone on to shatter the cheekpiece of a gun carriage and then to lodge in the ship's side. Nor had human blood quenched it; smoke was rising on the instant from where it rested. Bush himself seized a fire bucket and dashed its contents on the glowing ball; steam blended with the smoke and the water spat and sputtered. No single fire bucket could quench twenty-four pounds of red-hot iron, but a fire party came running up to flood the smouldering menace.

The dead and the wounded had been dragged away and the men were at the capstan bars again.

"Heave!" shouted Booth. Clank — clank — clank. Slowly and more slowly still turned the capstan. Then it came to a dead stop while the bitts groaned under the strain.

"Heave! Heave!"

Clank! Then reluctantly, and after a long interval, clank! Then no more. The merciless sun beat down upon the men's straining backs; their horny feet sought for a grip against the cleats on the deck as they shoved and thrust against the bars. Bush went below again, leaving them straining away; he could, and did, send plenty of men up from the lower gundeck to treble-bank the capstan bars. There were men still hard at work in the

smoky twilight hauling the last possible gun aft, but Hornblower was back among his guns supervising the pointing. Bush set his foot on the cable. It was not like a rope, but like a wooden spar, as rigid and unyielding. Then through the sole of his shoe Bush felt the slightest tremor, the very slightest; the men at the capstan were putting their reinforced strength against the bars. The clank of one more pawl gained reverberated along the ship's timbers; the cable shuddered a trifle more violently and then stiffened into total rigidity again. It did not creep over an eighth of an inch under Bush's foot, although he knew that at the capstan a hundred and fifty men were straining their hearts out at the bars. One of Hornblower's guns went off; Bush felt the jar of the recoil through the cable. Faintly down the hatchways came the shouts of encouragement from Smith and Booth at the capstan, but not an inch of gain could be noted at the cable. Hornblower came and touched his hat to Bush.

"D'you notice any movement when I fire a gun, sir?" As he asked the question he turned and waved to the captain of a midship gun which was loaded and run out. The gun captain brought the linstock down on the touchhole, and the gun roared out and came recoiling back through the smoke. Bush's foot on the cable recorded the effect.

"Only the jar — no — yes." Inspiration came to Bush. To the question he asked, Bush already knew the answer Hornblower would give. "What are you thinking of?"

"I could fire all my guns at once. That might break the suction, sir."

So it might, indeed. The *Renown* was lying on mud, which was clutching her in a firm grip. If she could be severely shaken while the hawser was maintained at full tension the grip might be broken.

"I think it's worth trying, by God," said Bush.

"Very good, sir. I'll have my guns loaded and ready in three minutes, sir." Hornblower turned to his battery and funnelled his hands round his mouth. "Cease fire! Cease fire, all!"

"I'll tell 'em at the capstan," said Bush.

"Very good, sir." Hornblower went on giving his orders. "Load and double-shot your guns. Prime and run out." That was the last that Bush heard for the moment as he went up on the maindeck and made his suggestion to Smith, who nodded in instant agreement.

"Vast heaving!" shouted Smith, and the sweating men at the bars eased their weary backs.

An explanation was necessary to Buckland on the quarterdeck, he saw the force of the argument. The unfortunate man, who was watching the failure of his first venture in independent command, and whose ship was in such deadly peril, was gripping at the rail and wringing it with his two hands as if he would twist it like a corkscrew. In the midst of all this there was a piece of desperately important news that Smith had to give.

"Roberts is dead," he said, out of the corner of his mouth.

"No!"

"He's dead. A shot cut him in two in the launch."

"Good God!"

It was to Bush's credit that he felt sorrow at the death of Roberts before his mind recorded the fact that he was now first lieutenant of a ship of the line. But there was no time now to think of either sorrow or rejoicing, not with the *Renown* aground and under fire. Bush hailed down the hatchway.

"Below, there! Mr Hornblower!"

"Sir!"

"Are your guns ready?"

"Another minute, sir."

"Better take the strain," said Bush to Smith; and then, louder, down the hatchway, "Await my order, Mr Hornblower."

"Aye aye, sir."

The men settled themselves at the capstan bars again, braced their feet, and heaved.

"Heave!" shouted Booth. "Heave!"

The men might be pushing at the side of a church, so little movement did they get from the bars after the first inch.

"Heave!"

Bush left them and ran below. He set his foot on the rigid cable and nodded to Hornblower. The fifteen guns

— two had been dragged aft from the port side — were run out and ready, the crews awaiting orders.

"Captains, take your linstocks!" shouted Hornblower.

"All you others, stand clear! Now, I shall give you the words 'one, two, three'. At 'three' you touch your linstocks down. Understand?"

There was a buzz of agreement.

"All ready? All linstocks glowing?" The gun captains swung them about to get them as bright as possible. "Then one — two — three!"

Down came the linstocks on the touchholes, and almost simultaneously the guns roared out; even with the inevitable variation in the amounts of powder in the touchholes there was not a second between the first and the last of the fifteen explosions. Bush, his foot on the cable, felt the ship heave with the recoil — double-shotting the guns had increased the effect. The smoke came eddying into the sweltering heat, but Bush had no attention to give to it. The cable moved under his foot with the heave of the ship. Surely it was moving along. It was! He had to shift the position of his foot. The clank of a newly gained pawl on the windlass could be heard by everyone. Clank — clank. Someone in the smoke started to cheer and others took it up.

"Silence!" bellowed Hornblower.

Clank — clank — clank. Reluctant sounds; but the ship was moving. The cable was coming in slowly, like a mortally wounded monster. If only they could keep her on the move! Clank — clank — clank. The interval between the sounds was growing shorter — even Bush had to admit that to himself The cable was coming in faster — faster.

"Take charge here, Mr Hornblower," said Bush, and sprang for the maindeck. If the ship were free there would be urgent matters for the first lieutenant to attend to. The capstan pawls seemed almost to be playing a merry tune, so rapidly did they sound as the capstan turned.

Undoubtedly there was much to be attended to on deck. There were decisions which must be made at once. Bush touched his hat to Buckland.

"Any orders, sir?"

Buckland turned unhappy eyes on him.

"We've lost the flood," he said.

This must be the highest moment of the tide, if they were to touch ground again, hedging would not be so simple an operation.

"Yes, sir," said Bush.

The decision could only lie with Buckland; no one else could share the responsibility. But it was terribly hard for a man to have to admit defeat in his very first command. Buckland looked as if for inspiration round the bay, where the red-and-gold flags of Spain flew above the banked-up powder smoke of the batteries — no inspiration could be found there.

"We can only get out with the land breeze," said Buckland. "Yes, sir."

There was almost no longer for the land breeze to blow, either, thought Bush; Buckland knew it as well as he did. A shot from the fort on the hill struck into the main chains at that moment, with a jarring crash and a shower of splinters. They heard the call for the fire party, and with that Buckland reached the bitter decision.

"Heave in on the spring cable," he ordered. "Get her round head to sea."

"Aye aye, sir."

Retreat — defeat; that was what that order meant. But defeat had to be faced; even with that order given there was much that had to be done to work the ship out of the imminent danger in which she lay. Bush turned to give the orders.

"Vast heaving at the capstan, there!"

The clanking ceased and the *Renown* rode free in the muddy, churned-up waters of the bay. To retreat she would have to turn tail, reverse herself in that confined space, and work her way out to sea. Fortunately the means were immediately available: by heaving in on the bow cable which had so far lain idle between hawsehole and anchor the ship could be brought short round.

"Cast off the stern cable messenger!"

The orders came quickly and easily; it was a routine piece of seamanship, even though it had to be carried out under the fire of a red-hot shot. There were the boats still manned and afloat to drag the battered vessel out

of harm's way if the precarious breeze should die away. Round came the *Renown's* bows under the pull of the bow cable as the capstan set to work upon it. Even though the wind was dying away to a sweltering calm, movement was obvious — but the shock of defeat and the contemplation of that accursed artillery! While the capstan was dragging the ship up to her anchor the necessity for keeping the ship on the move occurred to Bush. He touched his hat to Buckland again.

"Shall I warp her down the bay, sir?"

Buckland had been standing by the binnacle staring vacantly at the fort. It was not a question of physical cowardice — that was obvious — but the shock of defeat and the contemplation of the future had made the man temporarily incapable of logical thought. But Bush's question prodded him back into dealing with the current situation.

"Yes," said Buckland, and Bush turned away, happy to have something useful to do which he well knew how to do.

Another anchor had to be cockbilled at the port bow, another cable roused out. A hail to James, in command of the boats since Roberts' death, told him of the new evolution and called him under the bows for the anchor to be lowered down to the launch — the trickiest part of the whole business. Then the launch's crew bent to their oars and towed ahead, their boat crank with the ponderous weight that it bore dangling aft and with the cable paying out astern of it. Yard by yard, to the monotonous turning of the capstan, the *Renown* crept up to her first anchor, and when that cable was straight up and down the flutter of a signal warned James, now far ahead in the launch, to drop the anchor his boat carried and return for the stream anchor which was about to be hauled up. The stern cable, now of no more use, had to be unhitched and got in, the effort of the capstan transferred from one cable to the other, while the two cutters were given lines by which they could contribute their tiny effort to the general result, towing the ponderous ship and giving her the smallest conceivable amount of motion which yet was valuable when it was a matter of such urgency to withdraw the ship out of range.

Down below Hornblower was at work dragging forward the guns he had previously dragged aft; the rumble and squeal of the trucks over the planking was audible through the ship over the monotonous clanking of the capstan. Overhead blazed the pitiless sun, softening the pitch in the seams, while yard after painful yard, cable's length after cable's length, the ship crept on down the bay out of range of the red-hot shot, over the glittering still water; down the bay of Samaná until at last they were out of range and could pause while the men drank a niggardly half-pint of warm odorous water before turning back to their labours. To bury the dead, to repair the damages, and to digest the realization of defeat. Maybe to wonder if the captain's malign influence still persisted, mad and helpless though he was.

Chapter VIII

When the tropic night closed down upon the battered *Renown*, as she stood off the land under easy sail, just enough to stiffen her to ride easily over the Atlantic rollers that the trade wind, reinforced by the sea breeze, sent hurrying under her bows, Buckland sat anxiously discussing the situation with his new first lieutenant. Despite the breeze, the little cabin was like an oven; the two lanterns which hung from the deck beams to illuminate the chart on the table seemed to heat the room unbearably. Bush felt the perspiration prickling under his uniform, and his stock constricted his thick neck so that every now and again he put two fingers into it and tugged, without relief. It would have been the simplest matter in the world to take off his heavy uniform coat and unhook his stock, but it never crossed his mind that he should do so. Bodily discomfort was something that one bore without complaint in a hard world; habit and pride both helped.

"Then you think we should bear up for Jamaica?" asked Buckland.

"I wouldn't go as far as to advise it, sir," replied Bush, cautiously.

The responsibility was Buckland's, entirely Buckland's, by the law of the navy, and Bush was a little irked at Buckland's trying to share it.

"But what else can we do?" asked Buckland. "What do you suggest?"

Bush remembered the plan of campaign Hornblower had sketched out to him, but he did not put it instantly forward; he had not weighed it sufficiently in his mind — he did not even know if he thought it practicable. Instead he temporised.

"If we head for Jamaica it'll be with our tail between our legs, sir," he said.

"That's perfectly true," agreed Buckland, with a helpless gesture. "There's the captain "

"Yes," said Bush. "There's the captain."

If the *Renown* were to report to the admiral at Kingston with a resounding success to her record there might not be too diligent an inquiry into past events; but if she came limping in, defeated, battered, it would be far more likely that inquiry might be made into the reasons why her captain had been put under restraint, why Buckland had read the secret orders, why he had taken upon himself the responsibility of making the attack upon Samaná.

"It was young Hornblower who said the same thing to me," complained Buckland pettishly. "I wish I'd never listened to him."

"What did you ask him, sir?" asked Bush.

"Oh, I can't say that I asked him anything," replied Buckland, pettishly again. "We were yarning together on the quarterdeck one evening. It was his watch."

"I remember, sir," prompted Bush.

"We talked. The infernal little whippersnapper said just what you were saying — I don't remember how it started. But then it was a question of going to Antigua. Hornblower said that it would be better if we had the chance to achieve something before we faced an inquiry about the captain. He said it was my opportunity. So it was, I suppose. My great chance. But with Hornblower talking you'd think I was going to be posted captain tomorrow. And now —"

Buckland's gesture indicated how much chance he thought he had of ever being posted captain now.

Bush thought about the report Buckland would have to make: nine killed and twenty wounded; the *Renown's* attack ignominiously beaten off; Samaná Bay as safe a refuge for privateers as ever. He was glad he was not Buckland, but at the same time he realised that there was grave danger of his being tarred with the same brush. He was first lieutenant now, he was one of the officers who had acquiesced, if nothing more, in the displacement of Sawyer from command, and it would take a victory to invest him with any virtue at all in the eyes of his superiors.

"Damn it," said Buckland in pathetic self-defence, "we did our best. Anyone could run aground in that channel. It wasn't our fault that the helmsman was killed. Nothing could get up the bay under that crossfire."

"Hornblower was suggesting a landing on the seaward side. In Scotchman's Bay, sir." Bush was speaking as cautiously as he could.

"Another of Hornblower's suggestions?" said Buckland.

"I think that's what he had in mind from the start, sir. A landing and a surprise attack."

Probably it was because the attempt had failed, but Bush now could see the unreason of taking a wooden ship into a situation where red-hot cannon balls could be fired into her.

"What do *you* think?"

"Well, sir —"

Bush was not sure enough about what he thought to be able to express himself with any clarity. But if they had failed once they might as well fail twice; as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. Bush was a sturdy soul; it went against his grain to yield in face of difficulties, and he was irritated at the thought of a tame retreat after a single repulse. The difficulty was to devise an alternative plan of campaign. He tried to say all these things to Buckland, and was sufficiently carried away to be incautious.

"I see," said Buckland. In the light of the swaying lamps the play of the shadows on his face accentuated the struggle in his expression. He came to a sudden decision. "Let's hear what he has to say."

"Aye aye, sir. Smith has the watch. Hornblower has the middle — I expect he has turned in until he's called."

Buckland was as weary as anyone in the ship — wearier than most, it seemed likely. The thought of Hornblower stretched at ease in his cot while his superiors sat up fretting wrought Buckland up to a pitch of decision that he might not otherwise have reached, determining him to act at once instead of waiting till the morrow.

"Pass the word for him," he ordered.

Hornblower came into the cabin with commendable promptitude, his hair tousled and his clothes obviously hastily thrown on. He threw a nervous glance round the cabin as he entered; obviously he suffered from not unreasonable doubts as to why he had been summoned thus into the presence of his superiors.

"What plan is this I've been hearing about?" asked Buckland. "You had some suggestion for storming the fort, I understand, Mr Hornblower."

Hornblower did not answer immediately; he was marshalling his arguments and reconsidering his first plan in the light of the new situation — Bush could see that it was hardly fair that Hornblower should be called upon to state his plan now that the *Renown* had made one attempt and had failed after sacrificing the initial advantage of surprise. But Bush could see that he was reordering his ideas.

"I thought a landing might have more chance, sir," he said. "But that was before the Dons knew there was a ship of the line in the neighbourhood."

"And now you don't think so?"

Buckland's tone was a mixture of relief and disappointment — relief that he might not have to reach any further decisions, and disappointment that some easy way of gaining success was not being put forward. But Hornblower had had time now to sort out his ideas, and to think about times and distances. That showed in his face.

"I think something might well be tried, sir, as long as it was tried at once."

"At once?" This was night, the crew were weary, and Buckland's tone showed surprise at the suggestion of immediate activity. "You don't mean tonight?"

"Tonight might be the best time, sir. The Dons have seen us driven off with our tail between our legs — excuse me, sir, but that's how it'll look to them, at least. The last they saw of us was beating out of Samaná Bay at sunset. They'll be pleased with themselves. You know how they are, sir. An attack at dawn from another quarter, overland, would be the last thing they'd expect."

That sounded like sense to Bush, and he made a small approving noise, the most he would venture towards making a contribution to the debate.

"How would you make this attack, Mr Hornblower?" asked Buckland.

Hornblower had his ideas in order now; the weariness disappeared and there was a glow of enthusiasm in his face.

"The wind's fair for Scotchman's Bay, sir. We could be back there in less than two hours — before midnight. By the time we arrive we can have the landing party told off and prepared. A hundred seamen and the marines. There's a good landing beach there — we saw it yesterday. The country inland must be marshy, before the hills of the peninsula start again, but we can land on the peninsula side of the marsh. I marked the place yesterday, sir."

"Well?"

Hornblower swallowed the realisation that it was possible for a man not to be able to continue from that point with a single leap of his imagination.

"The landing party can make their way up to the crest without difficulty, sir. There's no question of losing their way — the sea one side and Samaná Bay on the other. They can move forward along the crest. At dawn they can rush the fort. What with the marsh and the cliffs the Dons'll keep a poor lookout on that side, I fancy, sir."

"You make it sound very easy, Mr Hornblower. But — a hundred and eighty men?"

"Enough, I think, sir."

"What makes you think so?"

"There were six guns firing at us from the fort, sir. Ninety men at most — sixty more likely. Ammunition party; men to heat the furnaces. A hundred and fifty men altogether; perhaps as few as a hundred."

"But why should that be all they had?"

"The Dons have nothing to fear on that side of the island. They're holding out against the blacks, and the French, maybe, and the English in Jamaica. There's nothing to tempt the blacks to attack 'em across the marshes. It's south of Samaná Bay that the danger lies. The Dons'll have every man that can carry a musket on that side. That's where the cities are. That's where this fellow Toussaint, or whatever his name is, will be threatening 'em, sir."

The last word of this long speech came as a fortunate afterthought; Hornblower clearly was restraining himself from pointing out the obvious too didactically to his superior officer. And Bush could see Buckland squirm in discomfort at this casual mention of blacks and French. Those secret orders — which Bush had not been allowed to read — must lay down some drastic instructions regarding the complicated political situation in Santo Domingo, where the revolted slaves, the French, and the Spaniards (nominal allies though these last might be, elsewhere in the world) all contended for the mastery.

"We'll leave the blacks and the French out of this," said Buckland, confirming Bush's suspicions.

"Yes, sir. But the Dons won't," said Hornblower, not very abashed. "They're more afraid of the blacks than of us at present."

"So you think this attack might succeed?" asked Buckland, desperately changing the subject.

"I think it might, sir. But time's getting on."

Buckland sat looking at his two juniors in painful indecision, and Bush felt full sympathy for him. A second bloody repulse — possibly something even worse, the cutting off and capitulation of the entire landing party — would be Buckland's certain ruin.

"With the fort in our hands, sir," said Hornblower, "we can deal with the privateers up the bay. They could never use it as an anchorage again."

"That's true," agreed Buckland. It would be a neat and economical fulfillment of his orders; it would restore his credit.

The timbers of the ship creaked rhythmically as the *Renown* rode over the waves. The trade wind came blowing into the cabin, relieving it of some of its stuffiness, breathing cooler air on Bush's sweaty face.

"Damn it," said Buckland with sudden reckless decision, "let's do it."

"Very good, sir," said Hornblower.

Bush had to restrain himself from saying something that would express his pleasure; Hornblower had used a neutral tone — too obvious pushing of Buckland along the path of action might have a reverse effect and goad him into reversing his decision even now.

And although this decision had been reached there was another one, almost equally important, which had to be reached at once.

"Who will be in command?" asked Buckland. It could only be a rhetorical question; nobody except Buckland could possibly supply the answer, and to Bush and Hornblower this was obvious. They could only wait.

"It'd be poor Roberts' duty if he had lived," said Buckland, and then he turned to look at Bush.

"Mr Bush, you will take command."

"Aye aye, sir."

Bush got up from his chair and stood with his head bowed uneasily under the deck timbers above.

"Who do you want to take with you?"

Hornblower had been on his feet during the whole interview; now he shifted his weight self-consciously from one foot to the other.

"Do you require me any more, sir?" he said to Buckland.

Bush could not tell by looking at him what emotions were at work in him; he had the pose merely of a respectful, attentive officer. Bush thought about Smith, the remaining lieutenant in the ship. He thought about Whiting, the captain of marines, who would certainly have to take part in the landing. There were midshipmen and master's mates to be used as subordinate officers. He was going to be responsible for a risky and desperate operation of war — now it was his own credit, as well as Buckland's, that was at stake. Whom did he want at his side at this, one of the most important moments in his career? Another lieutenant, if he asked for one, would be second in command, might expect to have a voice in the decisions to be made.

"Do we need Mr Hornblower any more, Mr Bush?" asked Buckland.

Hornblower would be an active subordinate in command. A restless one, would be another way of expressing it. He would be apt to criticise, in thought at least. Bush did not think he cared to exercise command with Hornblower listening to his every order. This whole internal debate of Bush's did not take definite shape, with formal arguments pro and con; it was rather a conflict of prejudices and instincts, the result of years of experience, which Bush could never have expressed in words. He decided he needed neither Hornblower nor Smith at the moment before he looked again at Hornblower's face. Hornblower was trying to remain

impassive; but Bush could see, with sympathetic insight, how desperately anxious he was to be invited to join in the expedition. Any officer would want to go, of course, would yearn to be given an opportunity to distinguish himself, but actuating Hornblower was some motive more urgent than this. Hornblower's hands were at his sides, in the 'attention' position, but Bush noticed how the long fingers tapped against his thighs, restrained themselves, and then tapped again uncontrollably. It was not cool judgment that finally brought Bush to his decision, but something quite otherwise. It might be called kindness; it might be called affection. He had grown fond of this volatile, versatile young man, and he had no doubts now as to his physical courage. "I'd like Mr Hornblower to come with me, sir," he said; it seemed almost without his volition that the words came from his mouth; a softhearted elder brother might have said much the same thing, burdening himself with the presence of a much younger brother out of kindness of heart when contemplating some pleasant day's activities.

And as he spoke he received a glance in return from Hornblower that stifled at birth any regrets he may have felt at allowing his sentiments to influence his judgment. There was so much of relief, so much of gratitude, in the way Hornblower looked at him that Bush experienced a kindly glow of magnanimity; he felt a bigger and better man for what he had done. Naturally he did not for a moment see anything incongruous about Hornblower's being grateful for a decision that would put him in peril of his life.

"Very well, Mr Bush," said Buckland; typically, he wavered for a space after agreeing. "That will leave me with only one lieutenant."

"Carberry could take watch, sir," replied Bush. "And there are several among the master's mates who are good watch-keeping officers."

It was as natural for Bush to argue down opposition once he had committed himself as it might be for a fish to snap at a lure.

"Very well," said Buckland again, almost with a sigh. "And what is it that's troubling you, Mr Hornblower?"

"Nothing, sir."

"There was something you wanted to say. Out with it."

"Nothing important, sir. It can wait. But I was wondering about altering course, sir. We can head for Scotchman's Bay now and waste no time."

"I suppose we can." Buckland knew as well as any officer in the navy that the whims of wind and weather were unpredictable, and that action upon any decision at sea should in consequence never be delayed, but he was likely to forget it unless he were prodded. "Oh, very well. We'd better get her before the wind, then. What's the course?"

After the bustle of wearing the ship round had died away Buckland led the way back to his cabin and threw himself wearily into his chair again. He put on a whimsical air to conceal the anxiety which was now consuming him afresh.

"We've satisfied Mr Hornblower for a moment," he said. "Now let's hear what you need, Mr Bush."

The discussion regarding the proposed expedition proceeded along normal lines: the men to be employed, the equipment that was to be issued to them, the rendezvous that had to be arranged for next morning.

Hornblower kept himself studiously in the background as these points were settled.

"Any suggestions, Mr Hornblower?" asked Bush at length. Politeness, if not policy as well, dictated the question.

"Only one, sir. We might have with us some boat grapnels with lines attached. If we have to scale the walls they might be useful."

"That's so," agreed Bush. "Remember to see that they're issued."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Do you need a messenger, Mr Hornblower?" asked Buckland.

"It might be better if I had one, sir."

"Anyone in particular?"

"I'd prefer to have Wellard, sir, if you've no objection. He's cool-headed and thinks quickly."

"Very well." Buckland looked hard at Hornblower at the mention of Wellard's name, but said nothing more on the subject for the moment.

"Anything else? No? Mr Bush? All settled?"

"Yes, sir," said Bush.

Buckland drummed with his fingers on the table. The recent alteration of course had not been the decisive move; it did not commit him to anything. But the next order would. If the hands were roused out, arms issued to them, instructions given for a landing, he could hardly draw back. Another attempt; maybe another failure; maybe a disaster. It was not in his power to command success, while it was certainly in his power to obviate failure by simply not risking it. He looked up and met the gaze of his two subordinates turned on him remorselessly. No, it was too late now — he had been mistaken when he thought he could draw back. He could not.

"Then it only remains to issue the orders," he said. "Will you see to it, if you please?"

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush.

He and Hornblower were about to leave the cabin when Buckland asked the question he had wanted to ask for so long. It necessitated an abrupt change of subject, even though the curiosity that inspired the question had been reawakened by Hornblower's mention of Wellard. But Buckland, full of the virtuous glow of having reached a decision, felt emboldened to ask the question; it was a moment of exaltation in any case, and confidences were possible.

"By the way, Mr Hornblower," he said, and Hornblower halted beside the door, "how did the captain come to fall down the hatchway?"

Bush saw the expressionless mask take the place of the eager look on Hornblower's face. The answer took a moment or two to come.

"I think he must have overbalanced, sir," said Hornblower, with the utmost respect and a complete absence of feeling in his voice. "The ship was lively that night, you remember, sir."

"I suppose she was," said Buckland; disappointment and perplexity were audible in his tone. He stared at Hornblower, but there was nothing to be gleaned from that face. "Oh, very well then. Carry on."

"Aye aye, sir."

Chapter IX

The sea breeze had died away with the cooling of the land, and it was that breathless time of night when air pressures over land and ocean were evenly balanced. Not many miles out at sea the trade winds could blow, as they blew eternally, but here on the beach a humid calm prevailed. The long swell of the Atlantic broke momentarily at the first hint of shallows far out, but lived on, like some once vigorous man now feeble after an illness, to burst rhythmically in foam on the beach to the westward; here, where the limestone cliffs of the Samaná peninsula began, there was a sheltered corner where a small watercourse had worn a wide gully in the cliff, at the most easterly end of the wide beach. And sea and surf and beach seemed to be afire; in the dark night the phosphorescence of the water was vividly bright, heaving up with the surf, running up the beach with the breakers, and lighting up the oar blades as the launches pulled to shore. The boats seemed to be floating on fire which derived new life from their passage; each launch left a wake of fire behind it, with a vivid streak on either side where the oar blades had bitten into the water.

Both landing and ascent were easy at the foot of the gully; the launches nuzzled their bows into the sand and the landing party had only to climb out, thigh-deep in the water — thigh-deep in liquid fire — holding their weapons and cartridge boxes high to make sure they were not wetted. Even the experienced seamen in the party were impressed by the brightness of the phosphorescence; the raw hands were excited by it enough to raise a bubbling chatter which called for a sharp order to repress it. Bush was one of the earliest to climb out of his launch; he splashed ashore and stood on the unaccustomed solidity of the beach while the others followed him; the water streamed down out of his soggy trouser legs.

A dark figure appeared before him, coming from the direction of the other launch.

"My party is all ashore, sir," it reported.

"Very good, Mr Hornblower."

"I'll start up the gully with the advanced guard then, sir?"

"Yes, Mr Hornblower. Carry out your orders."

Bush was tense and excited, as far as his stoical training and phlegmatic temperament would allow him to be; he would have liked to plunge into action at once, but the careful scheme worked out in consultation with Hornblower did not allow it. He stood aside while his own party was being formed up and Hornblower called the other division to order.

"StarbowLines! Follow me closely. Every man is to keep in touch with the man ahead of him. Remember your muskets aren't loaded — it's no use snapping them if we meet an enemy. Cold steel for that. If any one of you is fool enough to load and fire he'd get four dozen at the gangway tomorrow. That I promise you. Woolton!"

"Sir!"

"Bring up the rear. Now follow me, you men, starting from the right of the line."

Hornblower's party filed off into the darkness. Already the marines were coming ashore, their scarlet tunics black against the phosphorescence. The white crossbelts were faintly visible side by side in a rigid two-deep line as they formed up, the non-commissioned officers snapping low-voiced orders at them. With his left hand still resting on his sword hilt Bush checked once more with his right hand that his pistols were in his belt and his cartridges in his pocket. A shadowy figure halted before them with a military click of the heels.

"All present and correct, sir. Ready to march off," said Whiting's voice.

"Thank you. We may as well start. Mr Abbott!"

"Sir!"

"You have your orders. I'm leaving with the marine detachment now. Follow us."

"Aye aye, sir."

It was a long hard climb up the gully; the sand soon was replaced by rock, flat ledges of limestone, but even among the limestone there was a sturdy vegetation, fostered by the tropical rains which fell profusely on this northern face. Only in the bed of the watercourse itself, dry now with all the water having seeped into the limestone, was there a clear passage, if clear it could be called, for it was jagged and irregular, with steep ledges up which Bush had to heave himself. In a few minutes he was streaming with sweat, but he climbed on stubbornly. Behind him the marines followed clumsily, boots clashing, weapons and equipment clinking, so that anyone might think the noise would be heard a mile away. Someone slipped and swore.

"Keep a still tongue in yer 'ead!" snapped a corporal.

"Silence!" snarled Whiting over his shoulder.

Onward and upward; here and there the vegetation was lofty enough to cut off the faint light from the stars, and Bush had to grope his way along over the rock, his breath coming with difficulty, powerfully built man though he was. Fireflies showed here and there as he climbed; it was years since he had seen fireflies last, but he paid no attention to them now. They excited irrepressible comment among the marines following him, though; Bush felt a bitter rage against the uncontrolled louts who were imperilling everything — their own lives as well as the success of the expedition — by their silly comments.

"I'll deal with 'em, sir," said Whiting, and dropped back to let the column overtake him.

Higher up a squeaky voice, moderated as best its owner knew how, greeted him from the darkness ahead.

"Mr Bush, sir?"

"Yes."

"This is Wellard, sir. Mr Hornblower sent me hack here to act as guide; There's grassland beginning just above here." Very well, said Bush.

He halted for a space, wiping his streaming face with his coat sleeve, while the column closed up behind him. It was not much farther to climb when he moved on again; Wellard led him past a clump of shadowy trees, and, sure enough, Bush felt grass under his feet, and he could walk more freely, uphill still, but only a gentle slope compared with the gully. There was a low challenge ahead of them.

"Friend," said Wellard. "This is Mr Bush here."

"Glad to see you, sir," said another voice — Hornblower's.

Hornblower detached himself from the darkness and came forward to make his report.

"My party is formed up just ahead, sir. I've sent Saddler and two reliable men on as scouts."

"Very good," said Bush, and meant it.

The marine sergeant was reporting to Whiting.

"All present, sir, 'cept for Chapman, sir. 'E's sprained 'is ankle, or 'e says 'e 'as, sir. Left 'im be'ind back there, sir."

"Let your men rest, Captain Whiting," said Bush.

Life in the confines of a ship of the line was no sort of training for climbing cliffs in the tropics, especially as the day before had been exhausting. The marines lay down, some of them with groans of relief which drew the unmistakable reproof of savage kicks from the sergeant's toe.

"We're on the crest here, sir," said Hornblower. "You can see over into the bay from that side there."

"Three miles from the fort, d'ye think?"

Bush did not mean to ask a question, for he was in command, but Hornblower was so ready with his report that Bush could not help doing so.

"Perhaps. Less than four, anyway, sir. Dawn in four hours from now, and the moon rises in half an hour."

"Yes."

"There's some sort of track or path along the crest, sir, as you'd expect. It should lead to the fort."

"Yes."

Hornblower was a good subordinate, clearly. Bush realised now that there would naturally be a track along the crest of the peninsula — that would be the obvious thing — but the probability had not occurred to him until that moment.

"If you will permit me, sir," went on Hornblower, "I'll leave James in command of my party and push on ahead with Saddler and Wellard and see how the land lies."

"Very good, Mr Hornblower."

Yet no sooner had Hornblower left than Bush felt a vague irritation. It seemed that Hornblower was taking too much on himself. Bush was not a man who would tolerate any infringement upon his authority. However, Bush was distracted from this train of thought by the arrival of the second division of seamen, who came sweating and gasping up to join the main body. With the memory of his own weariness when he arrived still fresh in his mind Bush allowed them a rest period before he should push on with his united force. Even in the darkness a cloud of insects had discovered the sweating force, and a host of them sang round Bush's ears and bit him viciously at every opportunity. The crew of the *Renown* had been long at sea and were tender and desirable in consequence. Bush slapped at himself and swore, and every man in his command did the same.

"Mr Bush, sir?"

It was Hornblower back again.

"Yes?"

"It's a definite trail, sir. It crosses a gully just ahead, but it's not a serious obstacle."

"Thank you, Mr Hornblower. We'll move forward. Start with your division, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

The advance began. The domed limestone top of the peninsula was covered with long grass, interspersed with occasional trees. Off the track walking was a little difficult on account of the toughness and irregularity of the bunches of high grass, but on the track it was comparatively easy. The men could move along it in something like a solid body, well closed up. Their eyes, thoroughly accustomed to the darkness, could see in the starlight enough to enable them to pick their way. The gully that Hornblower had reported was only a shallow depression with easily sloping sides and presented no difficulty.

Bush plodded on at the head of the marines with Whiting at his side, the darkness all about him like a warm blanket. There was a kind of dreamlike quality about the march, induced perhaps by the fact that Bush had not slept for twenty-four hours and was stupid with the fatigues he had undergone during that period. The path was ascending gently — naturally, of course, since it was rising to the highest part of the peninsula where the fort was sited.

"Ah!" said Whiting suddenly.

The path had wandered to the right, away from the sea and towards the bay, and now they had crossed the backbone of the peninsula and opened up the view over the bay. On their right they could see clear down the bay to the sea, and there it was not quite dark, for above the horizon a little moonlight was struggling through the clouds that lay at the lower edge of the sky.

"Mr Bush, sir?"

This was Wellard, his voice more under command this time.

"Here I am."

"Mr Hornblower sent me back again, sir. There's another gully ahead, crossing the path. An' we've come across some cattle, sir. Asleep on the hill. We disturbed 'em, and they're wandering about."

"Thank you, I understand," said Bush.

Bush had the lowest opinion of the ordinary man and the sub-ordinary man who constituted the great bulk of his command. He knew perfectly well that if they were to blunder into cattle along this path they would think they were meeting the enemy. There would be excitement and noise, even if there was no shooting.

"Tell Mr Hornblower I am going to halt for fifteen minutes."

"Aye aye, sir."

A rest and opportunity to close up the column were desirable for the weary men in any case, as long as there was time to spare. And during the rest the men could be personally and individually warned about the possibility of encountering cattle. Bush knew that merely to pass the word back down the column would be unsatisfactory, actually unsafe, with these tired and slow-witted men. He gave the order and the column came to a halt, of course with sleepy men bumping into the men in front of them with a clatter and a murmur and the whispered curses of the petty officers with difficulty suppressed. While the warning was being circulated among the men lying in the grass another trouble was reported to Bush by a petty officer.

"Seaman Black, sir. 'E's drunk."

"Drunk?"

"'E must 'ave 'ad sperrits in 'is canteen, sir. You can smell it on 'is breff. Dunno 'ow 'e got it, sir."

With a hundred and eighty seamen and marines under his command one man at least was likely to be drunk. The ability of the British sailor to get hold of liquor and his readiness to over-indulge in it were part of his physical make-up, like his ears or his eyes.

"Where is he now?"

"'E made a noise, sir, so I clipped 'im on the ear'ole an' 'e's quiet now, sir."

There was much left untold in that brief sentence, as Bush could guess, but he had no reason to make further inquiry while he thought of what to do.

"Choose a steady seaman and leave him with Black when we go on."

"Aye aye, sir."

So the landing party was the weaker now by the loss of the services not only of the drunken Black but of the man who must be left behind to keep him out of mischief. But it was lucky that there were not more stragglers than there had been up to now.

As the column moved forward again Hornblower's unmistakable gangling figure showed up ahead, silhouetted against the faint moonlight. He fell into step beside Bush and made his report.

"I've sighted the fort, sir."

"You have?"

"Yes, sir. A mile ahead from here, or thereabouts, there's another gully. The fort's beyond that. You can see it against the moon. Maybe half a mile beyond, maybe less. I've left Wellard and Saddler at the gully with orders to halt the advance there."

"Thank you."

Bush plodded on over the uneven surface. Now despite his fatigue he was growing tense again, as the tiger having scented his prey braces his muscles for the spring. Bush was a fighting man, and the thought of action close ahead acted as a stimulant to him. Two hours to sunrise; time and to spare.

"Half a mile from the gully to the fort?" he asked.

"Less than that, I should say, sir."

"Very well. I'll halt there and wait for daylight."

"Yes, sir. May I go on to join my division?"

"You may, Mr Hornblower."

Bush and Whiting were holding down the pace of the march to a slow methodical step, adapted to the capacity of the slowest and clumsiest man in the column; Bush at this moment was checking himself from lengthening his stride under the spur of the prospect of action. Hornblower went plunging ahead; Bush could

see his awkward gait but found himself approving of his subordinate's overflowing energy. He began to discuss with Whiting plans for the final assault.

There was a petty officer waiting for them at the approach to the gully. Bush passed the word back for the column to be ready to halt, and then halted it. He went forward to reconnoitre; with Whiting and Hornblower beside him he stared forward at the square silhouette of the fort against the sky. It even seemed possible to see the dark line of the flagpole. Now his tenseness was eased; the scowl that had been on his face in the last stages of the advance had softened into an expression of good humour, which was wasted in the circumstances.

The arrangements were quickly made, the orders whispered back and forth, the final warnings given. It was the most dangerous moment so far, as the men had to be moved up into the gully and deployed ready for a rush. One whisper from Whiting called for more than a moment's cogitation from Bush.

"Shall I give permission for the men to load, sir?"

"No," answered Bush at length. "Cold steel."

It would be too much of a risk to allow all those muskets to be loaded in the dark. There would not only be the noise of the ramrods, but there was also the danger of some fool pulling a trigger. Hornblower went off to the left, Whiting with his marines to the right, and Bush lay down in the midst of his division in the centre. His legs ached with their unaccustomed exercise, and as he lay his head was inclined to swim with fatigue and lack of sleep. He roused himself and sat up so as to bring himself under control again. Except for his weariness he did not find the waiting period troublesome to him; years of life at sea with its uncounted eventless watches, and years of war with its endless periods of boredom, had inured him to waiting. Some of the seamen actually slept as they lay in the rocky gully; more than once Bush heard snores begin, abruptly cut off by the nudges of the snorers' neighbours.

Now there, at last, right ahead, beyond the fort — was the sky a little paler? Or was it merely that the moon had climbed above the cloud? All round about save there the sky was like purple velvet, still spangled with stars. But there — there — undoubtedly there was a pallor in the sky which had not been there before. Bush stirred and felt again at the uncomfortable pistols in his belt. They were at half-cock; he must remember to pull the hammers back. On the horizon there was a suspicion, the merest suggestion, of a redness mingled with the purple of the sky.

"Pass the word down the line," said Bush. "Prepare to attack."

He waited for the word to pass, but in less time than was possible for it to have reached the ends of the line there were sounds and disturbances in the gully. The damned fools who were always to be found in any body of men had started to rise as soon as the word had reached them, probably without even bothering to pass the word on themselves. But the example would be infectious, at least; beginning at the wings, and coming back to the centre where Bush was, a double ripple of men rising to their feet went along the line. Bush rose too. He drew his sword, balanced it in his hand, and when he was satisfied with his grip he drew a pistol with his left hand and pulled back the hammer. Over on the right there was a sudden clatter of metal; the marines were fixing their bayonets. Bush could see the faces now of the men to right and to left of him.

"Forward!" he said, and the line came surging up out of the gully. "Steady, there!"

He said the last words almost loudly; sooner or later the hotheads in the line would start to run, and later would be better than sooner. He wanted his men to reach the fort in a single wave, not in a succession of breathless individuals. Out on the left he heard Hornblower's voice saying "Steady" as well. The noise of the advance must reach the fort now, must attract the attention even of sleepy, careless Spanish sentries. Soon a sentry would call for his sergeant, the sergeant would come to see, would hesitate a moment, and then give the alarm. The fort bulked square in front of Bush, still shadowy black against the newly red sky; he simply could not restrain himself from quickening his step, and the line came hurrying forward along with him. Then someone raised a shout, then the other hotheads shouted, and the whole line started to run, Bush running with them.

Like magic, they were at the edge of the ditch, a six-foot scarp, almost vertical, cut in the limestone.

"Come on!" shouted Bush.

Even with his sword and his pistol in his hands he was able to precipitate himself down the scarp, turning his back to the fort and clinging to the edge with his elbows before allowing himself to drop. The bottom of the

dry ditch was slippery and irregular, but he plunged across it to the opposite scarp. Yelling men clustered along it, hauling themselves up.

"Give me a hoist!" shouted Bush to the men on either side of him, and they put their shoulders to his thighs and almost threw him up bodily. He found himself on his face, lying on the narrow shelf above the ditch at the foot of the ramparts. A few yards along a seaman was already trying to fling his grapnel up to the top. It came thundering down, missing Bush by no more than a yard, but the seaman without a glance at him snatched it back, poised himself again, and flung the grapnel up the ramparts. It caught, and the seaman, setting his feet against the ramparts and grasping the line with his hands, began to climb like a madman. Before he was half way up another seaman had grabbed the line and started to scale the ramparts after him, and a yelling crowd of excited men gathered round contending for the next place. Farther along the foot of the ramparts another grapnel had caught and another crowd of yelling men were gathered about the line. Now there was musketry fire; a good many loud reports, and a whiff of powder smoke came to Bush's nostrils in sharp contrast with the pure night air that he had been breathing.

Round on the other face of the fort on his right the marines would be trying to burst in through the embrasures of the guns; Bush turned to his left to see what could be done there. Almost instantly he found his reward; here was the sally port into the fort — a wide wooden door bound with iron, sheltered in the angle of the small projecting bastion at the corner of the fort. Two idiots of seamen were firing their muskets up at the heads that were beginning to show above — not a thought for the door. The average seaman was not fit to be trusted with a musket. Bush raised his voice so that it pealed like a trumpet above the din.

"Axemen here! Axemen! Axemen!"

There were still plenty of men down in the ditch who had not yet had time to scale the scarp; one of them, waving an axe, plunged through the crowd and began to climb up. But Silk, the immensely powerful bosun's mate who commanded a section of seamen in Bush's division, came running along the shelf and grabbed the axe. He began to hew at the door, with tremendous methodical blows, gathering his body together and then flinging the axehead into the wood with all the strength in his body. Another axeman arrived, elbowed Bush aside, and started to hack at the door as well, but he was neither as accomplished nor as powerful. The thunder of their blows resounded in the angle. The ironbarred wicket in the door opened, with a gleam of steel beyond the bars. Bush pointed his pistol and fired. Silk's axe drove clean through the door, and he wrenched the blade free; then, changing his aim, he began to swing the axe in a horizontal arc at the middle part of the door. Three mighty blows and he paused to direct the other axeman where to strike. Silk struck again and again; then he put down the axe, set his fingers in the jagged hole that had opened, his foot against the door, and with one frightful muscle-tearing effort he rent away a whole section of the door. There was a beam across the gap he had opened; Silk's axe crashed on to it and through it — and again. With a hoarse shout Silk plunged, axe in hand, through the jagged hole.

"Come along, men!" yelled Bush, at the top of his lungs, and plunged through after him.

This was the open courtyard of the fort. Bush stumbled over a dead man and looked up to see a group of men before him, in their shirts, or naked; coffee-coloured faces with long disordered moustaches; men with cutlasses and pistols. Silk flung himself upon them like a maniac, the axe swinging. A Spaniard fell under the axe; Bush saw a severed finger fall to the ground as the axe crashed through the Spaniard's ineffectual guard. Pistols banged and smoke eddied about as Bush rushed forward too. There were other men swarming after him. Bush's sword clashed against a cutlass and then the group turned and fled. Bush swung with his sword at a naked shoulder fleeing before him, and saw a red wound open in the flesh and heard the man scream. The man he was pursuing vanished somewhere, like a wraith, and Bush, hurrying on to find other enemies, met a red-coated marine, hatless, his hair wild and his eyes blazing, yelling like a fiend. Bush actually had to parry the bayonet-thrust the marine made at him.

"Steady, you fool!" shouted Bush, only conscious after the words had passed his lips that they were spoken at the top of his voice.

There was a hint of recognition in the marine's mad eyes, and he turned aside, his bayonet at the charge, and rushed on. There were other marines in the background; they must have made their way in through the embrasures. They were all yelling, all drunk with fighting. And here was another rush of seamen, swarming down from the ramparts they had scaled. On the far side there were wooden buildings; his men were

swarming round them and shots and screams were echoing from them. Those must be the barracks and storehouses, and the garrison must have fled there for shelter from the fury of the stormers.

Whiting appeared, his scarlet tunic filthy, his sword dangling from his wrist. His eyes were bleary and cloudy.

"Call 'em off," said Bush, grasping at his own sanity with a desperate effort.

It took Whiting a moment to recognise him and to understand the order.

"Yes, sir," he said.

A fresh flood of seamen came pouring into view beyond the buildings; Hornblower's division had found its way into the fort on the far side, evidently. Bush looked round him and called to a group of his own men who appeared at that moment.

"Follow me," he said, and pushed on.

A ramp with an easy slope led up the side of the ramparts. A dead man lay there, half way up, but Bush gave the corpse no more attention than it deserved. At the top was the main battery, six huge guns pointing through the embrasures. And beyond was the sky, all bloody-red with the dawn. A third of the way up to the zenith reached the significant colour, but even while Bush halted to look at it a golden gleam of sun showed through the clouds on the horizon, and the red began to fade perceptibly; blue sky and white clouds and blazing golden sun took its place. That was the measure of the time the assault had taken; only a few minutes from the earliest dawn to tropical sunrise. Bush stood and grasped this astonishing fact — it could have been late afternoon as far as his own sensations went.

Here from the gun platform the whole view of the bay opened up. There was the opposite shore; the shallows where the *Renown* had grounded (was it only yesterday?), the rolling country lifting immediately into the hills of that side, with the sharply defined shape of the other battery at the foot of the point. To the left the peninsula dropped sharply in a series of jagged headlands, stretching like fingers out into the blue, blue ocean; farther round still was the sapphire surface of Scotchman's Bay, and there, with her backed mizzen topsail catching brilliantly the rising sun, lay the *Renown*. At that distance she looked like a lovely toy; Bush caught his breath at the sight of her, not because of the beauty of the scene but with relief. The sight of the ship, and the associated memories which the sight called up in his mind, brought his sanity flooding back; there were a thousand things to be done now.

Hornblower appeared up the other ramp; he looked like a scarecrow with his disordered clothes. He held sword in one hand and pistol in the other, just as did Bush. Beside him Wellard swung a cutlass singularly large for him, and at his heels were a score or more of seamen still under discipline their muskets, with bayonets fixed, held before them ready for action.

"Morning, sir," said Hornblower. His battered cocked hat was still on his head for him to touch it, and he made a move to do so, checking himself at the realization that his sword was in his hand.

"Good morning ' said Bush automatically.

"Congratulations, sir ' said Hornblower. His face was white, and the smile on his lips was like the grin of a corpse. His beard sprouted over his lips and chin.

"Thank you," said Bush

Hornblower pushed his pistol into his belt and then sheathed his sword.

"I've taken possession of all that side, sir," he went on, with a gesture behind him. "Shall I carry on?"

"Yes, carry on, Mr Hornblower."

"Aye aye, sir."

This time Hornblower could touch his hat. He gave a rapid order posting a petty officer and men over the guns.

"You see, sir," said Hornblower, pointing, "a few got away."

Bush looked down the precipitous hillside that fell to the bay and could see a few figures down there.

"Not enough to trouble us," he said; his mind was just beginning to work smoothly now.

"No, sir. I've forty prisoners under guard at the main gate. I can see Whiting's collecting the rest. I'll go on now, sir, if I may.

"Very well, Mr Hornblower."

Somebody at least had kept a clear head during the fury of the assault. Bush went on down the farther ramp. A petty officer and a couple of seamen stood there on guard; they came to attention as Bush appeared.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"This yere's the magazine, zur," said the petty officer — Ambrose, captain of the foretop, who had never lost the broad Devon acquired in his childhood, despite his years in the navy. "We'm guarding of it."

"Mr Hornblower's orders?"

"Iss, zur."

A forlorn party of prisoners were squatting by the main gate. Hornblower had reported the presence of them. But there were guards he had said nothing about: a sentry at the well; guards at the gate; Woolton, the steadiest petty officer of them all, at a long wooden building beside the gate, and six men with him.

"What's your duty?" demanded Bush.

"Guarding the provision store, sir. There's liquor here."

"Very well."

If the madmen who had made the assault — that marine, for instance, whose bayonet-thrust Bush had parried — had got at the liquor there would be no controlling them at all.

Abbott, the midshipman in subordinate command of Bush's own division, came hurrying up.

"What the hell d'ye think you've been doing?" demanded Bush, testily. "I've been without you since the attack began."

"Sorry, sir," apologised Abbott. Of course he had been carried away by the fury of the attack, but that was no excuse; certainly no excuse when one remembered young Wellard still at Hornblower's side and attending to his duties.

"Get ready to make the signal to the ship," ordered Bush "You ought to have been ready to do that five minutes ago. Clear three guns. Who was it who was carrying the flag? Find him and bend it on over the Spanish colours. Jump to it, damn you."

Victory might be sweet, but it had no effect on Bush's temper, now that the reaction had set in. Bush had had no sleep and no breakfast, and even though perhaps only ten minutes had elapsed since the fort had been captured, his conscience nagged at him regarding those ten minutes; there were many things he ought to have done in that time.

It was a relief to turn away from the contemplation of his own shortcomings and to settle with Whiting regarding the safeguarding of the prisoners. They had all been fetched out of the barrack buildings by now; a hundred half naked men, and at least a score of women, their hair streaming down their backs and their scanty clothing clutched about them. At a more peaceful moment Bush would have had an eye for those women, but as it was he merely felt irritated at the thought of an additional complication to deal with, and his eyes only took note of them as such.

Among the men there was a small sprinkling of negroes and mulattoes, but most of them were Spaniards. Nearly all the dead men who lay here and there were fully clothed, in white uniforms wide blue facings — they were the sentinels and the main guard who had paid the penalty for their lack of watchfulness.

"Who was in command?" asked Bush of Whiting.

"Can't tell, sir."

"Well, ask them, then."

Bush had command of no language at all save his own, and apparently neither had Whiting, judging by his unhappy glance.

"Please, sir —" This was Pierce, surgeon's mate, trying to attract his attention. "Can I have a party to help carry the wounded into the shade?"

Before Bush could answer him Abbott was hailing from the gun platform.

"Guns clear, sir. May I draw powder charges from the magazines?"

And then before Bush could give permission here was young Wellard, trying to elbow Pierce on one side so as to command Bush's attention.

"Please, sir. Please, sir. Mr Hornblower's respects, sir, an' could you please come up to the tower there, sir? Mr Hornblower says it's urgent, sir."

Bush felt at that moment as if one more distraction would break his heart.

Chapter X

At each corner of the fort there was a small bastion built out, to give flanking fire along the walls, and on top of the southwest bastion stood a little watchtower which carried the flagstaff. Bush and Hornblower stood on the tower, the broad Atlantic behind them and before them the long gulf of the bay of Samaná. Over their heads waved two flags: the White Ensign above, the red and gold of Spain below. Out in the *Renown* they might not be able to make out the colours, but they would certainly see the two flags. And when having heard the three signal guns boom out they trained their telescopes on the fort they must have seen the flags slowly flutter down and rise again, dip and rise again. Three guns; two flags twice dipped. That was the signal that the fort was in English hands, and the *Renown* had seen it, for she had braced up her mizzen topsail and begun the long beat back along the coast of the peninsula.

Bush and Hornblower had with them the one telescope which a hasty search through the fort had brought to light; when one of them had it to his eye the other could hardly restrain his twitching fingers from snatching at it. At the moment Bush was looking through it, training it on the farther shore of the bay, and Hornblower was stabbing with an index finger at what he had been looking at a moment before.

"You see, sir?" he asked. "Farther up the bay than the bakery. There's the town — Savana, it's called. And beyond that there's the shipping. They'll up anchor any minute now."

"I see 'em," said Bush, the glass still at his eye. "Four small craft. No sail hoisted — hard to tell what they are."

"Easy enough to guess, though, sir."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Bush.

There would be no need for big men of war here, immediately adjacent to the Mona Passage. Half the Caribbean trade came up through here, passing within thirty miles of the bay of Samaná. Fast, handy craft, with a couple of long guns each and a large crew, could dash out and snap up prizes and retire to the protection of the bay, where the crossed fire of the batteries could be relied on to keep out enemies, as the events of yesterday had proved. The raiders would hardly have to spend a night at sea.

"They'll know by now we've got this fort," said Hornblower. "They'll guess that *Renown* will be coming round after 'em. They can sweep, and tow, and kedge. They'll be out of the bay before you can say Jack Robinson. And from Engano Point it's a fair wind for Martinique."

"Very likely," agreed Bush.

With a simultaneous thought they turned to look at the *Renown*. With her stern to them, her sails braced sharp on the starboard tack, she was making her way out to sea; it would be a long beat before she could go about in the certainty of being able to weather Cape Samaná. She looked lovely enough out there, with her white sails against the rich blue, but it would be hours before she could work round to stop the bolt hole. Bush turned back and considered the sheltered waters of the bay.

"Better man the guns and make ready for 'em," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Hornblower. He hesitated. "We won't have 'em under fire for long. They'll be shallow draught. They can hug the point over there closer than *Renown* could."

"But it won't take much to sink 'em, either," said Bush. "Oh, I see what you're after."

"Red-hot shot might make all the difference, sir," said Hornblower.

"Repay 'em in their own coin," said Bush, with a grin of satisfaction. Yesterday the *Renown* had endured the hellish fire of red-hot shot. To Bush the thought of roasting a few Dagoes was quite charming.

"That's right, sir," said Hornblower.

He was not grinning like Bush. There was a frown on his face; he was oppressed with the thought that the privateers might escape to continue their depredations elsewhere, and any means to reduce their chances should be used.

"But can you do it?" asked Bush suddenly. "D'ye know how to heat shot?"

"I'll find out, sir."

"I'll wager no man of ours knows how."

Shot could only be heated in a battery on land; a seagoing ship, constructed of inflammable material, could not run the risk of going into action with a flaming furnace inside her. The French, in the early days of the Revolutionary War, had made some disastrous experiments in the hope of finding a means of countering

England's naval superiority, but after a few ships had set themselves on fire they had given up the attempt. Seagoing men now left the use of the heated weapon to shore-based garrison artillery.

"I'll try and find out for myself, sir," said Hornblower. "There's the furnace down there and all the gear."

Hornblower stood in the sunshine, already far too hot to be comfortable. His face was pale, dirty and bearded, and in his expression eagerness and weariness were oddly at war.

"Have you had any breakfast yet?" asked Bush.

"No, sir." Hornblower looked straight at him. "Neither have you, sir."

"No," grinned Bush.

He had not been able to spare a moment for anything like that, with the whole defence of the fort to be organised. But he could bear fatigue and hunger and thirst, and he doubted if Hornblower could.

"I'll get a drink of water at the well, sir," said Hornblower.

As he said the words, and the full import came to him, a change in his expression was quite obvious. He ran the tip of his tongue over his lips; Bush could see that the lips were cracked and parched and that the tongue could do nothing to relieve them. The man had drunk nothing since he had landed twelve hours ago — twelve hours of desperate exertion in a tropical climate.

"See that you do, Mr Hornblower," said Bush. "That's an order."

"Aye aye, sir."

Bush found the telescope leaving his hand and passing into Hornblower's.

"May I have another look, sir, before I go down? By George, I thought as much. That two-master's warping out, sir. Less than an hour before she's within range. I'll get the guns manned, sir. Take a look for yourself, sir."

He went darting down the stone stairs of the tower, having given back the telescope, but half way down he paused.

"Don't forget your breakfast, sir," he said, his face upturned to Bush. "You've plenty of time for that."

Bush's glance through the telescope confirmed what Hornblower had said. At least one of the vessels up the bay was beginning to move. He turned and swept the rest of the land and water with a precautionary glance before handing the telescope to Abbott, who during all this conversation had been standing by, silent in the presence of his betters.

"Keep a sharp lookout," said Bush.

Down in the body of the fort Hornblower was already issuing rapid orders, and the men, roused to activity, were on the move. On the gun platform they were casting loose the remaining guns, and as Bush descended from the platform he saw Hornblower organising other working parties, snapping out orders with quick gestures. At the sight of Bush he turned guiltily and walked over to the well. A marine was winding up the bucket, and Hornblower seized it. He raised the bucket to his lips, leaning back to balance the weight; and he drank and drank, water slopping in quantities over his chest as he drank, water pouring over his face, until the bucket was empty, and then he put it down with a grin at Bush, his face still dripping water. The very sight of him was enough to make Bush, who had already had one drink from the well, feel consumed with thirst all over again.

By the time Bush had drunk there was the usual group of people clamouring for his attention, for orders and information, and by the time he had dealt with them there was smoke rising from the furnace in the corner of the courtyard, and a loud crackling from inside it. Bush walked over. A seaman, kneeling, was plying a pair of bellows; two other men were bringing wood from the pile against the ramparts. When the furnace door was opened the blast of heat that rose into Bush's face was enough to make him step back. Hornblower turned up with his hurried pace.

"How's the shot, Saddler?" he asked.

The petty officer picked up some rags, and, with them to shield his hands, laid hold of two long handles that projected from the far side of the furnace, balancing two projecting from the nearest side. When he drew them out it became apparent that all four handles were part of a large iron grating, the centre of which rested inside the furnace above the blazing fuel. Lying on the grating were rows of shot, still black in the sunshine. Saddler shifted his quid, gathered his saliva, and spat expertly on the nearest one. The spittle boiled off, but not with violence.

"Not very hot yet, sir," said Saddler.

"Us'll fry they devils," said the man with the bellows, unexpectedly; he looked up, as he crouched on his knees, with ecstasy in his face at the thought of burning his enemies alive.

Hornblower paid him no attention.

"Here, you bearer men," he said, "let's see what you can do."

Hornblower had been followed by a file of men, every pair carrying a piece of apparatus formed of two iron bars joined with iron crosspieces. The first pair approached. Saddler took a pair of tongs and gingerly worked a hot shot on to the bearer.

"Move on, you two," ordered Hornblower. "Next!"

When a shot lay on every bearer Hornblower led his men away.

"Now let's see you roll those into the guns," he said.

Bush followed, consumed with curiosity. The procession moved up the ramp to the gun platform, where now crews had been told off to every gun; the guns were run back with the muzzles well clear of the embrasures. Tubs of water stood by each pair of guns.

"Now, you rammers," said Hornblower, "are your dry wads in? Then in with your wet wads."

From the tubs the seamen brought out round flat discs of fibre, dripping with water.

"Two to a gun," said Hornblower.

The wet wads were thrust into the muzzles of the guns and then were forced down the bores with the club-ended ramrods.

"Ram 'em home," said Hornblower. "Now, bearers."

It was not such an easy thing to do, to put the ends of the bearing-stretchers at the muzzles of the guns and then to tilt so as to induce the hot shot to roll down into the bore.

"The Don must've exercised with these guns better than we'd give 'em credit for," said Hornblower to Bush, "judging by the practice they made yesterday. Rammers!"

The ramrods thrust the shot home against the charges; there was a sharp sizzling noise as each hot shot rested against the wet wads.

"Run up!"

The guns' crews seized the tackles and heaved, and the ponderous guns rolled slowly forward to point their muzzles out through the embrasures.

"Aim for the point over there and fire!"

With handspikes under the rear axles the guns were traversed at the orders of the captains; the priming tubes were already in the touchholes and each gun was fired as it bore. The sound of the explosions was very different here on the stone platform from when guns were fired in the confined spaces of a wooden ship. The slight wind blew the smoke sideways.

"Pretty fair!" said Hornblower, shading his eyes to watch the fall of the shot; and, turning to Bush, "That'll puzzle those gentlemen over there. They'll wonder what in the world we're firing at."

"How long," asked Bush, who had watched the whole process with a fascinated yet horrified interest, "before a hot shot burns through those wads and sets off the gun itself?"

"That is one of the things I do not know, sir," answered Hornblower with a grin. "It would not surprise me if we found out during the course of today."

"I dare say," said Bush; but Hornblower had swung round and was confronting a seaman who had come running up to the platform.

"What d'ye think you're doing?"

"Bringing a fresh charge, sir," said the man, surprised, indicating with a gesture the cartridge-container he carried.

"Then get back and wait for the order. Get back, all of you."

The ammunition carriers shrank back before his evident anger.

"Swab out!" ordered Hornblower to the guns' crews, and as the wetted sponges were thrust into the muzzles he turned to Bush again. "We can't be too careful, sir. We don't want any chance of live charges and red-hot shot coming together on this platform."

"Certainly not," agreed Bush.

He was both pleased and irritated that Hornblower should have dealt so efficiently with the organization of

the battery.

"Fresh charges!" yelled Hornblower, and the ammunition carriers he had previously sent back came trotting up the ramp again. "These are English cartridges, sir, I'll wager."

"Why do you say that?"

"West-Country serge, stitched and choked exactly like ours, sir. Out of English prizes, I fancy."

It was most probable; the Spanish forces which held this end of the island against the insurgents most likely depended on renewing their stores from English ships captured in the Mona Passage. Well, with good fortune they would take no more prizes — the implication, forcing itself on Bush's mind despite his many preoccupations, made him stir uneasily as he stood by the guns with his hands clasped behind him and the sun beating down on his face. The Dons would be in a bad way with their source of supplies cut off. They would not be able to hold out long against the rebellious blacks that hemmed them in here in the eastern end of Santo Domingo.

"Ram those wads handsomely, there, Cray," said Hornblower. "No powder in that bore, or we'll have 'Cray D.D.' in the ship's books."

There was a laugh at that — 'D.D.' in the ship's books means 'discharged, dead' — but Bush was not paying attention. He had scrambled up the parapet and was staring out at the bay.

"They're standing down by the bay," he said. "Stand by, Mr Hornblower."

"Aye aye, sir."

Bush strained his sight to look at the four vessels creeping down the fairway. As he watched he saw the first one hoisting sail on both masts. Apparently she was taking advantage of a flaw of wind, blowing flukily in the confined and heated waters, to gain some of the desperately necessary distance towards the sea and safety.

"Mr Abbott, bring down that glass!" shouted Hornblower.

As Abbott descended the steps Hornblower addressed a further comment to Bush.

"If they're making a bolt for it the moment they know we've got the fort it means they're not feeling too secure over there, sir."

"I suppose not."

"You might have expected 'em to try and recapture the fort one way or another. They could land a force up the peninsula and come down to attack us. I wonder why they're not trying that, sir? Why do they just unstick and run?"

"They're only Dagoes," said Bush. He refused to speculate further about the enemy's motives while action was imminent, and he grabbed the glass from Abbott's hands.

Through the telescope details were far plainer. Two large schooners with several guns a-side; a big lugger, and a vessel whose rig they still could not determine, as she was the farthest away and, with no sail set, was towing behind her boats out from the anchorage.

"It'll be long range, Mr Hornblower," said Bush.

"Yes, sir. But they hit us with these same guns yesterday."

"Make sure of your aim. They won't be long under fire."

"Aye aye, sir."

The vessels were not coming down together. If they had done so they might stand a better chance, as the fort would only be able to fire on one at a time. But the panic feeling or every man for himself must have started them off as soon as each one separately could get under way — and perhaps the deep channel was too narrow for vessels in company. Now the leading schooner had taken in her sail again; the wind here, what there was of it, was foul for her when she turned to port along the channel. She had two boats out quickly enough to tow her; Bush's telescope could reveal every detail.

"Some time yet before she's in range, sir," said Hornblower. "I'll take a look at the furnace, with your permission."

"I'll come too," said Bush.

At the furnace the bellows were still being worked and the heat was tremendous — but it was far hotter when Saddler drew out the grating that carried the heated shot. Even in the sunshine they could see the glow of the spheres; as the heat rose from them the atmosphere above them wavered so that everything below was vague and distorted. It could be a scene in Hell. Saddler spat on the nearest cannon ball and the saliva leaped

with an instant hiss from the smooth surface of the sphere, falling from it without contact to dance and leap on the grating under it until with a final hiss it vanished entirely. A second attempt by Saddler brought the same result.

"Hot enough, sir?" asked Saddler.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

Bush had often enough as a midshipman taken a smoothing-iron forward to the galley to heat it when there had been particular need to iron a shirt or a neckcloth; he remembered how he had made the same test of the temperature of the iron. It was a proof that the iron was dangerously hot to use when the spittle refused to make contact with it, but the shot was far hotter than that, infinitely hotter.

Saddler thrust the grating back into the furnace and wiped his steaming face with the rags that had shielded his hands.

"Stand by, you bearer men," said Hornblower. "You'll be busy enough soon."

With a glance at Bush for permission he was off again, back to the battery, hurrying with awkward galvanic strides. Bush followed more slowly; he was weary with all his exertions, and it crossed his mind as he watched Hornblower hurrying up the ramp that Hornblower had probably been more active than he and was not blessed with nearly as powerful a physique. By the time he came up to him Hornblower was watching the leading schooner again.

"Her scantling'll be weak," said Hornblower. "These twenty-four-pounders'll go clean through her most of the time, even at long range."

"Plunging shot," said Bush. "Maybe they'll go through her bottom."

"Maybe so," said Hornblower, and then added "sir."

Even after all his years of service he was liable to forget that important monosyllable when he was thinking deeply.

"She's setting sail again!" said Bush. "They've got her head round."

"And the tows have cast off," added Hornblower. "Not long now."

He looked down the line of guns, all charged and primed, the quoins withdrawn so that they were at their highest elevation, the muzzles pointing upward as though awaiting the shot to be rolled into them. The schooner was moving perceptibly down the channel towards them. Hornblower turned and walked down the row; behind his back one hand was twisting impatiently within the other; he came back and turned again, walking jerkily down the row — he seemed incapable of standing still, but when he caught Bush's eye on him he halted guiltily, forcing himself, with an obvious effort, to stand still like his superior officer. The schooner crept on, a full half-mile ahead of the next vessel.

"You might try a ranging shot," said Bush at length.

"Aye aye, sir," said Hornblower with instant agreement, like a river bursting through a broken dam. It seemed as if he had been compelling himself to wait until Bush should speak.

"Furnace there!" hailed Hornblower. "Saddler! send up one shot."

The bearers came plodding up the ramp, carrying carefully between them the glowing cannon ball. The bright redness of it was quite obvious — even the heat that it gave off was distinctly perceptible. The wet wads were rammed down the bore of the nearest gun, the shot bearer was hoisted up level with its muzzle, and coaxed into motion with wad-hook and rammer, the fiery shot was rolled in. There was an instant hissing and spluttering of steam as the ball came into contact with the wet wads; Bush wondered again how long it would be before the wads were burned through and the charge set off; the recoil would make it decidedly uncomfortable for anyone who happened to be aiming the gun at that moment.

"Run up!" Hornblower was giving the orders. The gun's crew heaved at the tackles and the gun rumbled forward.

Hornblower took his place behind the gun and, squatting down, he squinted along it.

"Trail right!" Tackles and handspikes heaved the gun around. "A touch more! Steady! No, a touch left. Steady!"

Somewhat to Bush's relief Hornblower straightened himself and came from behind the gun. He leaped on to the parapet with his usual uncontrollable vigour and shaded his eyes; Bush at one side kept his telescope trained on the schooner.

"Fire!" said Hornblower.

The momentary hiss of the priming was drowned in the instant bellow of the gun. Bush saw the black line of the shot's path across the blue of the sky, reaching upward during the time it might take to draw a breath, sinking downward again; a strange sort of line, an inch long if he had to say its length, constantly renewing itself in front and constantly disappearing at its back end, and pointing straight at the schooner. It was still pointing at her, just above her — to that extent did the speed of the shot outpace the recording of retina and brain — when Bush saw the splash, right in line with the schooner's bows. He took his eye from the telescope as the splash disappeared, to find Hornblower looking at him.

"A cable's length short," he said, and Hornblower nodded agreement.

"We can open fire, then, sir?" asked Hornblower.

"Yes, carry on, Mr Hornblower."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before Hornblower was hailing again.

"Furnace, there! Five more shot!"

It took Bush a moment or two to see the point of that order. But clearly it was inadvisable to have hot shot and powder charges brought up on the platform at the same time; the gun that had been fired would have to remain unloaded until the other five had fired as well. Hornblower came down and stood at Bush's side again.

"I couldn't understand yesterday why they always fired salvos at us, sir," he said, "that reduced the rate of fire to the speed of the slowest gun. But I see now."

"So do I," said Bush.

"All your wet wads in?" demanded Hornblower of the guns' crews. "Certain? Carry on, then."

The shot were coaxed into the muzzles of the guns; they hissed and spluttered against the wads.

"Run up. Now take your aim. Make sure of it, captains."

The hissing and spluttering continued as the guns were trained.

"Fire when your gun bears!"

Hornblower was up on the parapet again; Bush could see perfectly well through the embrasure of the idle gun. The five guns all fired within a second or two of each other; through Bush's telescope the sky was streaked by the passage of their shot.

"Sponge out!" said Hornblower; and then, louder, "Six charges!"

He came down to Bush.

"One splash pretty close," said Bush.

"Two very short," said Hornblower, "and one far out on the right. I know who fired that one and I'll deal with him."

"One splash I didn't see," said Bush

"Nor did I, sir. Clean over, perhaps. But possibly a hit."

The men with the charges came running up to the platform, and the eager crews seized them and rammed them home and the dry wads on top of the charges.

"Six shot!" shouted Hornblower to Saddler; and then, to the gun captains, "Prime. Put in your wet wads."

"She's altered course," said Bush. "The range can't have changed much."

"No, sir. Load and run up! Excuse me, sir."

He went hurrying off to take his stand by the left-hand gun, which presumably was the one which had been incorrectly laid previously.

"Take your aim carefully," he called from his new position. "Fire when you're sure."

Bush saw him squat behind the left-hand gun, but he himself applied his attention to observing the results of the shooting.

The cycle repeated itself; the guns roared, the men came running with fresh charges, the red-hot shot were brought up. The guns were fired again before Hornblower came back to Bush's side.

"You're hitting, I think," said Bush. He turned back to look again through his glass. "I think — by God, yes! Smoke! Smoke!"

A faint black cloud was just visible between the schooner's masts. It thinned again, and Bush could not be perfectly sure. The nearest gun bellowed out, and a chance flaw of wind blew the powder smoke about them as they stood together, blotting out their view of the schooner.

"Confound it all!" said Bush, moving about restlessly in search of a better viewpoint.

The other guns went off almost simultaneously and added to the smoke.

"Bring up fresh charges!" yelled Hornblower, with the smoke eddying round him. "See that you swab those guns out properly."

The smoke eddied away, revealing the schooner, apparently unharmed, still creeping along the bay, and Bush cursed in his disappointment.

"The range is shortening and the guns are hot now," said Hornblower; and then, louder, "Gun captains! Get your quoins in!"

He hurried off to supervise the adjustment of the guns' elevation, and it was some seconds before he hailed again for hot shot to be brought up. In that time Bush noticed that the schooner's boats, which had been pulling in company with the schooner, were turning to run alongside her. That could mean that the schooner's captain was now sure that the flaws of wind would be sufficient to carry her round the point and safely to the mouth of the bay. The guns went off again in an irregular salvo, and Bush saw a trio of splashes rise from the water's surface close to the near side of the schooner.

"Fresh charges!" yelled Hornblower.

And then Bush saw the schooner swing round, presenting her stern to the battery and heading straight for the shallows of the farther shore.

"What in hell —" said Bush to himself.

Then he saw a sudden fountain of black smoke appear spouting from the schooner's deck, and while this sight was rejoicing him he saw the schooner's booms swing over as she took the ground. She was afire and had been deliberately run ashore. The smoke was dense about her hull, and while he held her in his telescope he saw her big white mainsail above the smoke suddenly disintegrate and disappear — the flames had caught it and whisked it away into nothing. He took the telescope from his eye and looked round for Hornblower, who was standing on the parapet again. Powder and smoke had grimed his face, already dark with the growth of his beard, and his teeth showed strangely white as he grinned. The gunners were cheering, and the cheering was being echoed by the rest of the landing party in the fort.

Hornblower was gesticulating to make the gunners cease their noise so that he could be heard down in the fort as he countermanded his call for more shot.

"Belay that order, Saddler! Take those shot back, bearer men!"

He jumped down and approached Bush.

"That's done it," said the lamer.

"The first one, anyway."

A great jet of smoke came from the burning wreck, reaching up and up from between her masts; the mainmast fell as they watched, and as it fell the report of the explosion came to their ears across the water; the fire had reached the schooner's powder store, and when the smoke cleared a little they could see that she now lay on the shore in two halves, blown asunder in the middle. The foremast still stood for a moment on the forward half, but it fell as they watched it; bows and stern were blazing fiercely, while the boats with the crew rowed away across the shallows.

"A nasty sight," said Hornblower.

But Bush could see nothing unpleasant about the sight of an enemy burning. He was exulting. "With half his men in the boats he didn't have enough hands to spare to fight the fires when we hit him," he said.

"Maybe a shot went through her deck and lodged in her hold," said Hornblower.

The tone of his voice made Bush look quickly at him, for he was speaking thickly and harshly like a drunken man; but he could not be drunk, although the dirty hairy face and bloodshot eyes might well have suggested it. The man was fatigued. Then the dull expression of Hornblower's face was replaced once more by a look of animation, and when he spoke his voice was natural again.

"Here comes the next," he said. "She must be nearly in range."

The second schooner, also with her boats in attendance, was coming down the channel, her sails set.

Hornblower turned back to the guns.

"D'you see the next ship to aim at?" he called; and received a fierce roar of agreement, before he turned round to hail Saddler. "Bring up those shot, bearer men."

The procession of bearers with the glowing shot came up the ramp again — frightfully hot shot; the heat as

each one went by — twenty-four pounds of white-hot iron — was like the passage of a wave. The routine of rolling the fiendish things into the gun muzzles proceeded. There were some loud remarks from the men at the guns, and one of the shot fell with a thump on the stone floor of the battery, and lay there glowing. Two other guns were still not loaded.

"What's wrong there?" demanded Hornblower.

"Please, sir —"

Hornblower was already striding over to see for himself. From the muzzle of one of the three loaded guns there was a curl of steam; in all three there was a wild hissing as the hot shot rested on the wet wads.

"Run up, train, and fire," ordered Hornblower. "Now what's the matter with you others? Roll that thing out of the way."

"Shot won't fit, sir," said more than one voice as someone with a wad-hook awkwardly rolled the fallen shot up against the parapet. The bearers of the other two stood by, sweating. Anything Hornblower could say in reply was drowned for the moment by the roar of one of the guns — the men were still at the tackles, and the gun had gone off on its own volition as they ran it up. A man sat crying out with pain, for the carriage had recoiled over his foot and blood was already pouring from it on to the stone floor. The captains of the other two loaded guns made no pretence at training and aiming. The moment their guns were run up they shouted "Stand clear!" and fired.

"Carry him down to Mr Pierce," said Hornblower, indicating the injured man. "Now let's see about these shot." Hornblower returned to Bush with a rueful look on his face, embarrassed and self-conscious.

"What's the trouble?" asked Bush.

"These shot are too hot," explained Hornblower. "Damn it, I didn't think of that. They're half melted in the furnace and gone out of shape so that they won't fit the bore. What a fool I was not to think of that."

As his superior officer, Bush did not admit that he had not thought of it either. He said nothing.

"And the ones that hadn't gone out of shape were too hot anyway," went on Hornblower. "I'm the damnedest fool God ever made. Mad as a hatter. Did you see how that gun went off? The men'll be scared now and won't lay their guns properly — too anxious to fire it off before the recoil catches them. God, I'm a careless son of a swab."

"Easy, easy," said Bush, a prey to conflicting emotions.

Hornblower pounding his left hand with his right fist as he upbraided himself was a comic sight; Bush could not help laughing at him. And Bush knew perfectly well that Hornblower had done excellently so far, really excellently, to have mastered at a moment's notice so much of the technique of using red-hot shot. Moreover, it must be confessed that Bush had experienced, during this expedition, more than one moment of pique at Hornblower's invariable bold assumption of responsibility; and the pique may even have been roused by a stronger motive, jealousy at Hornblower's good management — an unworthy motive, which Bush would disclaim with shocked surprise if he became aware of it. Yet it made the sight of Hornblower's present discomfiture all the more amusing at the moment.

"Don't take on so," said Bush with a grin.

"But it makes me wild to be such a —"

Hornblower cut the sentence off short. Bush could actually see him calling up his self-control and mastering himself, could see his annoyance at having been self-revelatory, could see the mask of the stoical and experienced fighting man put back into place to conceal the furious passions within.

"Would you take charge here, sir?" he said; it might be another person speaking. "I'll go and take a look at the furnace, if I may. They'll have to go easy with those bellows."

"Very good, Mr Hornblower. Send the ammunition up and I'll direct the fire on the schooner."

"Aye aye, sir. I'll send up the last shot to go into the furnace. They won't be too hot yet, sir."

Hornblower went darting down the ramp while Bush moved behind the guns to direct the fire. The fresh charges came up and were rammed home, the wet wads went in on top of the dry wads, and then the bearers began to arrive with the shot.

"Steady, all of you," said Bush. "These won't be as hot as the last batch. Take your aim carefully."

But when Bush climbed on to the parapet and trained his telescope on the second schooner he could see that the schooner was changing her mind. She had brailled up her foresail and taken in her jibs; her boats were lying

at an angle to her course, and were struggling, beetle-like, off her bows. They were pulling her round — she was going back up the bay and deciding not to run the gauntlet of the red-hot shot. There was the smouldering wreck of her consort to frighten her.

"She's turning tail!" said Bush loudly. "Hit her while you can, you men."

He saw the shot curving in the air, he saw the splashes in the water; he remembered how yesterday he had seen a ricochet shot from these very guns rebound from the water and strike the *Renown's* massive side — one of the splashes was dead true for line, and might well indicate a hit.

"Fresh charges!" he bellowed, turning to make himself heard down at the magazine. "Sponge out!"

But by the time the charges were in the guns the schooner had got her head right round, had reset her foresail, and was creeping back up the bay. Judging by the splashes of the last salvo she would be out of range before the next could be fired.

"Mr Hornblower!"

"Sir!"

"Vast sending any shot."

"Aye aye, sir."

When Hornblower came up again to the battery Bush pointed to the retreating schooner.

"He thought better of it, did he?" commented Hornblower. "Yes, and those other two have anchored, I should say."

His fingers were twitching for the one telescope again, and Bush handed it over.

"The other two aren't moving either," said Hornblower, and then he swung round and trained the telescope down the bay towards the sea. "*Renown's* gone about. She's caught the wind. Six miles? Seven miles? She'll be rounding the point in an hour."

It was Bush's turn to grab for the telescope. There was no mistaking the trim of those topsails. From the *Renown* he transferred his attention to the opposite shore of the bay. There was the other battery with the Spanish flag above it — the flag was now drooping, now flapping lazily in the light wind prevailing over the shore. He could make out no sign of activity whatever, and there was some finality in his gesture as he closed the telescope and looked at his second in command.

"Everything's quiet," he said. "Nothing to be done until *Renown* comes down."

"That is so," agreed Hornblower.

It was interesting to watch Hornblower's animation ebb away. Intense weariness was obvious in his face the moment he was off his guard.

"We can feed the men," said Bush. "And I'd like to have a look at the wounded. Those damned prisoners have to be sorted out — Whiting's got 'em all herded in the casemate, men and women, captains and drum boys. God knows what provisions there are here. We've got to see about that. Then we can set a watch, dismiss the watch below, and some of us can get some rest."

"So we can," said Hornblower; reminded of the necessary activities that still remained, he resumed his stolid expression. "Shall I go down and start attending to it, sir?"

Chapter XI

The sun at noontime was glaring down into the fort of Samaná. Within the walls the heat was pitilessly reflected inwards to a murderous concentration, so that even the corners which had shade were dreadfully hot. The sea breeze had not yet begun to blow, and from the flagstaff the White Ensign drooped spiritlessly, half covering the Spanish colours that drooped below it. Yet discipline still prevailed. On every bastion the lookouts stood in the blazing sun to guard against surprise. The marine sentries, with regular and measured step, were 'walking their posts of duty in a smart and soldierly manner' in accordance with regulations, muskets sloped, scarlet tunics buttoned to the neck, crossbelts exactly in position. When one of them reached the end of his beat he would halt with a click of his heels, bring down his musket to the 'order' position in three smart movements, and then, pushing his right hand forward and his left foot out, stand 'at ease' until

the heat and the flies drove him into motion again, when his heels would come together, the musket rise to his shoulder, and he would walk his beat once more. In the battery the guns' crew dozed on the unrelenting stone, the lucky men in the shade cast by the guns, the others in the narrow strip of shade at the foot of the parapet; but two men sat and kept themselves awake and every few minutes saw to it that the slow matches smouldering in the tubs were still alight, available to supply fire instantly if the guns had to be worked, whether to fire on ships in the bay or to beat off an attack by land. Out beyond Samaná Point HMS *Renown* lay awaiting the first puffs of the sea breeze to come up the bay and get into touch with her landing party. Beside the main storehouse Lieutenant Bush sat on a bench and tried to stay awake, cursing the heat, cursing his own kindness of heart that had led him to allow his junior officers to rest first while he assumed the responsibilities of officer on duty, envying the marines who lay asleep and snoring all about him. From time to time he stretched his legs, which were stiff and painful after all his exertions. He mopped his forehead and thought about loosening his neckcloth.

Round the corner came a hurried messenger.

"Mr Bush, sir. Please, sir, there's a boat puttin' off from the battery across the bay."

Bush rolled a stupefied eye at the messenger.

"Heading which way?"

"Straight towards us, sir. She's got a flag — a white flag, it looks like."

"I'll come and see. No peace for the wicked," said Bush, and he pulled himself to his feet, with all his joints complaining, and walked stiffly over to the ramp and up to the battery.

The petty officer of the watch was waiting there with the telescope, having descended from the lookout tower to meet him. Bush took the glass and looked through it. A six-oared boat, black against the blue of the bay, was pulling straight towards him, as the messenger had said. From the staff in the bow hung a flag, which might be white; there was no wind to extend it. But in the boat there were no more than ten people all told, so that there could be no immediate danger to the fort in any case. It was a long row across the glittering bay. Bush watched the boat heading steadily for the fort. The low cliffs which descended to meet the water on this side of the Samaná peninsula sank in an easy gradient here in the neighbourhood of the fort; diagonally down the gradient ran a path to the landing stage, which could be swept — as Bush had already noted — by the fire of the last two guns at the right-hand end of the battery. But there was no need to man those guns, for this could not be an attack. And in confirmation a puff of wind blew out the flag in the boat. It was white.

Undeviating, the boat pulled for the landing stage and came alongside it. There was a flash of bright metal from the boat and then in the heated air the notes of a trumpet call, high and clear, rose to strike against the ears of the garrison. Then two men climbed out of the boat on to the landing stage. They wore uniforms of blue and white, one of them with a sword at his side while the other carried the twinkling trumpet, which he set to his lips and blew again. Piercingly and sweet, the call echoed along the cliffs; the birds which had been drowsing in the heat came fluttering out with plaintive cries, disturbed as much by the trumpet call as they had been by the thunder of the artillery in the morning. The officer wearing the sword unrolled a white flag, and then he and the trumpeter set themselves to climb the steep path to the fort. This was a parley in accordance with the established etiquette of war. The pealing notes of the trumpet were proof that no surprise was intended; the white flag attested the pacific intentions of the bearer.

As Bush watched the slow ascent he meditated on what powers he had to conduct a negotiation with the enemy, and he thought dubiously about the difficulties that would be imposed on any negotiation by differences of language.

"Turn out the guard," he said to the petty officer; and then to the messenger, "My compliments to Mr Hornblower, and ask him to come here as soon as he can."

The trumpet echoed up the path again; many of the sleepers in the fort were stirring at the sound, and it was a proof of the fatigue of the others that they went on sleeping. Down in the courtyard the tramp of feet and the sound of curt orders told how the marine guard was forming up. The white flag was almost at the edge of the ditch; the bearer halted, looking up at the parapets, while the trumpeter blew a last final call, the wild notes of the fanfare calling the last of the sleepers in the garrison to wakefulness.

"I'm here, sir," reported Hornblower.

The hat to which he raised his hand was lopsided, and he was like a scarecrow in his battered uniform. His face

was clean, but it bore a plentiful growth of beard.

"Can you speak Spanish enough to deal with him?" asked Bush, indicating the Spanish officer with a jerk of his thumb.

"Well, sir — yes."

The last word was in a sense spoken against Hornblower's will. He would have liked to temporise, and then he had given the definite answer which any military situation demanded.

"Let's hear you, then."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower stepped up on the parapet; the Spanish officer, looking up from the edge of the ditch, took off his hat at the sight of him and bowed courteously; Hornblower did the same. There was a brief exchange of apparently polite phrases before Hornblower turned back to Bush.

"Are you going to admit him to the fort, sir?" he asked. "He says he has many negotiations to carry out."

"No," said Bush, without hesitation. "I don't want him spying round here."

Bush was not too sure about what the Spaniard could discover, but he was suspicious and cautious by temperament.

"Very good, sir."

"You'll have to go out to him, Mr Hornblower. I'll cover you from here with the marines."

"Aye aye, sir."

With another exchange of courtesies Hornblower came down from the parapet and went down one ramp while the marine guard summoned by Bush marched up the other one. Bush, standing in an embrasure, saw the look on the Spaniard's face as the shakos and scarlet tunics and levelled muskets of the marines appeared in the other embrasures. Directly afterwards Hornblower appeared round the angle of the fort, having crossed the ditch by the narrow causeway from the main gate. Bush watched while once more hats were removed and Hornblower and the Spaniard exchanged bows, bobbing and scraping in a ludicrous Continental fashion. The Spaniard produced a paper, which he offered with a bow for Hornblower to read — his credentials, presumably. Hornblower glanced at them and handed them back. A gesture towards Bush on the parapet indicated his own credentials. Then Bush could see the Spaniard asking eager questions, and Hornblower answering them. He could tell by the way Hornblower was nodding his head that he was answering in the affirmative, and he felt dubious for a moment as to whether Hornblower might not be exceeding his authority. Yet the mere fact that he had to depend on someone else to conduct the negotiations did not irritate him; the thought that he himself might speak Spanish was utterly alien to him, and he was as reconciled to depending on an interpreter as he was to depending on cables to hoist anchors or on winds to carry him to his destination.

He watched the negotiations proceeding; observing closely he was aware when the subject under discussion changed. There was a moment when Hornblower pointed down the bay, and the Spaniard, turning, looked at the *Renown* just approaching the point. He looked long and searchingly before turning back to continue the discussion. He was a tall man, very thin, his coffee-coloured face divided by a thin black moustache. The sun beat down on the pair of them — the trumpeter had withdrawn out of earshot — for some time before Hornblower turned and looked up at Bush.

"I'll come in to report, sir, if I may," he hailed.

"Very well, Mr Hornblower."

Bush went down to the courtyard to meet him. Hornblower touched his hat and waited to be asked before he began his report.

"He's Colonel Ortega," said Hornblower in reply to the "Well?" that Bush addressed to him. "His credentials are from Villanueva, the Captain-General, who must be just across the bay, sir."

"What does he want?" asked Bush, trying to assimilate this first rather indigestible piece of information.

"It was the prisoners he wanted to know about first, sir," Bud Hornblower, "the women especially."

"And you told him they weren't hurt?"

"Yes, sir. He was very anxious about them. I told him I would ask your permission for him to take the women back with him."

"I see," said Bush.

"I thought it would make matters easier here, sir. And he had a good deal that he wanted to say, and I thought that if I appeared agreeable he would speak more freely."

"Yes," said Bush.

"Then he wanted to know about the other prisoners, sir. The men. He wanted to know if any had been killed, and when I said yes he asked which ones. I couldn't tell him that, sir — I didn't know. But I said I was sure you would supply him with a list; he said most of them had wives over there" — Hornblower pointed across the way — "who were all anxious."

"I'll do that," said Bush.

"I thought he might take away the wounded as well as the women, sir. It would free our hands a little, and we can't give them proper treatment here."

"I must give that some thought first," said Bush.

"For that matter, sir, it might be possible to rid ourselves of all the prisoners. I fancy it would not be difficult to exact a promise from him in exchange that they would not serve again while *Renown* was in these waters."

"Sounds fishy to me," said Bush; he distrusted all foreigners.

"I think he'd keep his word, sir. He's a Spanish gentleman. Then we wouldn't have to guard them, or feed them, sir. And when we evacuate this place what are we going to do with them? Pack 'em on board *Renown*?" A hundred prisoners in *Renown* would be an infernal nuisance, drinking twenty gallons of fresh water a day and having to be watched and guarded all the time. But Bush did not like to be rushed into making decisions, and he was not too sure that he cared to have Hornblower treating as obvious the points that he only arrived at after consideration.

"I'll have to think about that, too," said Bush.

"There was another thing that he only hinted at, sir. He wouldn't make any definite proposal, and I thought it better not to ask him."

"What was it?"

Hornblower paused before answering, and that in itself was a warning to Bush that something complicated was in the air.

"It's much more important than just a matter of prisoners, sir."

"Well?"

"It might be possible to arrange for a capitulation, sir."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A surrender, sir. An evacuation of all this end of the island by the Dons."

"My God!"

That was a startling suggestion. Bush's mind plodded along the paths it opened up. It would be an event of international importance; it might be a tremendous victory. Not just a paragraph in the *Gazette*, but a whole page. Perhaps rewards, distinction — even possibly promotion. And with that Bush's mind suddenly drew back in panic, as if the path it had been following ended in a precipice. The more important the event, the more closely it would be scrutinised, the more violent would be the criticism of those who disapproved. Here in Santo Domingo there was a complicated political situation; Bush knew it to be so, although he had never attempted to find out much about it, and certainly never to analyse it. He knew vaguely that French and Spanish interests clashed in the island, and that the Negro rebellion, now almost successful, was in opposition to both. He even knew, still more vaguely, that there was an anti-slavery movement in Parliament which persistently called attention to the state of affairs here. The thought of Parliament, of the Cabinet, of the King himself scrutinising his reports actually terrified Bush. The possible rewards that he had thought about shrank to nothing in comparison with the danger he ran. If he were to enter into a negotiation that embarrassed the government he would be offered up for instant sacrifice — not a hand would be raised to help a penniless and friendless lieutenant. He remembered Buckland's frightened manner when this question had been barely hinted at; the secret orders must be drastic in this regard.

"Don't lift a finger about that," said Bush. "Don't say a word."

"Aye aye, sir. Then if he brings the subject up I'm not to listen to him?"

"Well —" That might imply flinching away from duty. "It's a matter for Buckland to deal with, if anyone."

"Yes, sir. I could suggest something, sir."

"And what's that?" Bush did not know whether to be irritated or pleased that Hornblower had one more suggestion to make. But he doubted his own ability to bargain or negotiate; he knew himself to be lacking in chicane and dissimulation.

"If you made an agreement about the prisoners, sir, it would take some time to carry out. There'd be the question of the parole. I could argue about the wording of it. Then it would take some time to ferry the prisoners over. You could insist that only one boat was at the landing stage at a time — that's an obvious precaution to take. It would give time for *Renown* to work up into the bay. She can anchor down there just out of range of the other battery, sir. Then the hole'll be stopped, and at the same time we'll still be in touch with the Dons so that Mr Buckland can take charge of the negotiations if he wishes to."

"There's something in that notion," said Bush. Certainly it would relieve him of responsibility, and it was pleasant to think of spinning out time until the *Renown* was back, ready to add her ponderous weight in the struggle.

"So you authorise me to negotiate for the return of the prisoners on parole, sir?" asked Hornblower.

"Yes," said Bush, coming to a sudden decision. "But nothing else, mark you, Mr Hornblower. Not if you value your commission."

"Aye aye, sir. And a temporary suspension of hostilities while they are being handed over, sir?"

"Yes," said Bush, reluctantly. It was a matter necessarily arising out of the previous one, but it had a suspicious sound to it, now that Hornblower had suggested the possibility of further negotiations.

So the day proceeded to wear into afternoon. A full hour was consumed in haggling over the wording of the parole under which the captured soldiers were to be released. It was two o'clock before agreement was reached, and later than that before Bush, standing by the main gate, watched the women troop out through it, carrying their bundles of belongings. The boat could not possibly carry them all; two trips had to be made with them before the male prisoners, starting with the wounded, could begin. To rejoice Bush's heart the *Renown* appeared at last round the point; with the sea breeze beginning to blow she came nobly up the bay.

And here came Hornblower again, clearly so weary that he could hardly drag one foot after another, to touch his hat to Bush.

"*Renown* knows nothing about the suspension of hostilities, sir," he said. "She'll see the boat crossing full of Spanish soldiers, an' she'll open fire as sure as a gun."

"How are we to let her know?"

"I've been discussing it with Ortega, sir. He'll lend us a boat and we can send a message down to her."

"I suppose we can."

Sleeplessness and exhaustion had given an edge to Bush's temper. This final suggestion, when Bush came to consider it, with his mind slowed by fatigue, was the last straw.

"You're taking altogether too much on yourself, Mr Hornblower," he said. "Damn it, I'm in command here."

"Yes, sir," said Hornblower, standing at attention, while Bush gazed at him and tried to reassemble his thoughts after this spate of ill temper. There was no denying that *Renown* had to be informed; if she were to open fire it would be in direct violation of an agreement solemnly entered into, and to which he himself was a party.

"Oh, hell and damnation!" said Bush. "Have it your own way, then. Who are you going to send?"

"I could go myself, sir. Then I could tell Mr Buckland everything necessary."

"You mean about — about —" Bush actually did not like to mention the dangerous subject.

"About the chance of further negotiations, sir," said Hornblower stolidly. "He has to know sooner or later. And while Ortega's still here —"

The implications were obvious enough, and the suggestion was sensible.

"All right. You'd better go, I suppose. And mark my words, Mr Hornblower, you're to make it quite clear that I've authorised no negotiations of the sort you have in mind. Not a word. I've no responsibility. You understand?"

"Aye aye, sir."

Chapter XII

Three officers sat in what had been the commanding officer's room in Fort Samaná; in fact, seeing that Bush was now the commanding officer there, it could still be called the commanding officer's room. A bed with a mosquito net over it stood in one corner; at the other side of the room Buckland, Bush, and Hornblower sat in leather chairs. A lamp hanging from a beam overhead filled the room with its acrid smell, and lit up their sweating faces. It was hotter and stuffier even than it was in the ship, but at least here in the fort there was no brooding knowledge of a mad captain the other side of the bulkhead.

"I don't doubt for one moment," said Hornblower, "that when Villanueva sent Ortega here to open negotiations about the prisoners he also told him to put out a feeler regarding this evacuation."

"You can't be sure of that," said Buckland.

"Well, sir, put Yourself in Ortega's position. Would you say a word about a subject of that importance if you weren't authorised to? If you weren't expressly ordered to, sir?"

"No, I wouldn't," said Buckland.

No one could doubt that who knew Buckland, and for himself it was the most convincing argument.

"Then Villanueva had capitulation in mind as soon as he knew that we had captured this fort and that *Renown* would be able to anchor in the bay. You can see that must be so, sir."

"I suppose so," said Buckland, reluctantly.

"And if he's prepared to negotiate for a capitulation he must either be a poltroon or in serious danger, sir."

"Well —"

"It doesn't matter which is true, sir, whether his danger is real or imaginary, from the point of view of bargaining with him."

"You talk like a sea lawyer," said Buckland. He was being forced by logic into taking a momentous decision, and he did not want to be, so that in his struggles against it he used one of the worst terms of opprobrium in his vocabulary.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Hornblower. "I meant no disrespect. I let my tongue run away with me. Of course it's for you to decide where your duty lies, sir."

Bush could see that that word 'duty' had a stiffening effect on Buckland.

"Well, then, what d'you think lies behind all this?" asked Buckland. That might be intended as a temporising question, but it gave Hornblower permission to go on stating his views.

"Villanueva's been holding this end of the island against the insurgents for months now, sir. We don't know how much territory he holds, but we can guess that it's not much — only as far as the crest of those mountains across the bay, probably. Powder — lead — flints — shoes — he's probably in need of all of them."

"Judging by the prisoners we took, that's true, sir," interrupted Bush. It would be hard to ascertain the motives that led him to make this contribution to the discussion; perhaps he was only interested in the truth for its own sake.

"Maybe it is," said Buckland.

"Now you've arrived, sir, and he's cut off from the sea. He doesn't know how long we can stay here. He doesn't know what your orders are."

Hornblower did not know either, commented Bush to himself, and Buckland stirred restlessly at the allusion.

"Never mind that," he said.

"He sees himself cut off, and his supplies dwindling. If this goes on he'll have to surrender. He would rather start negotiations now, while he can still hold out, while he has something to bargain with, than wait until the last moment and have to surrender unconditionally, sir."

"I see," said Buckland.

"And he'd rather surrender to us than to the blacks, sir," concluded Hornblower.

"Yes indeed," said Bush. Everyone had heard a little about the horrors of the servile rebellion which for eight years had deluged this land with blood and scorched it with fire. The three men were silent for a space as they thought about the implications of Hornblower's last remark.

"Oh, very well then," said Buckland at length. "Let's hear what this fellow has to say."

"Shall I bring him in here, sir? He's been waiting long enough. I can blindfold him."

"Do what you like," said Buckland with resignation.

A closer view, when the handkerchief had been removed, revealed Colonel Ortega as a younger man than he might have been thought at a distance. He was very slender, and he wore his threadbare uniform with some presence at elegance. A muscle in his left cheek twitched continually. Buckland and Bush rose slowly to their feet to acknowledge the introductions Hornblower made.

"Colonel Ortega says he speaks no English," said Hornblower.

There was only the slightest extra stress on the word 'says', and only the slightest lingering in the glance that Hornblower shot at his two superiors as he said it, but it conveyed a warning.

"Well, ask him what he wants," said Buckland.

The conversation in Spanish was formal; obviously all the opening remarks were cautious fencing as each speaker felt for the weaknesses in the other's position and sought to conceal his own. But even Bush was aware of the moment when the vague sentences ended and definite proposals began. Ortega was bearing himself as a man conferring a favour; Hornblower like someone who did not care whether a favour was conferred or not. In the end he turned to Buckland and spoke in English.

"He has terms for a capitulation pat enough," he said.

"Well?"

"Please don't let him guess what you think, sir. But he suggests a free passage for the garrison. Ships — men — civilians. Passports for the ships while on passage to a Spanish possession — Cuba or Puerto Rico, in other words, sir. In exchange he'll hand over everything intact. Military stores. The battery across the bay. Everything."

"But —" Buckland struggled wildly to keep himself from revealing his feelings.

"I haven't said anything to him worth mentioning, so far, sir," said Hornblower.

Ortega had been watching the byplay keenly enough, and now he spoke again to Hornblower, with his shoulders back and his head high. There was passion in his voice, but what was more at odds with the dignity of his bearing was a peculiar gesture with which he accentuated one of his remarks — a jerk of the hand which called up the picture of someone vomiting.

"He says otherwise he'll fight to the last," interposed Hornblower. "He says Spanish soldiers can be relied upon to die to the last man sooner than submit to dishonour. He says we can do no more to them than we've done already — that we've reached the end of our tether, in other words, sir. And that we daren't stay longer in the island to starve him out because of the yellow fever — the *vomito negro*, sir."

In the whirl of excitement of the last few days Bush had forgotten all about the possibility of yellow fever. He found that he was looking concerned at the mention of it, and he hurriedly tried to assume an appearance of indifference. A glance at Buckland showed his face going through exactly the same transitions.

"I see," said Buckland.

It was an appalling thought. If yellow fever were to strike it might within a week leave the *Renown* without enough men to work her sails.

Ortega broke into passionate speech again, and Hornblower translated.

"He says his troops have lived here all their lives. They won't get yellow jack as easily as your men, and many of them have already had it. He has had it himself, he says, sir."

Bush remembered the emphasis with which Ortega had tapped his breast.

"And the blacks believe us to be their enemies, because of what happened in Dominica, sir, so he says. He could make an alliance with them against us. They could send an army against us here in the fort tomorrow, then. But please don't look as if you believe him, sir."

"Damn it to hell," said Buckland, exasperated. Bush wondered vaguely what it was that had happened in Dominica. History — even contemporary history — was not one of his strong points.

Again Ortega spoke.

"He says that's his last word, sir. An honourable proposal and he won't abate a jot, so he says. You could send him away now that you've heard it all and say that you'll give him an answer in the morning."

"Very well."

There were ceremonious speeches still to be made. Ortega's bows were so polite that Buckland and Bush were constrained, though reluctantly, to stand and endeavour to return them. Hornblower tied the handkerchief

round Ortega's eyes again and led him out.

"What do you think about it?" said Buckland to Bush.

"I'd like to think it over, sir," replied Bush.

Hornblower came in again while they were still considering the matter. He glanced at them both before addressing himself to Buckland.

"Will you be needing me again tonight, sir?"

"Oh, damn it, you'd better stay. You know more about these Dagoes than we do. What do you think about it?"

"He made some good arguments, sir."

"I thought so too," said Buckland with apparent relief.

"Can't we turn the thumbscrews on them somehow, sir?" asked Bush.

Even if he could not make suggestions himself, he was too cautious to agree readily to a bargain offered by a foreigner, even such a tempting one as this.

"We can bring the ship up the bay," said Buckland. "But the channel's tricky. You saw that yesterday."

Good God! it was still only yesterday that the *Renown* had tried to make her way in under the fire of red-hot shot. Buckland had had a day of comparative peace, so that the mention of yesterday did not appear as strange to him.

"We'll still be under the fire of the battery across the bay, even though we hold this one," said Buckland.

"We ought to be able to run past it, sir," protested Bush "We can keep over to this side."

"And if we do run past? They've warped their ships right up the bay again. They draw six feet less of water than we do — and if they've got any sense they'll lighten 'em so as to warp 'em farther over the shallows. Nice fools we'll look if we come in an' then find 'em out of range, an' have to run out again under fire. That might stiffen 'em so that they wouldn't agree to the terms that fellow just offered."

Buckland was in a state of actual alarm at the thought of reporting two fruitless repulses.

"I can see that," said Bush, depressed.

"If we agree," said Buckland, warming to his subject, "the blacks'll take over all this end of the island. This bay can't be used by privateers then. The blacks'll have no ships, and couldn't man 'em if they had. We'll have executed our orders. Don't you agree, Mr Hornblower?"

Bush transferred his gaze. Hornblower had looked weary in the morning, and he had had almost no rest during the day. His face was drawn and his eyes were rimmed with red.

"We might still be able to — to put the thumbscrews on 'em, sir," he said.

"How?"

"It'd be risky to take *Renown* into the upper end of the bay. But we might get at 'em from the peninsula here, all the same, sir, if you'd give the orders."

"God bless my soul!" said Bush, the exclamation jerked out of him.

"What orders?" asked Buckland.

"If we could mount a gun on the upper end of the peninsula we'd have the far end of the bay under fire, sir. We wouldn't need hot shot — we'd have all day to knock 'em to pieces however much they shifted their anchorage."

"So we would, by George," said Buckland. There was animation in his face. "Could you get one of these guns along there?"

"I've been thinking about it, sir, an' I'm afraid we couldn't. Not quickly, at least. Twenty-four-pounders. Two an' a half tons each. Garrison carriages. We've no horses. We couldn't move 'em with a hundred men over those gullies, four miles or more."

"Then what the hell's the use of talking about it?" demanded Buckland.

"We don't have to drag a gun from here, sir," said Hornblower. "We could use one from the ship. One of those long nine-pounders we've got mounted as bow chasers. Those long guns have a range pretty nearly as good as these twenty-fours, sir."

"But how do we get it there?"

Bush had a glimmering of the answer even before Hornblower replied.

"Send it round in the launch, sir, with tackle and cables, near to where we landed yesterday. The cliff's steep there. And there are big trees to attach the cables to. We could sway the gun up easy enough. Those

nine-pounders only weigh a ton."

"I know that," said Buckland, sharply.

It was one thing to make unexpected suggestions, but it was quite another to tell a veteran officer facts with which he was well acquainted.

"Yes, of course, sir. But with a nine-pounder at the top of the cliff it wouldn't be so difficult to move it across the neck of land until we had the upper bay under our fire. We wouldn't have to cross any gullies. Half a mile — uphill, but not too steep, sir — and it would be done."

"And what d'you think would happen then?"

"We'd have those ships under fire, sir. Only a nine-pounder, I know, but they're not built to take punishment. We could batter 'em into wrecks in twelve hours' steady fire. Less than that, perhaps. An' I suppose we could heat the shot if we wanted to, but we wouldn't have to. All we'd have to do would be to open fire, I think, sir."

"Why?"

"The Dons wouldn't risk those ships, sir. Ortega spoke very big about making an alliance with the blacks, but that was only talking big, sir. Give the blacks a chance an' they'll cut every white throat they can. An' I don't blame 'em — excuse me, sir."

"Well?"

"Those ships are the Dons' only way of escape. If they see they're going to be destroyed they'll be frightened. It would mean surrendering to the blacks — that or being killed to the last man. And woman, sir. They'd rather surrender to us."

"So they would, by jingo," said Bush.

"They'd climb down, d'ye think?"

"Yes — I mean I think so, sir. You could name your own terms, then. Unconditional surrender for the soldiers."

"It's what we said at the start," said Bush. "They'd rather surrender to us than to the blacks, if they have to."

"You could allow some conditions to salve their pride, sir," said Hornblower. "Agree that the women are to be conveyed to Cuba or Puerto Rico if they wish. But nothing important. Those ships would be our prizes, sir."

"Prizes, by George!" said Buckland.

Prizes meant prize money, and as commanding officer he would have the lion's share of it. Not only that — and perhaps the money was the smallest consideration — but prizes escorted triumphantly into port were much more impressive than ships sunk out of sight of the eyes of authority. And unconditional surrender had a ring of finality about it, proof that the victory gained could not be more complete.

"What do you say, Mr Bush?" asked Buckland.

"I think it might be worth trying, sir," said Bush.

He was fatalistic now about Hornblower. Exasperation over his activity and ingenuity had died of surfeit. There was something of resignation about Bush's attitude, but there was something of admiration too. Bush was a generous soul, and there was not a mean motive in him. Hornblower's careful handling of his superior had not been lost on him, and Bush was decently envious of the tact that had been necessary. Bush realistically admitted to himself that even though he had fretted at the prospect of agreeing to Ortega's terms he had not been able to think of a way to modify them, while Hornblower had. Hornblower was a very brilliant young officer, Bush decided; he himself made no pretence at brilliance, and now he had taken the last step and had overcome his suspicions of brilliance. He made himself abandon his caution and commit himself to a definite opinion.

"I think Mr Hornblower deserves every credit," he said.

"Of course," said Buckland — but the slight hint of surprise in his voice seemed to indicate that he did not really believe it; and he changed the subject without pursuing it further. "We'll start tomorrow — I'll get both launches out as soon as the hands've had breakfast. By noon — now what's the matter with you, Mr Hornblower?"

"Well, sir —"

"Come on. Out with it."

"Ortega comes back tomorrow morning to hear our terms again, sir. I suppose he'll get up at dawn or not long after. He'll have a bite of breakfast. Then he'll have a few words with Villanueva. Then he'll row across the bay. He might be here at eight bells. Later than that, probably, a little —"

"Who cares when Ortega has his breakfast? What's all this rigmarole for?"

"Ortega gets here at two bells in the forenoon. If he finds we haven't wasted a minute; if I can tell him that you've rejected his terms absolutely, sir, and not only that, if we can show him the gun mounted, and say we'll open fire in an hour if they don't surrender without conditions, he'll be much more impressed."

"That's true, sir," said Bush.

"Otherwise it won't be so easy, sir. You'll either have to temporise again while the gun's being got into position, or you'll have to use threats. I'll have to say to him *if* you don't agree, then we'll start hoisting a gun up. In either case you'll be allowing him time, sir. He might think of some other way out of it. The weather might turn dirty — there might even be a hurricane get up. But if he's sure we'll stand no nonsense, sir —"

"That's the way to treat 'em," said Bush.

"But even if we start at dawn " said Buckland, and having progressed so far in his speech he realised the alternative. "You mean we can get to work now?"

"We have all night before us, sir. You could have the launches hoisted out and the gun swayed down into one of them. Slings and cables and some sort of carrying cradle prepared. Hands told off —"

"And start at dawn!"

"At dawn the boats can be round the peninsula waiting for daylight, sir. You could send some hands with a hundred fathoms of line up from the ship to here. They can start off along the path before daylight. That'd save time."

"So it would, by George!" said Bush; he had no trouble in visualising the problems of seamanship involved in hoisting a gun up the face of a cliff.

"We're shorthanded already in the ship," said Buckland. "I'll have to turn up both watches."

"That won't hurt 'em, sir," said Bush. He had already been two nights without sleep and was now contemplating a third.

"Who shall I send? I'll want a responsible officer in charge. A good seaman at that."

"I'll go if you like, sir," said Hornblower.

"No. You'll have to be here to deal with Ortega. If I send Smith I'll have no lieutenant left on board."

"Maybe you could send me, sir," said Bush. "That is, if you were to leave Mr Hornblower in command here."

"Um —" said Buckland. "Oh well, I don't see anything else to do. Can I trust you, Mr Hornblower?"

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Let me see —" said Buckland.

"I could go back to the ship with you in your gig, sir," said Bush. "Then there'd be no time wasted."

This prodding of a senior officer into action was something new to Bush, but he was learning the art fast. The fact that the three of them had not long ago been fellow conspirators made it easier; and once the ice was broken, as soon as Buckland had once admitted his juniors to give him counsel and advice, it became easier with repetition.

"Yes, I suppose you'd better," said Buckland, and Bush promptly rose to his feet, so that Buckland could hardly help doing the same.

Bush ran his eye over Hornblower's battered form.

"Now look you here, Mr Hornblower," he said. "You take some sleep. You need it."

"I relieve Whiting as officer on duty at midnight, sir," said Hornblower, "and I have to go the rounds."

"Maybe that's true. You'll still have two hours before midnight. Turn in until then. And have Whiting relieve you at eight bells again."

"Aye aye, sir."

At the very thought of abandoning himself to the sleep for which he yearned Hornblower swayed with fatigue.

"You could make that an order, sir," suggested Bush to Buckland.

"What's that? Oh yes, get a rest while you can, Mr Hornblower."

"Aye aye, sir."

Bush picked his way down the steep path to the landing stage at Buckland's heels, and took his seat beside him in the stern sheets of the gig.

"I can't make that fellow Hornblower out," said Buckland a little peevishly on one occasion as they rowed back to the anchored *Renown*.

"He's a good officer, sir," answered Bush, but he spoke a little absently. Already in his mind he was tackling the problem of hoisting a long nine-pounder up a cliff, and he was sorting out mentally the necessary equipment, and planning the necessary orders. Two heavy anchors — not merely boat grapnels — to anchor the buoy solidly. The thwarts of the launch had better be shored up to bear the weight of the gun. Travelling blocks. Slings — for the final hoist it might be safer to suspend the gun by its cascabel and trunnions. Bush was not of the mental type that takes pleasure in theoretical exercises. To plan a campaign; to put himself mentally in the position of the enemy and think along alien lines; to devise unexpected expedients; all this was beyond his capacity. But to deal with a definite concrete problem, a simple matter of ropes and tackles and breaking strains, pure seamanship — he had a lifetime of experience to reinforce his natural bent in that direction.

Chapter XIII

"Take the strain," said Bush, standing on the cliff's edge and looking far, far down to where the launch floated moored to the buoy and with an anchor astern to keep her steady. Black against the Atlantic blue two ropes came down from over his head, curving slightly but almost vertical, down to the buoy. A poet might have seen something dramatic and beautiful in those spider lines cleaving the air, but Bush merely saw a couple of ropes, and the white flag down in the launch signalling that all was clear for hoisting. The blocks creaked as the men pulled in on the slack.

"Now, handsomely," said Bush. This work was too important to be delegated to Mr Midshipman James, standing beside him. "Hoist away. Handsomely."

The creaking took on a different tone as the weight came on the blocks. The curves of the ropes altered, appeared almost deformed, as the gun began to rise from its cradle on the thwarts. The shallow, lovely catenaries changed to a harsher, more angular figure. Bush had his telescope to his eye and could see the gun stir and move, and slowly — that was what Bush meant by 'handsomely' in the language of the sea — it began to upend itself, to dangle from the traveller, to rise clear of the launch; hanging, just as Bush had visualized it, from the slings through its cascabel and round its trunnions. It was safe enough — if those slings were to give way or to slip, the gun would crash through the bottom of the launch. The line about its muzzle restrained it from swinging too violently.

"Hoist away," said Bush again, and the traveller began to mount the rope with the gun pendant below it. This was the next ticklish moment, when the pull came most transversely. But everything held fast.

"Hoist away."

Now the gun was mounting up the rope. Beyond the launch's stern it dipped, with the stretching of the cable and the straightening of the curve, until its muzzle was almost in the sea. But the hoisting proceeded steadily, and it rose clear of the water, up, up, up. The sheaves hummed rhythmically in the blocks as the hands hove on the line. The sun shone on the men from its level position in the glowing east, stretching out their shadows and those of the trees to incredible lengths over the irregular plateau.

"Easy, there!" said Bush. "Belay!"

The gun had reached the cliff edge.

"Move that cat's cradle over this way a couple of feet. Now, sway in. Lower. Good. Cast off those lines."

The gun lay, eight feet of dull bronze, upon the cat's cradle that had been spread to receive it. This was a small area of stout rope-netting, from which diverged, knotted thickly to the central portion, a score or more of individual lines, each laid out separately on the ground.

"We'll get that on its way first. Take a line, each of you marines."

The thirty red-coated marines that Hornblower had sent along from the fort moved up to the cat's cradle. Their noncommissioned officers pushed them into position, and Bush checked to see that each man was there.

"Take hold."

It was better to go to a little trouble and see that everything was correctly balanced at the start rather than risk that the unwieldy lump of metal should roll off the cat's cradle and should have to be laboriously

manoeuvred back into position.

"Now, all of you together when I give the word. Lift!"

The gun rose a foot from the ground as every man exerted himself.

"March! Belay that, sergeant."

The sergeant had begun to call the step, but on this irregular ground with every man supporting eighty pounds of weight it was better that they should not try to keep step.

"Halt! Lower!"

The gun had moved twenty yards towards the position Bush had selected for it.

"Carry on, sergeant. Keep 'em moving. Not too fast."

Marines were only dumb animals, not even machines, and were liable to tire. It was better be conservative with their strength. But while they laboured at carrying the gun the necessary half mile up to the crest the seamen could work at hauling up the rest of the stores from the launches. Nothing would be as difficult as the gun. The gun carriage was a feather-weight by comparison; even the nets, each holding twenty nine-pound cannon balls, were easy to handle. Rammers, sponges, and wad-hooks, two of each in case of accidents; wads; and now the powder charges. With only two and a half pounds of powder in each they seemed tiny compared with the eight-pound charges Bush had grown accustomed to on the lower gundeck. Last of all came the heavy timbers destined to form a smooth floor upon which the gun could be worked. They were awkward things to carry, but with each timber on the shoulders of four men they could be carried up the gentle slope fast enough, overtaking the unfortunate marines, who, streaming with sweat, were lifting and carrying, lifting and carrying, on their way up.

Bush stood for a moment at the cliff edge checking over the stores with James' assistance. Linstocks and slow match; primers and quills; barricoes of water; handspikes, hammers, and nails; everything necessary, he decided — not merely his professional reputation but his self-respect depended on his having omitted nothing. He waved his flag, and received an answer from the launches. The second launch cast off her mooring line, and then, hauling up her anchor, she went off with her consort to pull back round Samaná Point to rejoin *Renown* — in the ship they would be most desperately shorthanded until the launches' crews should come on board again. From the trees to which it was secured, over Bush's head, the rope hung down to the buoy, neglected unless it should be needed again; Bush hardly spared it a glance. Now he was free to walk up the crest and prepare for action; a glance at the sun assured him that it was less than three hours since sunrise even now.

He organised the final carrying party and started up to the crest. When he reached it the bay opened below him. He put his glass to his eye: the three vessels were lying at anchor within easy cannon shot of where he stood, and when he swung the glass to his left he could just make out, far, far away, the two specks which were the flags flying over the fort — the swell of the land hid the body of the building from his sight. He closed the glass and applied himself to the selection of a level piece of ground on which to lay the timbers for the platform. Already the men with the lightest loads were around him, chattering and pointing excitedly until with a growl he silenced them.

The hammers thumped upon the nails as the crosspieces were nailed into position on the timbers. No sooner had they ceased than the gun carriage was swung up on to it by the lusty efforts of half a dozen men. They attached the tackles and saw to it that the gun-trucks ran easily before chocking them. The marines came staggering up, sweating and gasping under their monstrous burden. Now was the moment for the trickiest piece of work in the morning's programme. Bush distributed his steadiest men round the carrying ropes, a reliable petty officer on either side to watch that accurate balance was maintained.

"Lift and carry."

The gun lay beside the carriage on the platform

"Lift. Lift. Higher. Not high enough. Lift, you men!"

There were gasps and grunts as the men struggled to raise the gun.

"Keep her at that! Back away, starboard side! Go with 'em, port side. Lift! Bring the bows round now. Steady!"

The gun in its cat's cradle hung precariously over the carriage as Bush lined it up.

"Now, back towards me! Steady! Lower! Slowly, damn you! Steady! For'ard a little! Now lower again!"

The gun sank down towards its position on the carriage. It rested there, the trunnions not quite in their holes,

the breech not quite in position on the bed.

"Hold it! Berry! Chapman! Handspikes under those trunnions! Ease her along!"

With something of a jar the ton of metal subsided into it, place on the carriage, trunnions home into their holes and breech settled upon the bed. A couple of hands set to work untying the knots that would free the cat's cradle from under the gun, but Berry, gunner's mate, had already snapped the capsquares down upon the trunnions, and the gun was now a gun, a vital fighting weapon and not an inanimate ingot of metal. The shot were being piled at the edge of the platform.

"Lay those charges out back there!" said Bush, pointing. No one in his senses allowed unprotected explosives nearer a gun than was necessary. Berry was kneeling on the platform, bent over the flint and steel with which he was working to catch a spark upon the tinder with which to ignite the slow match. Bush wiped away the sweat that streamed over his face and neck; even though he had not taken actual physical part in the carrying and heaving he felt the effect of his exertions. He looked at the sun again to judge the time; this was no moment for resting upon his labours.

"Gun's crew fall in!" he ordered. "Load and run up!"

He applied his eye to the telescope.

"Aim for the schooner," he said. "Take a careful aim."

The gun-trucks squealed as the handspikes trained the gun round.

"Gun laid, sir," reported the gun captain.

"Then fire!"

The gun banged out sharp and clear, a higher-pitched report than the deafening thunderous roar of the massive twenty-four-pounders. That report would resound round the bay. Even if the shot missed its mark this time, the men down in those ships would know that the next, or the next, would strike. Looking up at the high shore through hastily trained telescopes they would see the powder smoke slowly drifting along the verge of the cliff, and would recognise their doom. Over on the southern shore Villanueva would have his attention called to it, and would know that escape was finally cut off for the men under his command and the women under his protection. Yet all the same, Bush, gazing through the telescope, could mark no fall of the shot.

"Load and fire again. Make sure of your aim."

While they loaded Bush turned his telescope upon the flags over the fort, until the gun captain's cry told him that loading was completed. The gun banged out, and Bush thought he saw the fleeting black line of the course of the shot.

"You're firing over her. Put the quoins in and reduce the elevation. Try again!"

He looked again at the flags. They were very slowly descending, down out of his sight. Now they rose once more, very slowly, fluttered for a moment at the head of the Flagstaff, and sank again. The next time they rose they remained steady. That was the preconcerted signal. Dipping the colours twice meant that the gun had been heard in the fort and all was well. It was Bush's duty now to complete ten rounds of firing, slowly. Bush watched each round carefully; it seemed likely that the schooner was being hit. Those flying nine-pound balls of iron were crashing through the frail upper works, smashing and destroying, casting up showers of splinters. At the eighth round something screamed through the air like a banshee two yards over Bush's head, a whirling irregular scream which died away abruptly behind his back.

"What the hell was that?" demanded Bush.

"The gun's unbushed, sir," said Berry.

"God —" Bush poured out a torrent of blasphemy, uncontrolled, almost hysterical. This was the climax of days and nights of strain and labour, the bitterest blow that could be imagined, with success almost within their grasp and now snatched away. He swore frightfully, and then came back to his senses; it would not be good for the men to know that their officer was as disappointed as Bush knew himself to be. His curses died away when he restrained himself, and he walked forward to look at the gun.

The damage was plain. The touchhole in the breech of a gun, especially a bronze gun, was always a weak point. At each round some small part of the explosion vented itself through the hole, the blast of hot gas and unconsumed powder grains eroding the edges of the hole, enlarging it until the loss of force became severe enough to impair the efficiency of the gun. Then the gun had to be 'bushed'; a tapering plug, with a hole pierced through its length and a flange round its base, had to be forced into the touchhole from the inside of

the gun, small end first. The hole in the plug served as the new touchhole, and the explosions of the gun served to drive the plug more and more thoroughly home, until the plug itself began to erode and to weaken, forcing itself up through the touchhole while the flange burned away in the fierce heat of the explosions until at last it would blow itself clean out, as it had done now.

Bush looked at the huge hole in the breech, a full inch wide; if the gun were to be fired in that condition half the powder charge would blow out through it. The range would be halved at best, and every subsequent round would enlarge the hole further.

"D'ye have a new vent-fitting?" he demanded.

"Well, sir —" Berry began to go slowly through hip pockets, rummaging through their manifold contents while gazing absently at the sky and while Bush fumed with impatience. "Yes, sir."

Berry produced, seemingly at the eleventh hour, the cast-iron plug that meant so much.

"Lucky for you," said Bush, grimly. "Get it fitted and don't waste any more time."

"Aye aye, sir. I'll have to file it to size, sir. Then I'll have to put it in place."

"Start work and stop talking. Mr James!"

"Sir!"

"Run to the fort." Bush took a few steps away from the gun as he spoke, so as to get out of earshot of the men.

"Tell Mr Hornblower that the gun's unbushed. It'll be an hour before we can open fire again. Tell him I'll fire three shots when the gun's ready, and ask him to acknowledge them as before."

"Aye aye, sir "

At the last moment Bush remembered something.

"Mr James! Don't make your report in anyone's hearing. Don't let that Spanish fellow, what's-his-name, hear about this. Not if you want to be kind to your backside."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Run!"

That would be a very long hot run for Mr James; Bush watched him go and then turned back to the gun. Berry had selected a file from his roll of tools and was sitting on the rear step of the gun scraping away at the plug. Bush sat on the edge of the platform; the irritation at the disablement of the gun was overlaid by his satisfaction with himself as a diplomat. He was pleased at having remembered to warn James against letting Ortega into the secret. The men were chattering and beginning to skylark about; a few minutes more and they would be scattering all over the peninsula. Bush lifted his head and barked at them.

"Silence, there! Sergeant!"

"Sir?"

"Post four sentries. Give 'em beats on all four sides. No one to pass that line on any account whatever."

"Yessir."

"Let the rest of your men sit down. You gun's crew! Sit there, and don't chatter like Portuguese bumboat men."

The sun was very hot, and the rasp-rasp-rasp of Berry's file was, if anything, soothing. Bush had hardly ceased speaking when fatigue and sleepiness demanded their due; his eyes closed and his chin sank on his breast. In one second he was asleep; in three he was awake again, with the world whirling round him as he recovered himself from falling over. He blinked at the unreal world; the blink prolonged itself into sleep, and again he caught himself up on the point of keeling over. Bush felt that he would give anything at all, in this world or the next, to sink quietly on to his side and allow sleep to overwhelm him. He fought down the temptation; he was the only officer present and there might be an instant emergency. Straightening his back, he glowered at the world, and then even with his back straight he went to sleep again. There was only one thing to do. He rose to his feet, with his weary joints protesting, and began to pace up and down beside the gun platform, up and down in the sunshine, with the sweat pouring off him, while the gun's crew quickly subsided into the sleep he envied them — they lay like pigs in a sty, at all angles — and while Berry's file went whit-whit-whit on the vent-fitting. The minutes dragged by and the sun mounted higher and higher. Berry paused in his work to gauge the fitting against the touchhole, and then went on filing; he paused again to clean his file, and each time Bush looked sharply at him, only to be disappointed, and to go back to thinking how much he wanted to go to sleep.

"I have it to size now, sir," said Berry at last.

"Then fit it, damn you," said Bush. "You gun's crew, wake up, there! Rise and shine! Wake up, there!"

While Bush kicked the snoring men awake Berry had produced a length of twine from his pocket. With a slowness that Bush found maddening he proceeded to tie one end into a loop and then drop the loop in through the touchhole. Then he took the wad-hook, and, walking round to the muzzle of the gun and squatting down, he proceeded to push the hook up the eight-foot length of the bore and try to catch the loop on it. Over and over again he twisted the hook and withdrew it a little with no corresponding reaction on the part of the twine hanging from the touchhole, but at last he made his catch. As he brought the hook out the twine slid down into the hole, and when the wad-hook was withdrawn from the muzzle the loop was hanging on it. Still with intense deliberation Berry calmly proceeded to undo the loop and pass the end of the twine through the hole in the vent-fitting, and then secure the end to a little toggle which he also took from his pocket. He dropped the vent-fitting into the muzzle and walked round to the breech again, and pulled in on the twine, the vent-fitting rattling down the bore until it leaped up to its position under the touchhole with a sharp tap that every ear heard. Even so it was only after some minutes of fumbling and adjustment that Berry had the vent-fitting placed to his satisfaction with its small end in the hole, and he gestured to the gun captain to hold it steady with the twine. Now he took the rammer and thrust it with infinite care up the muzzle, feeling sensitively with it and pressing down upon the handle when he had it exactly placed. Another gesture from Berry, and a seaman brought a hammer and struck down upon the handle which Berry held firm. At each blow the vent-fitting showed more clearly down in the touchhole, rising an eighth of an inch at a time until it was firmly jammed.

"Ready?" asked Bush as Berry waved the seaman away.

"Not quite, sir."

Berry withdrew the rammer and walked slowly round to the breech again. He looked down at the vent-fitting with his head first on one side and then on the other, like a terrier at a rat-hole. He seemed to be satisfied, and yet he walked back again to the muzzle and took up the wad-hook. Bush glared round the horizon to ease his impatience; over towards where the fort lay a tiny figure was visible coming towards them. Bush clapped a telescope to his eye. It was a white-trousered individual, now running, now walking, and apparently waving his arm as though to attract attention. It might be Wellard; Bush was nearly sure it was. Meanwhile Berry had caught the twine again with the wad-hook and drawn it out again. He cut the toggle free from the twine with a stroke of his sheath knife and dropped it in his pocket, and then, once more as if he had all the time in the world, he returned to the breech and wound up his twine.

"Two rounds with one-third charges ought to do it now, sir," he announced. "That'll seat —"

"It can wait a few minutes longer," said Bush, interrupting him with a short-tempered delight in showing this self-satisfied skilled worker that his decisions need not all be treated like gospel.

Wellard was in clear sight of them all now, running and walking and stumbling over the irregular surface. He reached the gun gasping for breath, sweat running down his face.

"Please, sir —" he began. Bush was about to blare at him for his disrespectful approach but Wellard anticipated him. He twitched his coat into position, settled his absurd little hat on his head, and stepped forward with all the stiff precision his gasping lungs would allow.

"Mr Hornblower's respects, sir," he said, raising his hand to his hat brim.

"Well, Mr Wellard?"

"Please will you not reopen fire, sir."

Wellard's chest was heaving, and that was all he could say between two gasps. The sweat running down into his eyes made him blink, but he manfully stood to attention ignoring it.

"And why not, pray, Mr Wellard?"

Even Bush could guess at the answer, but asked the question because the child deserved to be taken seriously.

"The Dons have agreed to a capitulation, sir."

"Good! Those ships there?"

"They'll be our prizes, sir."

"Hurray!" yelled Berry, his arms in the air.

Five hundred pounds for Buckland, five shillings for Berry but prize money was something to cheer about in

any case. And this was a victory, the destruction of a nest of privateers, the capture of a Spanish regiment, security for convoys going through the Mona Passage. It had only needed the mounting of the gun to search the anchorage to bring the Dons to their senses.

"Very good, Mr Wellard, thank you," said Bush.

So Wellard could step back and wipe the sweat out of his eyes, and Bush could wonder what item in the terms of the capitulation would be likely to rob him of his next night's rest.

Chapter XIV

Bush stood on the quarterdeck of the *Renown* at Buckland's side with his telescope trained on the fort.

"The party's leaving there now, sir," he said; and then, after an interval, "The boat's putting off from the landing stage."

The *Renown* swung at her anchor in the mouth of the Gulf of Samaná, and close beside her rode her three prizes; All four ships were jammed with the prisoners who had surrendered themselves, and sails were ready to loose the moment the *Renown* should give the signal.

"The boat's well clear now," said Bush. "I wonder — ah!"

The fort on the crest had burst into a great fountain of smoke, within which could be made out flying fragments of masonry. A moment later came the crash of the explosion. Two tons of gunpowder, ignited by the slow match left burning by the demolition party, did the work. Ramparts and bastions, tower and platform, all were dashed into ruins. Already at the foot of the steep slope to the water lay what was left of the guns, trunnions blasted off, muzzles split, and touchholes spiked; the insurgents when they came to take over the place would have no means to re-establish the defences of the bay — the other battery on the point across the water had already been blown up.

"It looks as if the damage is complete enough, sir," said Bush.

"Yes," said Buckland, his eyes to his telescope observing the ruins as they began to show through the smoke and dust. "We'll get under way as soon as the boat's hoisted in, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush.

With the boat lowered on to its chocks the hands went to the capstan and hauled the ship laboriously up to her anchor; the sails were loosed as the anchor rose clear. The main topsail aback gave her a trifle of sternway, and then, with the wheel hard over and hands at the headsail sheets, she came round. The topsails, braced up, caught the wind as the quartermaster at the wheel spun the spokes over hastily, and now she was under full command, moving easily through the water, heeling a little to the wind, the sea swinging under her cutwater, heading out close-hauled to weather Engano Point. Somebody forward began to cheer, and in a moment the entire crew was yelling lustily as the *Renown* left the scene of her victory. The prizes were getting under way at the same time, and the prize crews on board echoed the cheering. Bush's telescope could pick out Hornblower on the deck of *La Gaditana*, the big shiprigged prize, waving his hat to the *Renown*.

"I'll see that everything is secure below, sir," said Bush

There were marine sentries beside the midshipmen's berth, bayonets fixed and muskets loaded. From within, as Bush listened, there was a wild babble of voices. Fifty women were cramped into that space, and almost as many children. That was bad, but it was necessary to confine them while the ship got under way. Later on they could be allowed on deck, in batches perhaps, for air and exercise. The hatchways in the lower gundeck were closed by gratings, and every hatchway was guarded by a sentry. Up through the gratings rose the smell of humanity; there were four hundred Spanish soldiers confined down there in conditions not much better than prevailed in a slave ship. It was only since dawn that they had been down there, and already there was this stench. For the men, as for the women, there would have to be arrangements made to allow them to take the air in batches. It meant endless trouble and precaution; Bush had already gone to considerable trouble to organise a system by which the prisoners should be supplied with food and drink. but every water butt was full, two boat-loads of yams had been brought on board from the shore, and, given the steady breeze that could be expected, the run to Kingston would be completed in less than a week. Then their troubles would be

ended and the prisoners handed over to the military authorities — probably the prisoners would be as relieved as Bush would be.

On deck again Bush looked over at the green hills of Santo Domingo out on the starboard beam as, close-hauled, the *Renown* coasted along them; on that side too, under her lee as his orders had dictated, Hornblower had the three prizes under easy sail. Even with this brisk seven-knot breeze blowing and the *Renown* with all sail set those three vessels had the heels of her if they cared to show them; privateers depended both for catching their prey and evading their enemies on the ability to work fast to the windward, and Hornblower could soon have left the *Renown* far behind if he were not under orders to keep within sight and to leeward so that the *Renown* could run down to him and protect him if an enemy should appear. The prize crews were small enough in all conscience, and just as in the *Renown* Hornblower had all the prisoners he could guard battened down below.

Bush touched his hat to Buckland as the latter came on to the quarterdeck.

"I'll start bringing the prisoners up if I may, sir," he said.

"Do as you think proper, if you please, Mr Bush."

The quarterdeck for the women, the maindeck for the men. It was hard to make them understand that they had to take turns; those of the women who were brought on deck seemed to fancy that they were going to be permanently separated from those kept below, and there was lamentation and expostulation which accorded ill with the dignified routine which should be observed on the quarterdeck of a ship of the line. And the children knew no discipline whatever, and ran shrieking about in all directions while harassed seamen tried to bring them back to their mothers. And other seamen had to be detailed to bring the prisoners their food and water. Bush, tackling each aggravating problem as it arose, began to think that life as first lieutenant in a ship of the line (which he had once believed to be a paradise too wonderful for him to aspire to) was not worth the living.

There were thirty officers crammed into the steerage, from the elegant Villanueva down to the second mate of the *Gaditana*; they were almost as much trouble to Bush as all the other prisoners combined, for they took the air on the poop, from which point of vantage they endeavoured to hold conversations with their wives on the quarterdeck, while they had to be fed from the wardroom stores, which were rapidly depleted by the large Spanish appetites. Bush found himself looking forward more and more eagerly to their arrival at Kingston, and he had neither time nor inclination to brood over what might be their reception there, which was probably just as well, for while he could hope for commendation for the part he had played in the attack on Santo Domingo he could also fear the result of an inquiry into the circumstances which had deprived Captain Sawyer of his command.

Day by day the wind held fair; day by day the *Renown* surged along over the blue Caribbean with the prizes to leeward on the port bow; the prisoners, even the women, began to recover from their seasickness, and feeding them and guarding them became more and more matters of routine making less demand on everyone. They sighted Cape Beata to the northward and could haul their port tacks on board and lay a course direct for Kingston, but save for that they hardly had to handle a sail, for the wind blew steady and the hourly heaving of the log recorded eight knots with almost monotonous regularity. The sun rose splendidly behind them each morning; and each evening the bowsprit pointed into a flaming sunset. In the daytime the sun blazed down upon the ship save for the brief intervals when sharp rainstorms blotted out sun and sea; at night the ship rose and swooped with the following sea under a canopy of stars.

It was a dark lovely night when Bush completed his evening rounds and went in to report to Buckland. The sentries were posted; the watch below was asleep with all lights out; the watch on deck had taken in the royals as a precaution against a rain squall striking the ship without warning in the darkness; the course was east by north and Mr Carberry had the watch, and the convoy was in sight a mile on the port bow. The guard over the captain in his cabin was at his post. All this Bush recounted to Buckland in the time-honoured fashion of the navy, and Buckland listened to it with the navy's time-honoured patience.

"Thank you, Mr Bush."

"Thank you, sir. Goodnight, sir."

"Goodnight, Mr Bush."

Bush's cabin opened on the halfdeck; it was hot and stuffy with the heat in the tropics, but Bush did not care.

He had six clear hours in which to sleep, seeing that he was going to take the morning watch, and he was not the man to waste any of that. He threw off his outer clothes, and standing in his shirt he cast a final look round his cabin before putting out the light. Shoes and trousers were on the sea-chest ready to be put on at a moment's notice in the event of an emergency. Sword and pistols were in their beackets against the bulkhead. All was well. The messenger who would come to call him would bring a lamp, so, using his hand to deflect his breath, he blew out the light. Then he dropped upon the cot, lying on his back with his arms and legs spread wide so as to allow the sweat every chance to evaporate, and he closed his eyes. Thanks to his blessed stolidity of temperament he was soon asleep. At midnight he awoke long enough to hear the watch called, and to tell himself blissfully that there was no need to awake, and he had not sweated enough to make his position on the cot uncomfortable.

Later he awoke again, and looked up into the darkness with uncomprehending eyes as his ears told him all was not well. There were loud cries, there was a rush of feet overhead. Perhaps a fluky rain squall had taken the ship aback. But those were the wrong noises. Were some of those cries cries of pain? Was that the scream of a woman? Were those infernal women squabbling with each other again? Now there was another rush of feet, and wild shouting, which brought Bush off his cot in a flash. He tore open his cabin door, and as he did so he heard the bang of a musket which left him in no doubt as to what was happening. He turned back and grabbed for sword and pistol, and by the time he was outside his cabin door again the ship was full of a yelling tumult. It was as if the hatchways were the entrances to Hell, and pouring up through them were the infernal powers, screaming with triumph in the dimly lit recesses of the ship.

As he emerged the sentry under the lantern fired his musket, lantern and musket flash illuminating a wave of humanity pouring upon the sentry and instantly submerging him; Bush caught a glimpse of a woman leading the wave, a handsome mulatto woman, wife to one of the privateer officers, now screaming with open mouth and staring eyes as she led the rush. Bush levelled his pistol and fired, but they were up to him in an instant. He backed into his narrow doorway. Hands grabbed his sword blade, and he tore it through their grip; he struck wildly with his empty pistol, he kicked out with his bare feet to free himself from the hands that grabbed at him. Thrusting overhand with his sword he stabbed again and again into the mass of bodies pressing against him. Twice his head struck against the deck beams above but he did not feel the blows. Then the flood had washed past him. There were shouts and screams and blows farther alone but he himself had been passed by, saved by the groaning men who wallowed at his feet — his bare feet slipping in the hot blood that poured over them.

His first thought was for Buckland, but a single glance aft assured him that by himself he stood no chance of being of any aid to him, and in that case his post was on the quarterdeck, and he ran out, sword in hand, to make his way there. At the foot of the companion ladder there was another whirl of yelling Spaniards; above there were shouts and cries as the after guard fought it out. Forward there was other fighting going on; the stars were shining on white-shined groups that fought and struggled with savage desperation. Unknown to himself he was yelling with the rest; a band of men turned upon him as he approached, and he felt the heavy blow of a belaying pin against his sword blade. But Bush inflamed with fighting madness was an enemy to be feared; his immense strength was allied to a lightfooted quickness. He struck and parried, leaping over the cumbered deck. He knew nothing, and during those mad minutes he thought of nothing save to fight against these enemies, to reconquer the ship by the strength of his single arm. Then he regained some of his sanity at the moment when he struck down one of the group against whom he was fighting. He must rally the crew, set an example, concentrate his men into a cohesive body. He raised his voice in a bellow.

"Renowns! Renowns! Here, Renowns! Come on!"

There was a fresh swirl in the mad confusion on the maindeck. There was a searing pain across his shoulderblade; instinctively he turned and his left hand seized a throat and he had a moment in which to brace himself and exert all his strength, with a wrench and a heave flinging the man on to the deck.

"Renowns!" he yelled again.

There was a rush of feet as a body of men rallied round him.

"Come on!"

But the charge that he led was met by a wall of men advancing forward against him from aft. Bush and his little group were swept back, across the deck, jammed against the bulwarks. Somebody shouted something in

Spanish in front of him, and there was an eddy in the ring; then a musket flashed and banged. The flash lit up the swarthy faces that ringed them round, lit up the bayonet on the muzzle of the musket, and the man beside Bush gave a sharp cry and fell to the deck; Bush could feel him flapping and struggling against his feet. Someone at least had a firearm — taken from an arms rack or from a marine — and had managed to reload it. They would be shot to pieces where they stood, if they were to stand.

"Come on!" yelled Bush again, and sprang forward.

But the disheartened little group behind him did not stir, and Bush gave back from the rigid ring. Another musket flashed and banged, and another man fell. Someone raised his voice and called to them in Spanish. Bush could not understand the words, but he could guess it was a demand for surrender.

"I'll see you damned first!" he said.

He was almost weeping with rage. The thought of his magnificent ship falling into alien hands was appalling now that the realization of the possibility arose in his mind. A ship of the line captured and carried off into some Cuban port — what would England say? What would the navy say? He did not want to live to find out. He was a desperate man who wanted to die.

This time it was with no intelligible appeal to his men that he sprang forward, but with a wild animal cry; he was insane with fury, a fighting lunatic and with a lunatic's strength. He burst through the ring of his enemies, slashing and smiting, but he was the only one who succeeded; he was out on to the clear deck while the struggle went on behind him.

But the madness ebbed away. He found himself leaning — hiding himself, it might almost be said — beside one of the maindeck eighteen-pounders, forgotten for the moment, his sword still in his hand, trying with a slow brain to take stock of his situation. Mental pictures moved slowly across his mind's eye. He could not doubt that some members of the ship's company had risked the ship for the sake of their lust. There had been no bargaining: none of the women had sold themselves in exchange for a betrayal. But he could guess that the women had seemed complacent, that some of the guards had neglected their duty to take advantage of such an opportunity. Then there would be a slow seepage of prisoners out of confinement, probably the officers from out of the midshipmen's berth, and then the sudden well-planned uprising. A torrent of prisoners pouring up, the sentries overwhelmed, the arms seized; the watch below, asleep in their hammocks and incapable of resistance, driven like sheep in a mass forward, herded into a crowd against the bulkhead and restrained there by an armed party while other parties secured the officers aft, and, surging on to the maindeck, captured or slew every man there. All about the ship now there must still be little groups of seamen and marines still free like himself, but weaponless and demoralized; with the coming of daylight the Spaniards would reorganise themselves and would hunt through the ship and destroy any further resistance piecemeal, group by group. It was unbelievable that such a thing could have happened, and yet it had. Four hundred disciplined and desperate men, reckless of their lives and guided by brave officers, might achieve much. There were orders — Spanish orders — being shouted about the deck now. The ship had come up into the wind all aback when the quartermaster at the wheel had been overwhelmed, and she was wallowing in the trough of the waves, now coming up, now falling off again, with the canvas overhead all flapping and thundering. There were Spanish sea officers — those of the prizes — on board. They would be able to bring the ship under control in a few minutes. Even with a crew of landsmen they would be able to brace the yards, man the wheel, and set a course close-hauled up the Jamaica Channel. Beyond, only a long day's run, lay Santiago. Now there was the faintest, tiniest light in the sky. Morning — the awful morning — was about to break. Bush took a fresh grip of his sword hilt; his head was swimming and he passed his forearm over his face to wipe away the cobwebs that seemed to be gathering over his eyes.

And then, pale but silhouetted against the sky on the other side of the ship, he saw the topsail of another vessel moving slowly forward along the ship's side; masts, yards, rigging; another topsail slowly turning. There were wild shouts and yells from the *Renown*, a grinding crash as the two ships came together. An agonising pause, like the moment before a roller breaks upon the shore. And then up over the bulwarks of the *Renown* appeared the heads and shoulders of men; the shakos of marines, the cold glitter of bayonets and cutlasses. There was Hornblower, hatless, swinging his leg over and leaping down to the deck, sword in hand, the others leaping with him on either hand. Weak and faint as he was, Bush still could think clearly enough to realise that Hornblower must have collected the prize crews from all three vessels before running alongside in the

Galitana; by Bush's calculation he could have brought thirty seamen and thirty marines to his attack. But while one part of Bush's brain could think with this clarity and logic, the other part of it seemed to be hampered and clogged so that what went on before his eyes moved with nightmare slowness. It might have been a slow-order drill, as the boarding party climbed down on the deck. Everything was changed and unreal. The shouts of the Spaniards might have been the shrill cries of little children at play. Bush saw the muskets levelled and fired, but the irregular volley sounded in his ears no louder than popguns. The charge was sweeping the deck; Bush tried to spring forward to join with it but his legs strangely would not move. He found himself lying on the deck and his arms had no strength when he tried to lift himself up.

He saw the ferocious bloody battle that was waged, a fight as wild and as irregular as the one that had preceded it, when little groups of men seemed to appear from nowhere and fling themselves into the struggle, sometimes on this side and sometimes on that. Now came another surge of men, nearly naked seamen with silk at their head; silk was swinging the rammer of a gun, a vast unwieldy weapon with which he struck out right and left at the Spaniards who broke before them. Another swirl and eddy in the fight; a Spanish soldier trying to run, limping, with a wounded thigh, and a British seaman with a boarding pike in pursuit, stabbing the wretched man under the ribs and leaving him moving feebly in the blood that poured from him.

Now the maindeck was clear save for the corpses that lay heaped upon it, although below decks he could hear the fight going on, shots and screams and crashes. It all seemed to die away. This weakness was not exactly pleasant. To allow himself to put his head down on his arm and forget his responsibilities might seem tempting, but just over the horizon of his conscious mind there were hideous nightmare things waiting to spring out on him, of which he was frightened, but it made him weaker still to struggle against them. But his head was down on his arm, and it was a tremendous effort to lift it again; later it was a worse effort still, but he tried to force himself to make it, to rise and deal with all the things that must be done. Now there was a hard voice speaking, painful to his ears.

"This 'ere's Mr Bush, sir. 'Ere 'e is!"

Hands were lifting his head. The sunshine was agonising as it poured into his eyes, and he closed his eyelids tight to keep it out.

"Bush! Bush!" That was Hornblower's voice, pleading and tender. "Bush, please, speak to me."

Two gentle hands were holding his face between them. Bush could just separate his eyelids sufficiently to see Hornblower bending over him, but to speak called for more strength than he possessed. He could only shake his head a little, smiling because of the sense of comfort and security conveyed by Hornblower's hands.

Chapter XV

"Mr Hornblower's respects, sir," said the messenger, putting his head inside Bush's cabin after knocking on the door. "The admiral's flag is flying off Mosquito Point, an' we're just goin' to fire the salute, sir."

"Very good." said Bush.

Lying on his cot he had followed in his mind's eye all that had been going on in the ship. She was on the port tack at the moment and had clewed up all sail save topsails and jib. They must be inside Gun Key, then. He heard Hornblower's voice hailing.

"Lee braces, there! Hands wear ship."

He heard the grumble of the tiller ropes as the wheel was put over, they must be rounding Port Royal point. The *Renown* rose to a level keel — she had been heeling very slightly — and then lay over to port, so little that, lying on his cot, Bush could hardly feel it. Then came the bang of the first saluting gun. Despite the kindly warning that Hornblower had sent down Bush was taken sufficiently by surprise to start a little at the sound. He was as weak and nervous as a kitten, he told himself. At five-second intervals the salute went on, while Bush resettled himself in bed. Movement was not very easy, even allowing for his weakness, on account of all the stitches that closed the numerous cuts and gashes on his body. He was sewn together like a crazy quilt; and any movement was painful.

The ship fell oddly quiet again when the salute was over — he was nearly sure it had been fifteen guns;

Lambert presumably had been promoted to vice-admiral. They must be gliding northward up Port Royal bay; Bush tried to remember how Salt Pond Hill looked, and the mountains in the background — what were they called? Liguanea, or something like that — he could never tackle these Dago names. They called it the Long Mountain behind Rock Fort.

"Tops'l sheets!" came Hornblower's voice from above. "Tops'l clew lines."

The ship must be gliding slowly to her anchorage.

"Helm-a-lee!"

Turning into the wind would take her way off her.

"Silence, there in the waist!"

Bush could imagine how the hands would be excited and chattering at coming into harbour — the old hands would be telling the new ones about the grog shops and the unholy entertainments that Kingston, just up the channel, provided for seamen.

"Let go!"

That rumble and vibration; no sailor, not even one as matter-of-fact as Bush, could hear the sound of the cable roaring through the hawsehole without a certain amount of emotion. And this was a moment of very mixed and violent emotions. This was no homecoming; it might be the end of an incident, but it would be most certainly the beginning of a new series of incidents. The immediate future held the likelihood of calamity. Not the risk of death or wounds; Bush would have welcomed that as an alternative to the ordeal that lay ahead. Even in his weak state he could still feel the tension mount in his body as his mind tried to foresee the future. He would like to move about, at least fidget and wriggle if he could not walk, in an endeavour to ease that tension, but he could not even fidget while fifty-three stitches held together the half-closed gashes on his body. There would most certainly be an inquiry into the doings on board HMS *Renown*, and there was a possibility of a court-martial — of a whole series of courts-martial — as a result.

Captain Sawyer was dead. Someone among the Spaniards, drunk with blood lust, at the time when the prisoners had tried to retake the ship, had struck down the wretched lunatic when they had burst into the cabin where he was confined. Hell had no fire hot enough for the man — or woman — who could do such a thing, even though it might be looked upon as a merciful release for the poor soul which had cowered before imagined terrors for so long. It was a strange irony that at the moment a merciless hand had cut the madman's throat some among the free prisoners had spared Buckland, had taken him prisoner as he lay in his cot and bound him with his bedding so that he lay helpless while the battle for his ship was being fought out to its bloody end. Buckland would have much to explain to a court of inquiry.

Bush heard the pipes of the bosun's mates and strained his ears to hear the orders given.

"Gig's crew away! Hands to lower the gig!"

Buckland would of course be going off at once to report to the admiral, and just as Bush came to that conclusion Buckland came into the cabin. Naturally he was dressed with the utmost care, in spotless white trousers and his best uniform coat. He was smoothly shaved, and the formal regularity of his neckcloth was the best proof of the anxious attention he had given to it. He carried his cocked hat in his hand as he stooped under the deck beams, and his sword hung from his hip. But he could not speak immediately; he could only stand and stare at Bush. Usually his cheeks were somewhat pudgy, but this morning they were hollow with care; the staring eyes were glassy, and the lips were twitching. A man on his way to the gallows might look like that.

"You're going to make your report, sir?" asked Bush, after waiting for his superior to speak first.

"Yes," said Buckland.

Beside his cocked hat he held in his hand the sealed reports over which he had been labouring. Bush had been called in to help him compose the first, the anxious one regarding the displacement of Captain Sawyer from command; and his own personal report was embodied in the second one, redolent with conscious virtue, telling of the capitulation of the Spanish forces in Santo Domingo. But the third, with its account of the uprising of the prisoners on board, and its confession that Buckland had been taken prisoner asleep in bed, had been written without Bush's help.

"I wish to God I was dead," said Buckland.

"Don't say that, sir," said Bush, as cheerfully as his own apprehensions and his weak state would allow.

"I wish I was," repeated Buckland.

"Your gig's alongside, sir," said Hornblower's voice. "And the prizes are just anchoring astern of us."

Buckland turned his dead-fish eyes towards him; Hornblower was not quite as neat in appearance, but he had clearly gone to some pains with his uniform.

"Thank you," said Buckland; and then, after a pause, he asked his question explosively: "Tell me, Mr Hornblower — this is the last chance — how did the captain come to fall down the hatchway?"

"I am quite unable to tell you, sir," said Hornblower.

There was no hint whatever to be gleaned from his expressionless face or from the words he used.

"Now, Mr Hornblower," said Buckland, nervously tapping the reports in his hand. "I'm treating you well. You'll find I've given you all the praise I could in these reports. I've given you full credit for what you did at Santo Domingo, and for boarding the ship when the prisoners rose. Full credit, Mr Hornblower. Won't you — won't you — ?"

"I really cannot add anything to what you already know, sir," said Hornblower.

"But what am I going to say when they start asking me?" asked Buckland.

"Just say the truth, sir, that the captain was found under the hatchway and that no inquiry could establish any other indication than that he fell by accident."

"I wish I knew," said Buckland.

"You know all that will ever be known, sir. Your pardon, sir" — Hornblower extended his hand and picked a thread of oakum from off Buckland's lapel before he went on speaking — "the admiral will be overjoyed at hearing that we've wiped out the Dons at Samaná, sir. He's probably been worrying himself gray-haired over convoys in the Mona Passage. And we've brought three prizes in. He'll have his one-eighth of their value. You can't believe he'll resent that, can you, sir?"

"I suppose not," said Buckland.

"He'll have seen the prizes coming in with us — everyone in the flagship's looking at them now and wondering about them. He'll be expecting good news. He'll be in no mood to ask questions this morning, sir. Except perhaps to ask you if you'll take Madeira or sherry."

For the life of him Bush could not guess whether Hornblower's smile was natural or not, but he was a witness of the infusion of new spirits into Buckland.

"But later on —" said Buckland.

"Later on's another day, sir. We can be sure of one thing, though — admirals don't like to be kept waiting, sir."

"I suppose I'd better go," said Buckland.

Hornblower returned to Bush's cabin after having supervised the departure of the gig. This time his smile was clearly not forced; it played whimsically about the corners of his mouth.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," said Bush.

He tried to ease his position under the sheet that covered him. Now that the ship was stationary and the nearby land interfered with the free course of the wind the ship was much warmer already; the sun was shining down mercilessly, almost vertically over the deck that lay hardly more than a yard above Bush's upturned face.

"You're quite right, sir," said Hornblower, stooping over him and adjusting the sheet. "There's nothing to laugh at."

"Then take that damned grin off your face," said Bush, petulantly. Excitement and the heat were working on his weakness to make his head swim again.

"Aye aye, sir. Is there anything else I can do?"

"No," said Bush.

"Very good, sir. I'll attend to my other duties, then."

Alone in his cabin Bush rather regretted Hornblower's absence. As far as his weakness would permit, he would have liked to discuss the immediate future; he lay and thought about it, muzzy-mindedly, while the sweat soaked the bandages that swathed him. But there could be no logical order in his thoughts. He swore feebly to himself. Listening, he tried to guess what was going on in the ship with hardly more success than when he had tried to guess the future. He closed his eyes to sleep, and he opened them again when he started wondering about how Buckland was progressing in his interview with Admiral Lambert.

A lob-lolly boy — sick-berth attendant — came in with a tray that bore a jug and a glass. He poured out a glassful of liquid and with an arm supporting Bush's neck he held it to Bush's lips. At the touch of the cool liquid, and as its refreshing scent reached his nose, Bush suddenly realised he was horribly thirsty, and he drank eagerly, draining the glass.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Lemonade, sir, with Mr Hornblower's respects."

"Mr Hornblower?"

"Yes, sir. There's a bumboat alongside an' Mr Hornblower bought some lemons an' told me to squeeze 'em for you."

"My thanks to Mr Hornblower."

"Aye aye, sir. Another glass, sir?"

"Yes."

That was better. Later on there were a whole succession of noises which he found hard to explain to himself: the tramp of booted feet on the deck, shouted orders, oars and more oars rowing alongside. Then there were steps outside his cabin door and Clive, the surgeon, entered, ushering in a stranger, a skinny, white-haired man with twinkling blue eyes.

"I'm Sankey, surgeon of the naval hospital ashore," he announced. "I've come to take you where you'll be more comfortable."

"I don't want to leave the ship," said Bush.

"In the service," said Sankey, with professional cheerfulness, "you should have learned that it is the rule always to have to do what you don't want to do."

He turned back the sheet and contemplated Bush's bandaged form.

"Pardon this liberty," he said, still hatefully cheerful, "but I have to sign a receipt for you — I trust you've never signed a receipt for ship's stores without examining into their condition, lieutenant."

"Damn you to hell!" said Bush.

"A nasty temper," said Sankey with a glance at Clive. "I fear you have not prescribed a sufficiency of opening medicine."

He laid hands on Bush, and with Clive's assistance dexterously twitched him over so that he lay face downward.

"The Dagoes seem to have done a crude job of carving; you, sir," went on Sankey, addressing Bush's defenceless back. "Nine wounds, I understand."

"And fifty-three stitches," added Clive.

"That will look well in the *Gazette*," said Sankey with giggle; and proceeded to extemporise a quotation:

"Lieutenant — ah — Bush received no fewer than nine wounds in the course of his heroic defence, but I am happy to state that he is rapidly recovering from them."

Bush tried to turn his head so as to snarl out an appropriate reply, but his neck was one of the sorest parts of him and he could only growl unintelligibly, and he was not turned on to his back again until his growls had died down.

"And now we'll whisk our little cupid away," said Sankey. "Come in, you stretcher men."

Carried out on to the maindeck Bush found the sunlight blinding, and Sankey stooped to draw the sheet over his eyes.

"Belay that!" said Bush, as he realised his intention, and there was enough of the old bellow in his voice to cause Sankey to pause. "I want to see!"

The explanation of the trampling and bustle on the deck was plain now. Across the waist was drawn up a guard of one of the West Indian regiments, bayonets fixed and every man at attention. The Spanish prisoners were being brought up through the hatchways for despatch to the shore in the lighters alongside. Bush recognised Ortega, limping along with a man on either side to support him; one trouser leg had been cut off and his thigh was bandaged, and the bandage and the other trouser leg were black with dried blood.

"A cut-throat crew, to be sure," said Sankey. "And now, if you have feasted your eyes on them long enough, we can sway you down into the boat."

Hornblower came hurrying down from the quarterdeck and went down on his knee beside the stretcher.

"Are you all right, sir?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, thank'ee," said Bush.

"I'll have your gear packed and sent ashore after you, sir."

"Thank you."

"Careful with those slings," snapped Hornblower, as the tackles were being attached to the stretcher.

"Sir! Sir!" Midshipman James was dancing about at Hornblower elbow, anxious for his attention. "Boat's heading for us with a captain aboard."

That was news demanding instant consideration.

"Goodbye, sir," said Hornblower. "Best of luck, sir. See you soon."

He turned away and Bush felt no ill will at this brief farewell, for a captain coming on board had to be received with the correct compliments. Moreover, Bush himself was desperately anxious to know the business that brought this captain on board.

"Hoist away!" ordered Sankey.

"Avast!" said Bush; and in reply to Sankey's look of inquiry, "Let's wait a minute."

"I have no objection myself to knowing what's going on," said Sankey.

The calls of the bosun's mates shrilled along the deck. The sideboys came running; the military guard wheeled to face the entry port; the marines formed up beside them. Up through the entry port came the captain, his gold lace flaming in the sunshine. Hornblower touched his hat.

"You are Mr Hornblower, at present the senior lieutenant on board this ship?"

"Yes, sir. Lieutenant Horatio Hornblower, at your service."

"My name is Cogshill," said the captain, and he produced a paper which he proceeded to unfold and read aloud. "Orders from Sir Richard Lambert, Vice Admiral of the Blue, Knight of the Bath, Commanding His Majesty's ships and vessels on the Jamaica station, to Captain James Edward Cogshill, of His Majesty's ship *Buckler*. You are hereby requested and required to repair immediately on board of His Majesty's ship *Renown* now lying in Port Royal bay and to take command pro tempore of the aforesaid ship *Renown*."

Cogshill folded his paper again. The assumption of command, even temporarily, of a king's ship was a solemn act, only to be performed with the correct ceremonial. No orders that Cogshill might give on board would be legal until he had read aloud the authority by which he gave them. Now he had 'read himself in', and now he held the enormous powers of a captain on board — he could make and unmake warrant officers, he could order imprisonment or the lash, by virtue of the delegation of power from the King in Council down through the Lords of the Admiralty and Sir Richard Lambert.

"Welcome on board, sir," said Hornblower, touching his hat again.

"Very interesting," said Sankey, when Bush had been swayed down into the hospital boat alongside and Sankey had taken his seat beside the stretcher. "Take charge, coxs'n. I knew Cogshill was a favourite of the admiral's. Promotion to a ship of the line from a twenty-eight-gun frigate is a long step for our friend James Edward. Sir Richard has wasted no time."

"The orders said it was only — only temporary," said Bush, not quite able to bring out the words 'pro tempore' with any aplomb.

"Time enough to make out the permanent orders in due form," said Sankey. "It is from this moment that Cogshill's pay is increased from ten shillings to two pounds a day."

The Negro oarsmen of the hospital boat were bending to their work, sending the launch skimming over the glittering water, and Sankey turned his head to look at the squadron lying at anchor in the distance — a three-decker and a couple of frigates.

"That's the *Buckler*," he said, pointing. "Lucky for Cogshill his ship was in here at this moment. There'll be plenty of promotion in the admiral's gift now. You lost two lieutenants in the *Renown*?"

"Yes," said Bush. Roberts had been cut in two by a shot from Samaná during the first attack, and Smith had been killed at the post of duty defending the quarterdeck when the prisoners rose.

"A captain and two lieutenants," said Sankey meditatively. "Sawyer had been insane for some time, I understand?"

"Yes."

"And yet they killed him?"

"Yes."

"A chapter of accidents. It might have been better for your first lieutenant if he had met the same fate."

Bush did not make any reply to that remark; even though the same thought had occurred to him. Buckland had been taken prisoner in his bed, and he would never be able to live that down.

"I think," said Sankey, judicially, "he will never be able to look for promotion. Unfortunate for him, seeing that he could otherwise have expected it as a result of your successes in Santo Domingo, on which so far I have not congratulated you, sir. My felicitations."

"Thank you," said Bush.

"A resounding success. Now it will be interesting to see what use Sir Richard — may his name be ever revered — will make of all these vacancies. Cogshill to the *Renown*. That seems certain. Then a commander must be promoted to the *Buckler*. The ineffable joy of post rank! There are four commanders on this station — I wonder which of them will enter through the pearly gates? You have been on this station before, I believe, sir?"

"Not for three years," said Bush.

"Then you can hardly be expected to be up to date regarding the relative standing of the officers here in Sir Richard's esteem. Then a lieutenant will be made commander. No doubt about who that will be."

Sankey spared Bush a glance, and Bush asked the question which was expected of him.

"Who?"

"Dutton. First lieutenant of the flagship. Are you acquainted with him?"

"I think so. Lanky fellow with a scar on his cheek?"

"Yes. Sir Richard believes that the sun rises and sets on him. And I believe that Lieutenant Dutton — Commander as he soon will be — is of the same opinion."

Bush had no comment to make, and he would not have made one if he had. Surgeon Sankey was quite obviously a scatter-brained old gossip, and quite capable of repeating any remarks made to him. He merely nodded — as much of a nod as his sore neck and his recumbent position allowed — and waited for Sankey to continue his monologue.

"So Dutton will be a commander. That'll mean vacancies for three lieutenants. Sir Richard will be able to gladden the hearts of three of his friends by promoting their sons from midshipmen. Assuming, that is to say, that Sir Richard has as many as three friends."

"Oars! Bowman!" said the coxswain of the launch; they were rounding the tip of the jetty. The boat ran gently along side and was secured; Sankey climbed out and supervised the lifting of the stretcher. With steady steps the Negro bearers began to carry the stretcher up the road towards the hospital, while the heat of the island closed round Bush like the warm water in a bath.

"Let me see," said Sankey, falling into step beside the stretcher. "We had just promoted three midshipmen to lieutenant. So among the warrant ranks there will be three vacancies. But let me see — I fancy you had casualties in the *Renown*?"

"Plenty," said Bush.

Midshipmen and master's mates had given their lives in defence of their ship.

"Of course. That was only to be expected. So there will be many more than three vacancies. So the hearts of the supernumeraries, of the volunteers, of all those unfortunates serving without pay in the hope of eventual preferment, will be gladdened by numerous appointments. From the limbo of nothingness to the inferno of warrant rank. The path of glory — I do not have to asperse your knowledge of literature by reminding you of what the poet said."

Bush had no idea what the poet said, but he was not going to admit it.

"And now we are arrived," said Sankey. "I will attend you to your cabin."

Inside the building the darkness left Bush almost blind for a space after the dazzling sunshine. There were whitewashed corridors; there was a long twilight ward divided by screens into minute rooms. He suddenly realised that he was quite exhausted, that all he wanted to do was to close his eyes and rest. The final lifting of him from the stretcher to the bed and the settling of him there seemed almost more than he could bear. He had no attention to spare for Sankey's final chatter. When the mosquito net was at last drawn round his bed and he was left alone he felt as if he were at the summit of a long sleek green wave, down which he went

gliding, gliding, endlessly gliding. It was almost a pleasant sensation, but not quite.

When he reached the foot of the wave he had to struggle up it again, recovering his strength, through a night and a day and another night, and during that time he came to learn about the life in the hospital — the sounds, the groans that came from other patients behind other screens, the not-quite-muffled howls of lunatic patients at the far end of the whitewashed corridor; morning and evening rounds; by the end of his second day there he had begun to listen with appetite for the noises that presaged the bringing in of his meals.

"You are a fortunate man," remarked Sankey, examining his stitched-up body. "These are all incised wounds. Not a single deep puncture. It's contrary to all my professional experience. Usually the Dagoes can be relied upon to use their knives in a more effective manner. Just look at this cut here."

The cut in question ran from Bush's shoulder to his spine, so that Sankey could not literally mean what he had just said.

"Eight inches long at least," went on Sankey. "Yet not more than two inches deep, even though, as I suspect, the scapula is notched. Four inches with the point would have been far more effective. This other cut here seems to be the only one that indicates any ambition to plumb the arterial depths. Clearly the man who wielded the knife here intended to stab. But it was a stab from above downwards, and the jagged beginning of it shows how the point was turned by the ribs down which the knife slid, severing a few fibres of latissimus dorsi but tailing off at the end into a mere superficial laceration. The effort of a tyro. Turn over, please. Remember, Mr Bush, if ever you use a knife, to give an upward inclination to the point. The human ribs lie open to welcome an upward thrust; before a downward thrust they overlap and forbid all entrance, and the descending knife, as in this case, bounds in vain from one rib to the next, knocking for admission at each in turn and being refused."

"I'm glad of that," said Bush. "Ouch!"

"And every cut is healing well," said Sankey. "No sign of mortification."

Bush suddenly realised that Sankey was moving his nose about close to his body; it was by its smell that gangrene first became apparent.

"A good clean cut," said Sankey, "rapidly sutured and bound up in its own blood, can be expected to heal by first intention more often than not. Many times more often than not. And these are mostly clean cuts, haggled, as I said, only a little here and there. Bend this knee if you please. Your honourable scars, Mr Bush, will in the course of a few years become almost unnoticeable. Thin lines of white whose crisscross pattern will be hardly a blemish on your classic torso."

"Good," said Bush; he was not quite sure what his torso was, but he was not going to ask Sankey to explain all these anatomical terms.

This morning Sankey had hardly left him before he returned with a visitor.

"Captain Cogshill to inspect you," he said. "Here he is, sir."

Cogshill looked down at Bush upon the bed.

"Doctor Sankey gives me the good news that you are recovering rapidly," he said.

"I think I am, sir."

"The admiral has ordered a court of inquiry, and I am nominated a member of the court. Naturally your evidence will be required, Mr Bush, and it is my duty to ascertain how soon you will be able to give it."

Bush felt a little wave of apprehension ripple over him. A court of inquiry was only a shade less terrifying than the court-martial to which it might lead. Even with a conscience absolutely clear Bush would rather — far rather — handle a ship on a lee shore in a gale than face questions and have to give answers, submit his motives to analysis and misconstruction, and struggle against the entanglements of legal forms. But it was medicine that had to be swallowed, and the sensible thing was to hold his nose and gulp it down, however nauseating.

"I'm ready at any time, sir."

"Tomorrow I shall take out the sutures, sir," interposed Sankey. "You will observe that Mr Bush is still weak. He was entirely exsanguinated by his wounds."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean he was drained of his blood. And the ordeal of taking out the sutures —"

"The stitches, do you mean?"

"The stitches, sir. The ordeal of removing them may momentarily retard Mr Bush's recovery of his strength. But if the court will indulge him with a chair when he gives his evidence —"

"That can certainly be granted."

"Then in three days from now he can answer any necessary questions."

"Next Friday, then?"

"Yes, sir. That is the earliest. I could wish it would be later."

"To assemble a court on this station," explained Cogshill with his cold courtesy, "is not easy, when every ship is away on necessary duty so much of the time. Next Friday will be convenient."

"Yes, sir," said Sankey.

It was some sort of gratification to Bush, who had endured so much of Sankey's chatter, to see him almost subdued in his manner when addressing someone as eminent as a captain.

"Very well, then," said Cogshill. He bowed to Bush. "I wish you the quickest of recoveries."

"Thank you, sir," said Bush.

Even lying on his back he could not check the instinctive attempt to return the bow, but his wounds hurt him when he started to double up in the middle and prevented him from appearing ridiculous. With Cogshill gone Bush had time to worry about the future; the fear of it haunted him a little even while he ate his dinner, but the lob-lolly boy who came to take away the remains ushered in another visitor, the sight of whom drove away the black thoughts. It was Hornblower, standing at the door with a basket in his hand, and Bush's face lit up at the sight of him.

"How are you, sir?" asked Hornblower.

They shook hands, each reflecting the pleasure of the others greeting.

"All the better for seeing you," said Bush, and meant it.

"This is my first chance of coming ashore," said Hornblower. "You can guess that I've been kept busy."

Bush could guess easily enough; it was no trouble to him to visualise all the duties that had been heaped on Hornblower, the necessity to complete *Renown* again with powder and shot, food and water, to clean up the ship after the prisoners had been removed, to eradicate the traces of the recent fighting, to attend to the formalities connected with the disposal of the prizes, the wounded, the sick, and the effects of the dead. And Bush was eager to hear the details, as a housewife might be when illness had removed her from the supervision of her household. He plied Hornblower with questions, and the technical discussion that ensued prevented Hornblower for some time from indicating the basket he had brought.

"Pawpaws," he said. "Mangoes. A pineapple. That's only the second pineapple I've ever seen."

"Thank you. Very kind of you," said Bush. But it was utterly beyond possibility that he could give the least hint of the feeling that the gift evoked in him, that after lying lonely for these days in the hospital he should find that someone cared about him — that in any case someone should give him so much as a thought. The words he spoke were limping and quite inadequate, and only a sensitive and sympathetic mind could guess at the feelings which the words concealed rather than expressed. But he was saved from further embarrassment by Hornblower abruptly introducing a new subject.

"The admiral's taking the *Gaditana* into the navy," he announced.

"Is he, by George!"

"Yes. Eighteen guns — six-pounders and nines. She'll rate as a sloop of war."

"So he'll have to promote a commander for her."

"Yes."

"By George!" said Bush again.

Some lucky lieutenant would get that important step. It might have been Buckland — it still might be, if no weight were given to the consideration that he had been captured asleep in bed.

"Lambert's renaming her the *Retribution*," said Hornblower.

"Not a bad name, either."

"No."

There was silence for a moment; each of them was reliving, from his own point of view, those awful minutes while the *Renown* was being recaptured, while the Spaniards who tried to fight it out were slaughtered without mercy.

"You know about the court of inquiry, I suppose?" asked Bush; it was a logical step from his last train of thought.

"Yes. How did you know about it?"

"Cogshill's just been in here to warn me that I'll have to give evidence."

"I see."

There followed silence more pregnant than the last as they thought about the ordeal ahead. Hornblower deliberately broke it.

"I was going to tell you," he said, "that I had to reeve new tiller lines in *Renown*. Both of them were frayed — there's too much wear there. I think they're led round too sharp an angle."

That provoked a technical discussion which Hornblower encouraged until it was time for him to leave.

Chapter XVI

The court of inquiry was not nearly as awe-inspiring as a court-martial. There was no gun fired, no court-martial flag hoisted; the captains who constituted the board wore their everyday uniforms, and the witnesses were not required to give their evidence under oath; Bush had forgotten about this last fact until he was called into the court.

"Please take a seat, Mr Bush," said the president. "I understand you are still weak from your wounds."

Bush hobbled across to the chair indicated and was just able to reach it in time to sit down. The great cabin of the *Renown* — here, where Captain Sawyer had lain quivering and weeping with fear — was sweltering hot. The president had the logbook and journal in front of him, and he held in his hand what Bush recognised to be his own report regarding the attack on Samaná, which he had addressed to Buckland.

"This report of yours does you credit, Mr Bush," said the president. "It appears that you stormed this fort with no more than six casualties, although it was constructed with a ditch, parapets, and ramparts in regular style, and defended by a garrison of seventy men, and armed with twenty-four-pounders."

"We took them by surprise, sir," said Bush.

"It is that which is to your credit."

The surprise of the garrison of Samaná could not have been greater than Bush's own surprise at this reception; he was expecting something far more unpleasant and inquisitorial. A glance across at Buckland, who had been called in before him, was not quite so reassuring; Buckland was pale and unhappy. But there was something he must say before the thought of Buckland should distract him.

"The credit should be given to Lieutenant Hornblower, sir," he said. "It was his plan."

"So you very handsomely say in your report. I may as well say at once that it is the opinion of this court that all the circumstances regarding the attack on Samaná and the subsequent capitulation are in accordance with the best traditions of the service."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now we come to the next matter. The attempt of the prisoners to capture the *Renown*. You were by this time acting as first lieutenant of the ship, Mr Bush?"

"Yes, sir."

Step by step Bush was taken through the events of that night. He was responsible under Buckland for the arrangements made for guarding and feeding the prisoners. There were fifty women, wives of the prisoners, under guard in the midshipmen's berth. Yes, it was difficult to supervise them as closely as the men. Yes, he had gone his rounds after pipedown. Yes, he had heard a disturbance. And so on. "And you were found lying among the dead, unconscious from your wounds?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Bush."

A fresh-faced young captain at the end of the table asked a question.

"And all this time Captain Sawyer was confined to his cabin, until he was murdered?"

The president interposed.

"Captain Hibbert, Mr Buckland has already enlightened us regarding Captain Sawyer's indisposition." There was annoyance in the glance that the president of the court turned upon Captain Hibbert, and light suddenly dawned upon Bush. Sawyer had a wife, children, friends, who would not desire that any attention should be called to the fact that he had died insane. The president of the court was probably acting under explicit orders to hush that part of the business up. He would welcome questions about it no more than Bush himself would, now that Sawyer was dead in his country's cause. Buckland could not have been very closely examined about it either. His unhappy look must be due to having to describe his inglorious part in the attempt on the *Renown*.

"I don't expect any of you gentlemen wish to ask Mr Bush any more questions?" asked the president of the court in such a way that questions could not possibly have been asked. "Call Lieutenant Hornblower." Hornblower made his bow to the court; he was wearing that impassive expression which Bush knew by now to conceal an internal turbulence. He was asked as few questions on Samaná as Bush had been.

"It has been suggested," said the president, "that this attack on the fort, and the hoisting up of the gun to search the bay, were on your initiative?"

"I can't think why that suggestion was made, sir. Mr Buckland bore the entire responsibility."

"I won't press you further about that Mr Hornblower, then. I think we all understand. Now, let us hear about your recapture of the *Renown*. What first attracted your attention?"

It called for steady questioning to get the story out of Hornblower. He had heard a couple of musket shots, which had worried him, and then he saw the *Renown* come up into the wind, which made him certain something was seriously wrong. So he had collected his prize crews together and laid the *Renown* on board.

"Were you not afraid of losing the prizes, Mr Hornblower?"

"Better to lose the prizes than the ship, sir. Besides —"

"Besides what, Mr Hornblower?"

"I had every sheet and halliard cut in the prizes before we left them, sir. It took them some time to reeve new ones, so it was easy to recapture them."

"You seem to have thought of everything, Mr Hornblower," said the president, and there was a buzz of approval through the court. "And you seem to have made a very prompt counter-attack on the *Renown*. You did not wait to ascertain the extent of the danger? Yet for all you knew the attempt to take the ship might have already failed."

"In that case no harm was done except the disabling of the rigging of the prizes, sir. But if the ship had actually fallen into the hands of the prisoners it was essential that an attack should be directed on her before any defence could be organized."

"We understand. Thank you, Mr Hornblower."

The inquiry was nearly over. Carberry was still too ill with his wounds to be able to give evidence; Whiting of the marines was dead. The court conferred only a moment before announcing its findings.

"It is the opinion of this court," announced the president, "that strict inquiry should be made among the Spanish prisoners to determine who it was that murdered Captain Sawyer, and that the murderer, if still alive, should be brought to justice. And as the result of our examination of the surviving officers of HMS *Renown* it is our opinion that no further action is necessary."

That meant there would be no court-martial. Bush found himself grinning with relief as he sought to meet Hornblower's eye, but when he succeeded his smile met with a cold reception. Bush tried to shut off his smile and look like a man of such clear conscience that it was no relief to be told that he would not be court-martialled. And a glance at Buckland changed his elation to a feeling of pity. The man was desperately unhappy; his professional ambitions had come to an abrupt end. After the capitulation of Samaná he must have cherished hope, for with that considerable achievement to his credit, and his captain unfit for service, there was every possibility that he would receive the vital promotion to commander at least, possibly even to captain. The fact that he had been surprised in bed meant an end to all that. He would always be remembered for it, and the fact would remain in people's minds when the circumstances were forgotten. He was doomed to remain an ageing lieutenant.

Bush remembered guiltily that it was only by good fortune that he himself had awakened in time. His wounds might be painful, but they had served an invaluable purpose in diverting attention from his own responsibility;

he had fought until he had fallen unconscious, and perhaps that was to his credit, but Buckland would have done the same had the opportunity been granted him. But Buckland was damned, while he himself had come through the ordeal at least no worse off than he had been before. Bush felt the illogicality of it all, although he would have been hard pressed if he had to put it into words. And in any case logical thinking on the subject of reputation and promotion was not easy, because during all these years Bush had become more and more imbued with the knowledge that the service was a hard and ungrateful one, in which fortune was even more capricious than in other walks of life. Good luck came and went in the navy as unpredictably as death chose its victims when a broadside swept a crowded deck. Bush was fatalistic and resigned about that, and it was not a state of mind conducive to penetrating thought.

"Ah, Mr Bush," said Captain Cogshill, "it's a pleasure to see you on your feet. I hope you will remain on board to dine with me. I hope to secure the presence of the other lieutenants."

"With much pleasure, sir," said Bush. Every lieutenant said that in reply to his captain's invitation.

"In fifteen minutes' time, then? Excellent."

The captains who had constituted the court of inquiry were leaving the ship, in strict order of seniority, and the calls of the bosun's mates echoed along the deck as each one left, a careless hand to a hat brim in acknowledgment of the compliments bestowed. Down from the entry port went each in turn, gold lace, epaulettes, and all, these blessed individuals who had achieved the ultimate beatitude of post rank, and the smart gigs pulled away towards the anchored ships.

"You're dining on board, sir?" said Hornblower to Bush.

"Yes."

On the deck of their own ship the 'sir' came quite naturally, as naturally as it had been dropped when Hornblower had been visiting his friend in the hospital ashore. Hornblower turned to touch his hat to Buckland.

"May I leave the deck to Hart, sir? I'm invited to dine in the cabin."

"Very well, Mr Hornblower." Buckland forced a smile. "We'll have two new lieutenants soon, and you'll cease to be the junior."

"I shan't be sorry, sir."

These men who had been through so much together were grasping eagerly at trivialities to keep the conversation going for fear lest more serious matters should lift their ugly heads.

"Time for us to go along," said Buckland.

Captain Cogshill was a courtly host. There were flowers in the great cabin now; they must have been kept hidden away in his sleeping cabin while the inquiry was being held so as not to detract from the formality of the proceedings. And the cabin windows were wide open, and a wind scoop brought into the cabin what little air was moving.

"That is, a land-crab salad before you, Mr Hornblower. Coconut-fed land crab. Some prefer it to dairy-fed pork. Perhaps you will serve it to those who would care for some?"

The steward brought in a vast smoking joint which he put on the table.

"A saddle of fresh lamb," said the captain. "Sheep do badly in these islands and I fear this may not be fit to eat. But perhaps you will at least try it. Mr Buckland, will you carve? You see, gentlemen, I still have some real potatoes left — one grows weary of yams. Mr Hornblower, will you take wine?"

"With pleasure, sir."

"And Mr Bush — to your speedy recovery, sir."

Bush drained his glass thirstily. Sankey had warned him, when he left the hospital, that over indulgence in spirituous liquors might result in inflammation of his wounds, but there was pleasure in pouring the wine down his throat and feeling the grateful warmth it brought to his stomach. The dinner proceeded.

"You gentlemen who have served on this station before must be acquainted with this," said the captain, contemplating a steaming dish that had been laid before him. "A West Indian pepper pot — not as good as one finds in Trinidad, I fear. Mr Hornblower, will you make your first essay? Come in!"

The last words were in response to a knock on the cabin door. A smartly dressed midshipman entered. His beautiful uniform, his elegant bearing, marked him as one of that class of naval officer in receipt of a comfortable allowance from home, or even of substantial means of his own. Some sprig of the nobility,

doubtless, serving his legal time until favouritism and interest should whisk him up the ladder of promotion. "I'm sent by the admiral, sir," he announced.

Of course. Bush, his perceptions comfortably sensitised with wine, could see at once that with those clothes and that manner he must be on the admiral's staff.

"And what's your message?" asked Cogshill.

"The admiral's compliments, sir, and he'd like Mr Hornblower's presence on board the flagship as soon as is convenient."

"And dinner not half way finished!" commented Cogshill, looking at Hornblower. But an admiral's request for something as soon as convenient meant immediately, convenient or not. Very likely it was a matter of no importance, either.

"I'd better leave, sir, if I may," said Hornblower. He glanced at Buckland. "May I have a boat, sir?"

"Pardon me, sir," interposed the midshipman. "The admiral said that the boat which brought me would serve to convey you to the flagship."

"That settles it," said Cogshill. "You'd better go, Mr Hornblower. We'll save some of this pepper pot for you against your return."

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower, rising.

As soon as he had left, the captain asked the inevitable question.

"What in the world does the admiral want with Hornblower?"

He looked round the table and received no verbal reply. There was a strained look on Buckland's face, however, as Bush saw. It seemed as if in his misery Buckland was clairvoyant.

"Well, we'll know in time," said Cogshill. "The wine's beside you, Mr Buckland. Don't let it stagnate."

Dinner went on. The pepper pot rasped on Bush's palate and inflamed his stomach, making the wine doubly grateful when he drank it. When the cheese was removed, and the cloth with it, the steward brought in fruit and nuts in silver dishes.

"Port," said Captain Cogshill. "'79. A good year. About this brandy I know little, as one might expect in these times."

Brandy could only come from France, smuggled, presumably, and as a result of trading with the enemy.

"But here," went on the captain, "is some excellent Dutch geneva — I bought it at the prize sale after we took St Eustatius. And here is another Dutch liquor — it comes from Curaçao, and if the orange flavour is not too sickly for your palates you might find it pleasant. Swedish schnapps, fiery but excellent, I fancy — that was after we captured Saba. The wise man does not mix grain and grape, so they say, but I understand schnapps is made from potatoes, and so does not come under the ban. Mr Buckland?"

"Schnapps for me," said Buckland a little thickly.

"Mr Bush?"

"I'll drink along with you, sir."

That was the easiest way of deciding.

"Then let us make it brandy. Gentlemen, may Boney grow bonier than ever."

They drank the toast, and the brandy went down to warm Bush's interior to a really comfortable pitch. He was feeling happy and relaxed, and two toasts later he was feeling better than he had felt since the *Renown* left Plymouth.

"Come in!" said the captain.

The door opened slowly, and Hornblower stood framed in the opening. There was the old look of strain in his face; Bush could see it even though Hornblower's figure seemed to waver a little before his eyes — the way objects appeared over the rack of red-hot cannon-balls at Samaná — and although Hornblower's countenance seemed to be a little fuzzy round the edges.

"Come in, come in, man," said the captain. "The toasts are just beginning. Sit in your old place. Brandy for heroes, as Johnson said in his wisdom. Mr Bush!"

"V-victorious war. O-oceans of gore. P-prizes galore. B-b-beauty ashore. Hic," said Bush, inordinately proud of himself that he had remembered that toast and had it ready when called upon.

"Drink fair, Mr Hornblower," said the captain, "we have a start of you already. A stern chase is a long chase." Hornblower put his glass to his lips again.

"Mr Buckland!"

"Jollity and — jollity and — jollity and — and — and — mirth," said Buckland, managing to get the last word out at last. His face was as red as a beetroot and seemed to Bush's heated imagination to fill the entire cabin like the setting sun; most amusing.

"You've come back from the admiral, Mr Hornblower," said the captain with sudden recollection.

"Yes, sir."

The curt reply seemed out of place in the general atmosphere of good-will; Bush was distinctly conscious of it, and of the pause which followed.

"Is all well?" asked the captain at length, apologetic about prying into someone else's business and yet led to do so by the silence.

"Yes, sir." Hornblower was turning his glass round and round on the table between long nervous fingers, every finger a foot long, it seemed to Bush. "He has made me commander into *Retribution*."

The words were spoken quietly, but they had the impact of pistol shots in the silence of the room.

"God bless my soul!" said the captain. "Then that's our new toast. To the new commander, and a cheer for him too!"

Bush cheered lustily and downed his brandy.

"Good old Hornblower!" he said. "Good old Hornblower!"

To him it was really excellent news; he leaned over and patted Hornblower's shoulder. He knew his face was one big smile, and he put his head on one side and his shoulder on the table so that Hornblower should get the full benefit of it.

Buckland put his glass down on the table with a sharp tap.

"Damn you!" he said. "Damn you! Damn you to Hell!"

"Easy there!" said the captain hastily. "Let's fill the glasses. A brimmer there, Mr Buckland. Now, our country! Noble England! Queen of the waves!"

Buckland's anger was drowned in the fresh flood of liquor, yet later in the session his sorrows overcame him and he sat at the table weeping quietly, with the tears running down his cheeks; but Bush was too happy to allow Buckland's misery to affect him. He always remembered that afternoon as one of the most successful dinners he had ever attended. He could also remember Hornblower's smile at the end of dinner.

"We can't send you back to the hospital today," said Hornblower. "You'd better sleep in your own cot tonight. Let me take you there."

That was very agreeable. Bush put both arms round Hornblower's shoulders and walked with dragging feet. It did not matter that his feet dragged and his legs would not function while he had this support; Hornblower was the best man in the world and Bush could announce it by singing 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' while lurching along the alleyway. And Hornblower lowered him on to the heaving cot and grinned down at him as he clung to the edges of the cot; Bush was a little astonished that the ship should sway like this while at anchor.

Chapter XVII

That was how Hornblower came to leave the *Renown*. The coveted promotion was in his grasp, and he was busy enough commissioning the *Retribution*, making her ready for sea, and organising the scratch crew which was drafted into her. Bush saw something of him during this time, and could congratulate him soberly on the epaulette which, worn on the left shoulder, marked him as a commander, one of those gilded individuals for whom bosuns' mates piped the side and who could look forward with confidence to eventual promotion to captain. Bush called him 'sir', and even when he said it for the first time the expression did not seem unnatural.

Bush had learned something during the past few weeks which his service during the years had not called to his attention. Those years had been passed at sea, among the perils of the sea, amid the ever-changing conditions of wind and weather, deep water and shoal. In the ships of the line in which he had served there had only

been minutes of battle for every week at sea, and he had gradually become fixed in the idea that seamanship was the one requisite for a naval officer. To be master of the countless details of managing a wooden sailing ship; not only to be able to handle her under sail, but to be conversant with all the petty but important trifles regarding cordage and cables, pumps and salt pork, dry rot and the Articles of War; that was what was necessary. But he knew now of other qualities equally necessary: a bold and yet thoughtful initiative, moral as well as physical courage, tactful handling both of superiors and of subordinates, ingenuity and quickness of thought. A fighting navy needed to fight, and needed fighting men to lead it.

Yet even though this realization reconciled him to Hornblower's promotion, there was irony in the fact that he was plunged back immediately into petty detail of the most undignified sort. For now he had to wage war on the insect world and not on mankind; the Spanish prisoners in the six days they had been on board had infested the ship with all the parasites they had brought with them. Fleas, lice, and bedbugs swarmed everywhere, and in the congenial environment of a wooden ship in the tropics full of men they flourished exceedingly. Heads had to be cropped and bedding baked; and in a desperate attempt to wall in the bedbugs, the woodwork had to be repainted — a success of a day or two flattered only to deceive, for after each interval the pests showed up again. Even the cockroaches and the rats that had always been in the ship seemed to multiply and become omnipresent.

It was perhaps an unfortunate coincidence that the height of his exasperation with this state of affairs coincided with the payment of prize money for the captures at Samaná. A hundred pounds to spend, a couple of days' leave granted by Captain Cogshell, and Hornblower at a loose end at the same time — those two days were a lurid period, during which Hornblower and Bush contrived to spend each of them a hundred pounds in the dubious delights of Kingston. Two wild days and two wild nights, and then Bush went back on board the *Renown*, shaken and limp, only too glad to get out to sea and recover. And when he returned from his first cruise under Cogshell's command Hornblower came to say goodbye.

"I'm sailing with the land breeze tomorrow morning," he said.

"Whither bound, sir?"

"England," said Hornblower.

Bush could not restrain a whistle at the news. There were men in the squadron who had not seen England for ten years.

"I'll be back again," said Hornblower. "A convoy to the Downs. Despatches for the Commissioners. Pick up the replies and a convoy out again. The usual round."

For a sloop of war it was indeed the usual round. The *Retribution* with her eighteen guns and disciplined crew could fight almost any privateer afloat; with her speed and handiness she could cover a convoy more effectively than the ship of the line or even the frigates that accompanied the larger convoys to give solid protection.

"You'll get your commission confirmed, sir," said Bush, with a glance at Hornblower's epaulette.

"I hope so," said Hornblower.

Confirmation of a commission bestowed by a commander-in-chief on a foreign station was a mere formality.

"That is," said Hornblower, "if they don't make peace."

"No chance of that, sir," said Bush; and it was clear from Hornblower's grin that he, too, thought there was no possibility of peace either, despite the hints in the two-months-old newspapers that came out from England to the effect that negotiations were possible. With Bonaparte in supreme power in France, restless, ambitious, and unscrupulous, and with none of the points settled that were in dispute between the two countries, no fighting man could believe that the negotiations could result even in an armistice, and certainly not in a permanent peace.

"Good luck in any case, sir," said Bush, and there was no mere formality about those words.

They shook hands and parted; it says much for Bush's feelings towards Hornblower that in the grey dawn next morning he rolled out of his cot and went up on deck to watch the *Retribution*, ghost-like under her topsails, and with the lead going in the chains, steal out round the point, wafted along by the land breeze. Bush watched her go; life in the service meant many partings. Meanwhile there was war to be waged against bedbugs.

Eleven weeks later the squadron was in the Mona Passage, beating against the trade winds. Lambert had

brought them out here with the usual double objective of every admiral, to exercise his ships and to see an important convoy through the most dangerous part of its voyage. The hills of Santo Domingo were out of sight at the moment over the westerly horizon, but *Mona* was in sight ahead, table-topped and, from this point of view, an unrelieved oblong in outline; over the port bow lay *Mona's* little sister *Monita*, exhibiting a strong family resemblance.

The lookout frigate ahead sent up a signal.

"You're too slow, Mr Truscott," bellowed Bush at the signal midshipman, as was right and proper.

"Sail in sight, bearing northeast," read the signal midshipman, glass to eye.

That might be anything, from the advanced guard of a French squadron broken out from Brest to a wandering trader.

The signal came down and was almost instantly replaced.

"Friendly sail in sight bearing northeast," read Truscott.

A squall came down and blotted out the horizon. The *Renown* had to pay off momentarily before its impact. The rain rattled on the deck as the ship lay over, and then the wind abruptly moderated, the sun came out again, and the squall was past. Bush busied himself with the task of regaining station, of laying the *Renown* her exact two cables' length astern of her next ahead. She was last in the line of three, and the flagship was the first. Now the strange sail was well over the horizon. She was a sloop of war as the telescope showed at once; Bush thought for a moment that she might be the *Retribution*, returned after a very quick double passage, but it only took a second glance to make sure she was not. Truscott read her number and referred to the list.

"*Clara*, sloop of war: Captain Ford," he announced.

The *Clara* had sailed for England with despatches three weeks before the *Retribution*, Bush knew.

"*Clara* to Flag," went on Truscott. "Have despatches."

She was nearing fast. Up the flagship's halliards soared a string of black balls which broke into flags at the top.

"All ships," read Truscott, with excitement evident in his voice, for this meant that the *Renown* would have orders to obey. "Heave-to."

"Main tops! braces!" yelled Bush. "Mr Abbott! My respects to the captain and the squadron's heaving-to."

The squadron came to the wind and lay heaving easily over the rollers. Bush watched the *Clara's* boat dancing over the waves towards the flagship.

"Keep the hands at the braces, Mr Bush," said Captain Cogshill. "I expect we'll fill again as soon as the despatches are delivered."

But Cogshill was wrong. Bush watched through his glass the officer from the *Clara* go up the flagship's side, but the minutes passed and the flagship still lay hove-to, the squadron still pitched on the waves. Now a new string of black balls went up the flagship's halliards.

"All ships," read Truscott. "Captains repair on board the flagship."

"Gig's crew away!" roared Bush.

It must be important, or at least unusual, news for the admiral to wish to communicate it to the captains immediately and in person. Bush walked the quarterdeck with Buckland while they waited. The French fleet might be out; the Northern Alliance might be growing restive again. The King's illness might have returned. It might be anything; they could be only certain that it was not nothing. The minutes passed and lengthened into half-hours; it could hardly be bad news — if it were, Lambert would not be wasting precious time like this, with the whole squadron going off slowly to leeward. Then at last the wind brought to their ears, over the blue water, the high-pitched sound of the pipes of the bosun's mates in the flagship. Bush clapped his glass to his eye.

"First one's coming off," he said.

Gig after gig left the flagship's side, and now they could see the *Renown's* gig with her captain in the sternsheets. Buckland went to meet him as he came up the side. Cogshill touched his hat; he was looking a little dazed.

"It's peace," he said.

The wind brought them the sound of cheering from the flagship — the announcement must have been made to the ship's company on board, and it was the sound of that cheering that gave any reality at all to the news the captain brought.

"Peace, sir?" asked Buckland.

"Yes, peace. Preliminaries are signed. The ambassadors meet in France next month to settle the terms, but it's peace. All hostilities are at an end — they are to cease in every part of the world on arrival of this news."

"Peace!" said Bush.

For nine years the world had been convulsed with war; ships had burned and men had bled from Manila to Panama, west about and east about. It was hard to believe that he was living now in a world where men did not fire cannons at each other on sight. Cogshill's next remark had a bearing on this last thought.

"National ships of the French, Batavian, and Italian Republics will be saluted with the honours due to foreign ships of war," he said.

Buckland whistled at that, as well he might. It meant that England had recognised the existence of the red republics against which she had fought for so long. Yesterday it had been almost treason to speak the word 'republic'. Now a captain could use it casually in an official statement.

"And what happens to us, sir?" asked Buckland.

"That's what we must wait to hear," said Cogshill. "But the navy is to be reduced to peacetime establishment. That means that nine ships out of ten will be paid off."

"Holy Moses!" said Bush.

Now the next ship ahead was cheering, the sound coming shrilly through the air.

"Call the hands," said Cogshill. "They must be told."

The ship's company of the *Renown* rejoiced to hear the news. They cheered as wildly as did the crews of the other ships. For them it meant the approaching end of savage discipline and incredible hardship. Freedom, liberty, a return to their homes. Bush looked down at the sea of ecstatic faces and wondered what the news implied for him. Freedom and liberty, possibly; but they meant life on a lieutenant's half pay. That was something he had never experienced; in his earliest youth he had entered the navy as a midshipman — the peacetime navy which he could hardly remember — and during the nine years of the war he had only known two short intervals of leave. He was not too sure that he cared for the novel prospects that the future held out to him.

He glanced up at the flagship and turned to bellow at the signal midshipman.

"Mr Truscott! Don't you see that signal? Attend to your duties, or it will be the worse for you, peace or no peace."

The wretched Truscott put his glass to his eye.

"All ships," he read. "Form line on the larboard tack."

Bush glanced at the captain for permission to proceed.

"Hands to the braces, there!" yelled Bush. "Fill that main tops'l. Smarter than that, you lubbers! Full and by, quartermaster. Mr Cope, haven't you eyes in your head? Take another pull at that weather-brace! God bless my soul! Easy there! Belay!"

"All ships," read Truscott with his telescope, as the *Renown* gathered way and settled in the wake of her next ahead. "Tack in succession."

"Stand by to go about!" yelled Bush.

He noted the progress of the next ahead, and then spared time to rate the watch for its dilatoriness in going to its stations for tacking ship.

"You slow-footed slob! I'll have some of you dancing at the gratings before long!"

The next ahead had tacked by now, and the *Renown* was advancing into the white water she had left behind.

"Ready about!" shouted Bush. "Headsail sheets! Helm-a-lee!"

The *Renown* came ponderously about and filled on the starboard tack.

"Course sou'west by west," said Truscott, reading the next signal.

Southwest by west. The admiral must be heading back for Port Royal. He could guess that was the first step towards the reduction of the fleet to its peacetime establishment. The sun was warm and delightful, and the *Renown*, steadying before the wind, was roaring along over the blue Caribbean. She was keeping her station well; there was no need to shiver the mizzen topsail yet. This was a good life. He could not make himself believe that it was coming to an end. He tried to think of a winter's day in England, with nothing to do. No ship to handle. Half pay — his sisters had half his pay as it was, which would mean there would be nothing for him,

as well as nothing to do. A cold winter's day. No, he simply could not imagine it, and he left off trying.

Chapter XVIII

It was a cold winter's day in Portsmouth; a black frost, and there was a penetrating east wind blowing down the street as Bush came out of the dockyard gates. He turned up the collar of his pea-jacket over his muffler and crammed his hands into his pockets, and he bowed his head into the wind as he strode forward into it, his eyes watering, his nose running, while that east wind seemed to find its way between his ribs, making the scars that covered them ache anew. He would not allow himself to look up at the Keppel's Head as he went past it. In there, he knew, there would be warmth and good company. The fortunate officers with prize money to spend; the incredibly fortunate officers who had found themselves appointments in the peacetime navy — they would be in there yarning and taking wine with each other. He could not afford wine. He thought longingly for a moment about a tankard of beer, but he rejected the idea immediately, although the temptation was strong. He had a month's half pay in his pocket — he was on his way back from the Clerk of the Cheque from whom he had drawn it — but that had to last four and a half weeks and he knew he could not afford it.

He had tried of course for a billet in the merchant service, as mate, but that was as hopeless a prospect at present as obtaining an appointment as lieutenant. Having started life as a midshipman and spent all his adult life in the fighting service he did not know enough about bills of lading or cargo stowage. The merchant service looked on the navy with genial contempt, and said the latter always had a hundred men available to do a job the merchantman had to do with six. And with every ship that was paid off a fresh batch of master's mates, trained for the merchant service and pressed from it, sought jobs in their old profession, heightening the competition every month.

Someone came out from a side street just in front of him and turned into the wind ahead of him — a naval officer. The gangling walk; those shoulders bent into the wind; he could not help but recognise Hornblower.

"Sir! Sir!" he called, and Hornblower turned.

There was a momentary irritation in his expression but it vanished the moment he recognised Bush.

"It's good to see you," he said, his hand held out.

"Good to see *you*, sir," said Bush.

"Don't call me 'sir'," said Hornblower.

"No, sir? What — why — ?"

Hornblower had no greatcoat on; and his left shoulder was bare of the epaulette he should have worn as a commander. Bush's eyes went to it automatically. He could see the old pin-holes in the material which showed where the epaulette had once been fastened.

"I'm not a commander," said Hornblower. "They didn't confirm my appointment."

"Good God!"

Hornblower's face was unnaturally white — Bush was accustomed to seeing it deeply tanned — and his cheeks were hollow, but his expression was set in the old unrevealing cast that Bush remembered so well.

"Preliminaries of peace were signed the day I took *Retribution* into Plymouth," said Hornblower.

"What infernal luck!" said Bush.

Lieutenants waited all their lives for the fortunate combination of circumstances that might bring them promotion, and most of them waited in vain. It was more than likely now Hornblower would wait in vain for the rest of his life.

"Have you applied for an appointment as lieutenant?" asked Bush.

"Yes. And I suppose you have?" replied Hornblower.

"Yes."

There was no need to say more than that on that subject. The peacetime navy employed one-tenth of the lieutenants who were employed in wartime; to receive an appointment one had to be of vast seniority or else have powerful friends.

"I spent a month in London," said Hornblower. "There was always a crowd round the Admiralty and the Navy Office."

"I expect so," said Bush.

The wind came shrieking round the corner.

"God, but it's cold!" said Bush.

His mind toyed with the thought of various ways to continue the conversation in shelter. If they went to the Keppel's Head now it would mean paying for two pints of beer, and Hornblower would have to pay for the same.

"I'm going into the Long Rooms just here," said Hornblower. "Come in with me — or are you busy?"

"No. I'm not busy," said Bush, doubtfully, "but —"

"Oh, it's all right," said Hornblower. "Come on."

There was reassurance in the confident way in which Hornblower spoke about the Long Rooms. Bush only knew of them by reputation. They were frequented by officers of the navy and the army with money to spare. Bush had heard much about the high stakes that were indulged in at play there, and about the elegance of the refreshments offered by the proprietor. If Hornblower could speak thus casually about the Long Rooms he could not be as desperately hard up as he seemed to be. They crossed the street and Hornblower held open the door and ushered him through. It was a long oak-panelled room; the gloom of the outer day was made cheerful here by the light of candles, and a magnificent fire flamed on the hearth. In the centre several card tables with chairs round them stood ready for play; the ends of the room were furnished as comfortable lounges. A servant in a green baize apron was making the room tidy, and came to take their hats and Bush's coat as they entered.

"Good morning, sir," he said.

"Good morning, Jenkins," said Hornblower.

He walked with unconcealed haste over to the fire and stood before it warming himself Bush saw that his teeth were chattering.

"A bad day to be out without your pea-jacket," he said.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

He clipped that affirmative a little short, so that in a minute degree it failed to be an indifferent, flat agreement. It was that which caused Bush to realise that it was not eccentricity or absent-mindedness that had brought Hornblower out into a black frost without his greatcoat. Bush looked at Hornblower sharply, and he might even have asked a tactless question if he had not been forestalled by the opening of an inner door beside them. A short, plump, but exceedingly elegant gentleman came in; he was dressed in the height of fashion, save that he wore his hair long, tied back and with powder in the style of the last generation. This made his age hard to guess. He looked at the pair of them with keen dark eyes.

"Good morning, Marquis," said Hornblower. "It is a pleasure to present — M. le Marquis de Sainte-Croix — Lieutenant Bush."

The Marquis bowed gracefully, and Bush endeavoured to imitate him. But for all that graceful bow, Bush was quite aware of the considering eyes running over him. A lieutenant looking over a likely hand, or a farmer looking at a pig at a fair, might have worn the same expression. Bush guessed that the Marquis was making a mental estimate as to how much Bush might be good for at the card tables, and suddenly became acutely conscious of his shabby uniform. Apparently the Marquis reached the same conclusion as Bush did, but he began a conversation nevertheless.

"A bitter wind," he said.

"Yes," said Bush.

"It will be rough in the Channel," went on the Marquis, politely raising a professional topic.

"Indeed it will," agreed Bush.

"And no ships will come in from the westward."

"You can be sure of that."

The Marquis spoke excellent English. He turned to Hornblower.

"Have you seen Mr Truelove lately?" he asked.

"No," said Hornblower. "But I met Mr Wilson."

Truelove and Wilson were names familiar to Bush; they were the most famous prize agents in England — a quarter of the navy at least employed that firm to dispose of their captures for them. The Marquis turned back to Bush

"I hope you have been fortunate in the matter of prize money, Mr Bush?" he said.

"No such luck," said Bush. His hundred pounds had gone in a two days' debauch at Kingston.

"The sums they handle are fabulous, nothing less than fabulous. I understand the ship's company of the *Caradoc* will share seventy thousand pounds when they come in."

"Very likely," said Bush. He had heard of the captures the *Caradoc* had made in the Bay of Biscay.

"But while this wind persists they must wait before enjoying their good fortune, poor fellows. They were not paid off on the conclusion of peace, but were ordered to Malta to assist in relieving the garrison. Now they are expected back daily."

For an immigrant civilian the Marquis displayed a laudable interest in the affairs of the service. And he was consistently polite, as his next speech showed.

"I trust you will consider yourself at home here, Mr Bush," he said. "Now I hope you will pardon me, as I have much business to attend to."

He withdrew through the curtained door, leaving Bush and Hornblower looking at each other.

"A queer customer," said Bush.

"Not so queer when you come to know him," said Hornblower.

The fire had warmed him by now, and there was a little colour in his cheeks.

"What do you *do* here?" asked Bush, curiosity finally overcoming his politeness.

"I play whist," said Hornblower.

"Whist?"

All that Bush knew about whist was that it was a slow game favoured by intellectuals. When Bush gambled he preferred something with a greater element of chance and which did not make any demand on his thoughts.

"A good many men from the services drop in here for whist," said Hornblower. "I'm always glad to make a fourth."

"But I'd heard —"

Bush had heard of all sorts of other games being played in the Long Rooms: hazard, vingt-et-un, even roulette.

"The games for high stakes are played in there," said Hornblower, pointing to the curtained door. "I stay here."

"Wise man," said Bush. But he was quite sure there was some further information that was being withheld from him. And he was not actuated by simple curiosity. The affection and the interest that he felt towards Hornblower drove him into further questioning.

"Do you win?" he asked.

"Frequently," said Hornblower. "Enough to live."

"But you have your half pay?" went on Bush.

Hornblower yielded in face of this persistence.

"No," he said. "I'm not entitled."

"Not entitled?" Bush's voice rose a semitone. "But you're a permanent lieutenant."

"Yes. But I was a temporary commander. I drew three months' full pay for that rank before the Admiralty refused to confirm."

"And then they put you under stoppages?"

"Yes. Until I've repaid the excess." Hornblower smiled; a nearly natural smile. "I've lived through two months of it. Only five more and I'll be back on half pay."

"Holy Peter!" said Bush.

Half pay was bad enough; it meant a life of constant care and economy, but one could live. Hornblower had nothing at all. Bush knew now why Hornblower had no greatcoat. He felt a sudden wave of anger. A recollection rose in his mind, as clear to his inward eye as this pleasant room was to his outward one. He remembered Hornblower swinging himself down, sword in hand, on to the deck of the *Renown*, plunging into a battle against odds which could only result in either death or victory. Hornblower, who had planned and worked endlessly to ensure success — and then had flung his life upon the board as a final stake; and today Hornblower was standing with chattering teeth trying to warm himself beside a fire by the charity of a

frog-eating gambling-hall keeper with the look of a dancing master.

"It's a hellish outrage," said Bush, and then he made his offer. He offered his money, even though he knew as he offered it that it meant most certainly that he would go hungry, and that his sisters, if not exactly hungry, would hardly have enough to eat. But Hornblower shook his head.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll never forget that. But I can't accept it. You know that I couldn't. But I'll never cease to be grateful to you. I'm grateful in another way, too. You've brightened the world for me by saying that." Even in the face of Hornblower's refusal Bush repeated his offer, and tried to press it, but Hornblower was firm in his refusal. Perhaps it was because Bush looked so downcast that Hornblower gave him some further information in the hope of cheering him up.

"Things aren't as bad as they seem," he said. "You don't understand that I'm in receipt of regular pay — a permanent salarium from our friend the Marquis."

"I didn't know that," said Bush.

"Half a guinea a week," explained Hornblower. "Ten shilling and sixpence every Saturday morning, rain or shine."

"And what do you have to do for it?" Bush's half pay was more than twice that sum.

"I only have to play whist," explained Hornblower. "Only that. From twelve midday until two in the morning I'm here to play whist with any three that need a fourth."

"I see," said Bush.

"The Marquis in his generosity also makes me free of these rooms I have no subscription to pay. No table money. And I can keep my winnings."

"And pay your losses?"

Hornblower shrugged.

"Naturally. But the losses do not come as often as one might think. The reason's simple enough. The whist players who find it hard to obtain partners and who are cold-shouldered by the others, are naturally the bad players. Strangely anxious to play, even so. And when the Marquis happens to be in here and Major Jones and Admiral Smith and Mr Robinson are seeking a fourth while everyone seems strangely preoccupied he catches my eye — the sort of reproving look a wife might throw at a husband talking too loud at a dinner party — and I rise to my feet and offer to be the fourth. It is odd they are flattered to play with Hornblower, as often it costs them money."

"I see," said Bush again, and he remembered Hornblower standing by the furnace in Fort Samaná organizing the firing of red-hot shot at the Spanish privateers.

"The life is not entirely one of beer and skittles, naturally," went on Hornblower; with the dam once broken he could not restrain his loquacity. "After the fourth hour or so it becomes irksome to play with bad players. When I go to Hell I don't doubt that my punishment will be always to partner players who pay no attention to my discards. But then on the other hand I frequently play a rubber or two with the good players. There are moments when I would rather lose to a good player than win from a bad one."

"That's just the point," said Bush, harking back to an old theme. "How about the losses?"

Bush's experiences of gambling had mostly been of losses, and in this hard-headed moment he could remember the times when he had been weak.

"I can deal with them," said Hornblower. He touched his breast pocket. "I keep ten pounds here. My *corps de réserve*, you understand. I can always endure a run of losses in consequence. Should that reserve be depleted, then sacrifices have to be made to build it up again."

The sacrifices being skipped meals, thought Bush grimly. He looked so woebegone that Hornblower offered further comfort.

"But five more months," he said, "and I'll be on half pay again. And before that — who knows? Some captain may take me off the beach."

"That's true," said Bush.

It was true insofar as the possibility existed. Sometimes ships were recommissioned. A captain might be in need of a lieutenant; a captain might invite Hornblower to fill the vacancy. But every captain was besieged by friends seeking appointments, and in any event the Admiralty was also besieged by lieutenants of great seniority — or lieutenants with powerful friends — and captains were most likely to listen to

recommendations of high authority.

The door opened and a group of men came in.

"It's high time for customers to arrive," said Hornblower, with a grin at Bush. "Stay and meet my friends."

The red coats of the army, the blue coats of the navy, the bottle-green and snuff-coloured coats of civilians; Bush and Hornblower made room for them before the fire after the introductions were made, and the coat-tails were parted as their wearers lined up before the flames. But the exclamations about the cold, and the polite conversation, died away rapidly.

"Whist?" asked one of the newcomers tentatively.

"Not for me. Not for us," said another, the leader of the red-coats. "The Twenty-Ninth Foot has other fish to fry. We've a permanent engagement with our friend the Marquis in the next room. Come on, Major, let's see if we can call a main right this time."

"Then will you make a four, Mr Hornblower? How about your friend Mr Bush?"

"I don't play," said Bush.

"With pleasure," said Hornblower. "You will excuse me, Mr Bush, I know. There is the new number of the *Naval Chronicle* on the table there. There's a *Gazette* letter on the last page which might perhaps hold your interest for a while. And there is another item you might think important, too."

Bush could guess what the letter was even before he picked the periodical up, but when he found the place there was the same feeling of pleased shock to see his name in print there as keen as the first time he saw it: 'I have the honour to be, etc., WM. BUSH.

The *Naval Chronicle* in these days of peace found it hard, apparently, to obtain sufficient matter to fill its pages, and gave much space to the reprinting of these despatches. 'Copy of a letter from Vice-Admiral Sir Richard Lambert to Evan Nepean, Esq., Secretary to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty.' That was only Lambert's covering letter enclosing the reports. Here was the first one — it was with a strange internal sensation that he remembered helping Buckland with the writing of it, as the *Renown* ran westerly along the coast of Santo Domingo the day before the prisoners broke out. It was Buckland's report on the fighting at Samaná. To Bush the most important line was 'in the handsomest manner — under the direction of Lieutenant William Bush, the senior officer, whose report I enclose'. And here was his very own literary work, as enclosed by Buckland.

HMS Renown, off the Santo Domingo. January 9th, 1802

SIR,

I have the honour to inform you . . .

Bush relived those days of a year ago as he reread his own words: those words which he had composed with so much labour even though he had referred, during the writing of them to other reports written by other men so as to get the phrasing right.

. . . I cannot end this report without a reference to the gallant conduct and most helpful suggestions of Lieutenant Horatio Hornblower, who was my second in command on this occasion, and to whom in great part the success of the expedition is due.

There was Hornblower now, playing cards with a post captain and two contractors.

Bush turned back through the pages of the *Naval Chronicle*. Here was the Plymouth letter, a daily account of the doings in the port during the last month.

'Orders came down this day for the following ships to be paid off....' 'Came in from Gibraltar *La Diana*, 44, and the *Tamar*, 38, to be paid off as soon as they go up the harbour and to be laid up.' 'Sailed the *Caesar*, 80, for Portsmouth, to be paid off.' And here was an item just as significant, or even more so: 'Yesterday there was a large sale of serviceable stores landed from different men of war.' The navy was growing smaller every day and with every ship that was paid off another batch of lieutenants would be looking for billets. And here was an item — 'This afternoon a fishing boat turning out of atwater jibed and upset, by which accident two industrious fishermen with large families were drowned.' This was the *Naval Chronicle*, whose pages had once

bulged with the news of the Nile and of Camperdown; now it told of accidents to industrious fishermen. Bush was too interested in his own concerns to feel any sympathy towards their large families. There was another drowning as a final item; a name — a combination of names — caught Bush's attention so that he read the paragraph with a quickened pulse.

Last night the jolly boat of His Majesty's cutter *Rapid*, in the Revenue service, while returning in the fog from delivering a message on shore, was swept by the ebb tide athwart the hawse of a merchantman anchored off Fisher's Nose, and capsized. Two seamen and Mr Henry Wellard, Midshipman, were drowned. Mr Wellard was a most promising young man recently appointed to the *Rapid*, having served as a volunteer in His Majesty's ship *Renown*.

Bush read the passage and pondered over it. He thought it important to the extent that he read the remainder of the *Naval Chronicle* without taking in any of it; and it was with surprise that he realised he would have to leave quickly in order to catch the carrier's waggon back to Chichester.

A good many people were coming into the Rooms now; the door was continually opening to admit them. Some of them were naval officers with whom he had a nodding acquaintance. All of them made straight for the fire for warmth before beginning to play. And Hornblower was on his feet now; apparently the rubber was finished, and Bush took the opportunity to catch his eye and give an indication that he wished to leave. Hornblower came over to him. It was with regret that they shook hands.

"When do we meet again?" asked Hornblower.

"I come in each month to draw my half pay," said Bush. "I usually spend the night because of the carrier's waggon. Perhaps we could dine — ?"

"You can always find me here," said Hornblower. "But — do you have a regular place to stay?"

"I stay where it's convenient," replied Bush.

They both of them knew that meant that he stayed where it was cheap.

"I lodge in Highbury Street. I'll write the address down." Hornblower turned to a desk in the corner and wrote on a sheet of paper which he handed to Bush "Would you care to share my room when next you come? My landlady is a sharp one. No doubt she will make a charge for a cot for you, but even so —"

"It'll save money," said Bush, putting the paper in his pocket; his grin as he spoke masked the sentiment in his next words. "And I'll see more of you."

"By George, yes," said Hornblower. Words were not adequate.

Jenkins had come sidling up and was holding Bush's greatcoat for him to put on. There was that in Jenkins' manner which told Bush that gentlemen when helped into their coats at the Long Rooms presented Jenkins with a shilling. Bush decided at first that he would be eternally damned before he parted with a shilling, and then he changed his mind. Maybe Hornblower would give Jenkins a shilling if he did not. He felt in his pocket and handed the coin over.

"Thank you, sir," said Jenkins.

With Jenkins out of earshot again Bush lingered, wondering how to frame his question.

"That was hard luck on young Wellard," he said, tentatively.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"D'you think," went on Bush, plunging desperately, "he had anything to do with the captain's falling down the hatchway?"

"I couldn't give an opinion," answered Hornblower. "I didn't know enough about it."

"But —" began Bush, and checked himself again; he knew by the look on Hornblower's face that it was no use asking further questions.

The Marquis had come into the room and was looking round in unobtrusive inspection. Bush saw him take note of the several men who were not playing, and of Hornblower standing in idle gossip by the door. Bush saw the meaning glance which he directed at Hornblower, and fell into sudden panic.

"Goodbye," he said, hastily.

The black northeast wind that greeted him in the street was no more cruel than the rest of the world.

Chapter XIX

It was a short, hard-faced woman who opened the door in reply to Bush's knock, and she looked at Bush even harder when he asked for Lieutenant Hornblower.

"Top of the house," she said, at last, and left Bush to find his way up.

There could be no doubt about Hornblower's pleasure at seeing him. His face was lit with a smile and he drew Bush into the room while shaking his hand. It was an attic, with a steeply sloping ceiling; it contained a bed and a night table and a single wooden chair, but, as far as Bush's cursory glance could discover, nothing else at all.

"And how is it with you?" asked Bush, seating himself in the proffered chair, while Hornblower sat on the bed.

"Well enough," replied Hornblower — but was there, or was there not, a guilty pause before that answer? In any case the pause was covered up by the quick counter-question. 'And with you?'

"So-so," said Bush.

They talked indifferently for a space, with Hornblower asking questions about the Chichester cottage that Bush lived in with his sisters.

"We must see about your bed for tonight," said Hornblower at the first pause. "I'll go down and give Mrs Mason a hail."

"I'd better come too," said Bush.

Mrs Mason lived in a hard world, quite obviously; she turned the proposition over in her mind for several seconds before she agreed to it.

"A shilling for the bed," she said. "Can't wash the sheets for less than that with soap as it is."

"Very good," said Bush.

He saw Mrs Mason's hand held out, and he put the shilling into it; no one could be in any doubt about Mrs Mason's determination to be paid in advance by any friend of Hornblower's. Hornblower had dived for his pocket when he caught sight of the gesture, but Bush was too quick for him.

"And you'll be talking till all hours," said Mrs Mason. "Mind you don't disturb my other gentlemen. And douse the light while you talk, too, or you'll be burning a shilling's worth of tallow."

"Of course," said Hornblower.

"Maria! Maria!" called Mrs Mason.

A young woman — no, a woman not quite young — came up the stairs from the depths of the house at the call.

"Yes, Mother?"

Maria listened to Mrs Mason's instructions for making up a truckle bed in Mr Hornblower's room.

"Yes, Mother," she said.

"Not teaching today, Maria?" asked Hornblower pleasantly.

"No, sir." The smile that lit her plain face showed her keen pleasure at being addressed.

"Oak-Apple Day? No, not yet. It's not the King's Birthday. Then why this holiday?"

"Mumps, sir," said Maria. "They all have mumps, except Johnnie Bristow."

"That agrees with everything I've heard about Johnnie Bristow," said Hornblower.

"Yes, sir," said Maria. She smiled again, clearly pleased not only that Hornblower should jest with her but also because he remembered what she had told him about the school.

Back in the attic again Hornblower and Bush resumed their conversation, this time on a more serious plane. The state of Europe occupied their attention.

"This man Bonaparte," said Bush. "He's a restless cove."

"That's the right word for him," agreed Hornblower.

"Isn't he satisfied? Back in '96 when I was in the old *Superb* in the Mediterranean — that was when I was commissioned lieutenant — he was just a general. I can remember hearing his name for the first time, when we were blockading Toulon. Then he went to Egypt. Now he's First Consul — isn't that what he calls himself?"

"Yes. But he's Napoleon now, not Bonaparte any more. First Consul for life."

"Funny sort of name. Not what I'd choose for myself."

"Lieutenant Napoleon Bush," said Hornblower. "It wouldn't sound well."

They laughed together at the ridiculous combination.

"The *Morning Chronicle* says he's going a step farther," went on Hornblower. "There's talk that he's going to call himself Emperor."

"Emperor!"

Even Bush could catch the connotations of that title, with its claims to universal pre-eminence.

"I suppose he's mad?" asked Bush.

"If he is, he's the most dangerous madman in Europe."

"I don't trust him over this Malta business. I don't trust him an inch," said Bush, emphatically. "You mark my words we'll have to fight him again in the end. Teach him a lesson he won't forget. It'll come sooner or later — we can't go on like this."

"I think you're quite right," said Hornblower. "And sooner rather than later."

"Then —" said Bush.

He could not talk and think at the same time, not when his thoughts were as tumultuous as the ones this conclusion called up; war with France meant the re-expansion of the navy; the threat of invasion and the needs of convoy would mean the commissioning of every small craft that could float and carry a gun. It would mean the end of half pay for him; it would mean walking a deck again and handling a ship under sail. And it would mean hardship again, danger, anxiety, monotony — all the concomitants of war. These thoughts rushed into his brain with so much velocity, and in such a continuous stream, that they made a sort of whirlpool of his mind, in which the good and the bad circled after each other, each in turn chasing the other out of his attention.

"War's a foul business," said Hornblower, solemnly. "Remember the things you've seen."

"I suppose you're right," said Bush; there was no need to particularize. But it was an unexpected remark, all the same. Hornblower grinned and relieved the tension.

"Well," he said, "Boney can call himself Emperor if he likes. I have to earn my half guinea at the Long Rooms."

Bush was about to take this opportunity to ask Hornblower how he was profiting there, but he was interrupted by a rumble outside the door and a knock.

"Here comes your bed," said Hornblower, walking over to open the door.

Maria came trundling the thing in. She smiled at them.

"Over here or over there?" she asked.

Hornblower looked at Bush.

"It doesn't matter," said Bush.

"I'll put it against the wall, then."

"Let me help," said Hornblower.

"Oh no, sir. Please, sir, I can do it."

The attention fluttered her — and Bush could see that with her sturdy figure she was in no need of help. To cover her confusion she began to thump at the bedding, putting the pillows into the pillowslips.

"I trust you have already had the mumps, Maria?" said Hornblower.

"Oh yes, sir. I had them as a child, on both sides."

The exercise and her agitation between them had brought the colour into her cheeks. With blunt but capable hands she spread the sheet. Then she paused as another implication of Hornblower's inquiry occurred to her.

"You've no need to worry, sir. I shan't give them to you if you haven't had them."

"I wasn't thinking about that," said Hornblower.

"Oh, sir," said Maria, twitching the sheet into mathematical smoothness. She spread the blankets before she looked up again. "Are you going out directly, sir?"

"Yes. I ought to have left already."

"Let me take that coat of yours for a minute, sir. I can sponge it and freshen it up."

"Oh, I wouldn't have you go to that trouble, Maria."

"It wouldn't be any trouble, sir. Of course not. Please let me, sir. It looks —"

"It looks the worse for wear," said Hornblower, glancing down at it. "There's no cure for old age that's yet been discovered."

"Please let me take it, sir. There's some spirits of hartshorn downstairs. It will make quite a difference. Really it will."

"But —"

"Oh, please, sir."

Hornblower reluctantly put up his hand and undid a button.

"I'll only be a minute with it," said Maria, hastening to him. Her hands were extended to the other buttons, but a sweep of Hornblower's quick nervous fingers had anticipated her. He pulled off his coat and she took it out of his hands.

"You've mended that shirt yourself," she said, accusingly

"Yes, I have."

Hornblower was a little embarrassed at the revelation of the worn garment. Maria studied the patch.

"I would have done that for you if you'd asked me, sir."

"And a good deal better, no doubt."

"Oh, I wasn't saying that, sir. But it isn't fit that you should patch your own shirts."

"Whose should I patch, then?"

Maria giggled.

"You're too quick with your tongue for me," she said. "Now, just wait here and talk to the lieutenant while I sponge this."

She darted out of the room and they heard her footsteps hurrying down the stairs, while Hornblower looked half ruefully at Bush.

"There's a strange pleasure," he said, "in knowing that there's a human being who cares whether I'm alive or dead. Why that should give pleasure is a question to be debated by the philosophic mind."

"I suppose so," said Bush.

He had sisters who devoted all their attention to him whenever it was possible, and he was used to it. At home he took their ministrations for granted. He heard the church clock strike the half hour, and it called his thoughts to the further business of the day.

"You're going to the Long Rooms now?" he asked.

"Yes. And you, I suppose, want to go to the dockyard? The monthly visit to the Clerk of the Cheque?"

"Yes."

"We can walk together as far as the Rooms, if you care to. As soon as our friend Maria returns my coat to me."

"That's what I was thinking," said Bush.

It was not long before Maria came knocking at the door again.

"It's done," she said, holding out the coat. "It's nice and fresh now."

But something seemed to have gone out of her. She seemed a little frightened, a little apprehensive.

"What's the matter, Maria?" asked Hornblower, quick to feel the change of attitude.

"Nothing. Of course there's nothing the matter with me," said Maria, defensively, and then she changed the subject. "Put your coat on now, or you'll be late."

Walking along Highbury Street Bush asked the question he had had in mind for some time, regarding whether Hornblower had experienced good fortune lately at the Rooms. Hornblower looked at him oddly.

"Not as good as it might be," he said.

"Bad?"

"Bad enough. My opponents' aces lie behind my kings, ready for instant regicide. And my opponents' kings lie behind my aces, so that when they venture out from the security of the hand they survive all perils and take the trick. In the long run the chances right themselves mathematically. But the periods when they are unbalanced in the wrong direction can be distressing."

"I see," said Bush, although he was not too sure that he did; but one thing he did know, and that was that Hornblower had been losing. And he knew Hornblower well enough by now to know that when he talked in an airy fashion as he was doing now he was more anxious than he cared to admit.

They had reached the Long Rooms, and paused at the door.

"You'll call in for me on your way back?" asked Hornblower. "There's an eating house in Broad Street with a fourpenny ordinary. Sixpence with pudding. Would you care to try it?"

"Yes, indeed. Thank you. Good luck," said Bush, and he paused before continuing. "Be careful."

"I shall be careful," said Hornblower, and went in through the door.

The weather was in marked contrast with what had prevailed during Bush's last visit. Then there had been a black frost and an east wind; today there was a hint of spring in the air. As Bush walked along the Hard the harbour entrance revealed itself to him on his left, its muddy water sparkling in the clear light. A flush-decked sloop was coming out with the ebb, the gentle puffs of wind from the northwest just giving her steerage way. Despatches for Halifax, perhaps. Money to pay the Gibraltar garrison. Or maybe a reinforcement for the revenue cutters that were finding so much difficulty in dealing with the peacetime wave of smuggling. Whatever it was, there were fortunate officers on board, with an appointment, with three years' employment ahead of them, with a deck under their feet and a wardroom in which to dine. Lucky devils. Bush acknowledged the salute of the porter at the gate and went into the yard.

He emerged into the late afternoon and made his way back to the Long Rooms. Hornblower was at a table near the corner and looked up to smile at him, the candlelight illuminating his face. Bush found himself the latest *Naval Chronicle* and settled himself to read it. Beside him a group of army and navy officers argued in low tones regarding the difficulties of living in the same world as Bonaparte. Malta and Genoa, Santo Domingo and Miquelet, came up in the conversation.

"Mark my words," said one of them, thumping his hand with his fist, "we'll be at war with him again soon enough."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"It'll be war to the knife," supplemented another. "If once he drives us to extremity, we shall never rest until Mr Napoleon Bonaparte is hanging to the nearest tree."

The others agreed to that with a fierce roar, like wild beasts.

"Gentlemen," said one of the players at Hornblower's table, looking round over his shoulder. "Could you find it convenient to continue your discussion at the far end of the room? This end is dedicated to the most scientific and difficult of all games."

The words were uttered in a pleasant high tenor, but it was obvious that the speaker had every expectation of being instantly obeyed.

"Very good, my lord," said one of the naval officers.

That made Bush look more closely, and he recognised the speaker, although it was six years since he had seen him last. It was Admiral Lord Parry, who had been made a lord after Camperdown; now he was one of the commissioners of the navy, one of the people who could make or break a naval officer. The mop of snow-white curls that ringed the bald spot on the top of his head, his smooth old-man's face, his mild speech, accorded ill with the nickname of 'Old Bloodybones' which had been given him by the lower deck far back in the American War. Hornblower was moving in very high society. Bush watched Lord Parry extend a skinny white hand and cut the cards to Hornblower. It was obvious from his colouring that Parry, like Hornblower, had not been to sea for a long time. Hornblower dealt and the game proceeded in its paralysing stillness; the cards made hardly a sound as they fell on the green cloth, and each trick was picked up and laid down almost silently, with only the slightest click. The line of tricks in front of Parry grew like a snake, silent as a snake gliding over a rock, like a snake it closed on itself and then lengthened again, and then the hand was finished and the cards swept together.

"Small slam," said Parry as the players attended to their markers, and that was all that was said. The two tiny words sounded as clearly and as briefly in the silence as two bells in the middle watch. Hornblower cut the cards and the next deal began in the same mystic silence. Bush could not see the fascination of it. He would prefer a game in which he could roar at his losses and exult over his winnings; and preferably one in which the turn of a single card, and not of the whole fifty-two, would decide who had won and who had lost. No, he was wrong. There was undoubtedly a fascination about it, a poisonous fascination. Opium? No. This silent game was like the quiet interplay of duelling swords as compared with the crash of cutlass blades, and it was as deadly. A smallsword through the lungs killed as effectively as — more effectively than — the sweep of a cutlass.

"A short rubber," commented Parry; the silence was over, and the cards lay in disorder on the table.

"Yes, my lord," said Hornblower.

Bush, taking note of everything with the keen observation of anxiety, saw Hornblower put his hand to his breast pocket — the pocket that he had indicated as holding his reserve — and take out a little fold of one-pound notes. When he had made his payment Bush could see that what he returned to his pocket was only a single note.

"You encountered the worst of good fortune," said Parry, pocketing his winnings. "On the two occasions when you dealt, the trump that you turned up proved to be the only one that you held. I cannot remember another occasion when the dealer has held a singleton trump twice running."

"In a long enough period of play, my lord," said Hornblower, "every possible combination of cards can be expected."

He spoke with a polite indifference that for a moment almost gave Bush heart to believe his losses were not serious, until he remembered the single note that had been put back into Hornblower's breast pocket.

"But it is rare to see such a run of ill luck," said Parry. "And yet you play an excellent game, Mr — Mr — please forgive me, but your name escaped me at the moment of introduction."

"Hornblower," said Hornblower.

"Ah, yes, of course. For some reason the name is familiar to me."

Bush glanced quickly at Hornblower. There never was such a perfect moment for reminding a Lord Commissioner about the fact that his promotion to commander had not been confirmed.

"When I was a midshipman, my lord," said Hornblower, "I was seasick while at anchor in Spithead on board the *Justinian*. I believe the story is told."

"That doesn't seem to be the connection I remember," answered Parry. "But we have been diverted from what I was going to say. I was about to express regret that I cannot give you your immediate revenge, although I should be most glad to have the opportunity of studying your play of the cards again."

"You are very kind, my lord," said Hornblower, and Bush writhed — he had been writhing ever since Hornblower had given the go-by to that golden opportunity. This last speech had a flavour of amused bitterness that Bush feared would be evident to the admiral. But fortunately Parry did not know Hornblower as well as Bush did.

"Most unfortunately," said Parry, "I am due to dine with Admiral Lambert."

This time the coincidence startled Hornblower into being human.

"Admiral Lambert, my lord?"

"Yes. You know him?"

"I had the honour of serving under him on the Jamaica station. This is Mr Bush, who commanded the storming party from the *Renown* that compelled the capitulation of Santo Domingo."

"Glad to see you, Mr Bush," said Parry, and it was only just evident that if he was glad he was not overjoyed. A commissioner might well find embarrassment at an encounter with an unemployed lieutenant with a distinguished record. Parry lost no time in turning back to Hornblower.

"It was in my mind," he said, "to try to persuade Admiral Lambert to return here with me after dinner so that I could offer you your revenge. Would we find you here if we did?"

"I am most honoured, my lord," said Hornblower with a bow, but Bush noted the uncontrollable flutter of his fingers towards his almost empty breast pocket.

"Then would you be kind enough to accept a semi-engagement? On account of Admiral Lambert I can make no promise, except that I will do my best to persuade him."

"I'm dining with Mr Bush, my lord. But I would be the last to stand in the way."

"Then we may take it as being settled as near as may be?"

"Yes, my lord."

Parry withdrew then, ushered out by his flag lieutenant who had been one of the whist four, with all the dignity and pomp that might be expected of a peer, an admiral, and a commissioner, and he left Hornblower grinning at Bush.

"D'you think it's time for us to dine too?" he asked.

"I think so," said Bush.

The eating house in Broad Street was run, as might almost have been expected, by a wooden-legged sailor. He had a pert son to assist him, who stood by when they sat at a scrubbed oaken table on oak benches, their feet

in the sawdust, and ordered their dinner.

"Ale?" asked the boy.

"No. No ale," said Hornblower.

The pert boy's manner gave some indication of what he thought about gentlemen of the navy who ate the fourpenny ordinary and drank nothing with it. He dumped the loaded plates in front of them: boiled mutton — not very much mutton — potatoes and carrots and parsnips and barley and a dab of pease pudding, all swimming in pale gravy.

"It keeps away hunger," said Hornblower.

It might indeed do that, but apparently Hornblower had not kept hunger away lately. He began to eat his food with elaborate unconcern, but with each mouthful his appetite increased and his restraint decreased. In an extraordinarily short time his plate was empty; he mopped it clean with his bread and ate the bread. Bush was not a slow eater, but he was taken a little aback when he looked up and saw that Hornblower had finished every mouthful while his own plate was still half full. Hornblower laughed nervously.

"Eating alone gives one bad habits," he said — and the best proof of his embarrassment was the lameness of his explanation.

He was aware of that, as soon as he had spoken, and he tried to carry it off by leaning back on his bench in a superior fashion; and to show how much at ease he was he thrust his hands into the side pockets of his coat. As he did so his whole expression changed. He lost some of the little colour there was in his cheeks. There was utter consternation in his expression — there was even fear. Bush took instant alarm; he thought Hornblower must have had a seizure, and it was only after that first thought that he connected Hornblower's changed appearance with his gesture of putting his hands in his pockets. But a man who had found a snake in his pocket would hardly wear that look of horror.

"What's the matter?" asked Bush. "What in God's name — ?"

Hornblower slowly drew his right hand out of his pocket. He kept it closed for a moment round what it held, and then he opened it, slowly, reluctantly, like a man fearful of his destiny. Harmless enough; it was a silver coin — a half crown.

"That's nothing to take on about," said Bush, quite puzzled. "I wouldn't even mind finding a half crown in my pocket."

"But — but —" stammered Hornblower, and Bush began to realise some of the implications.

"It wasn't there this morning," said Hornblower, and then he smiled the old bitter smile. "I know too well what money I have in my pockets."

"I suppose you do," agreed Bush; but even now, with his mind going back through the events of the morning, and making the obvious deductions, he could not understand quite why Hornblower should be so worried.

"That wench put it there?"

"Yes. Maria," said Hornblower. "It must have been her. That's why she took my coat to sponge it."

"She's a good soul," said Bush.

"Oh God!" said Hornblower. "But I can't — I can't —"

"Why not?" asked Bush, and he really thought that question unanswerable.

"No," said Hornblower. "It's — it's — I wish she hadn't done it. The poor girl —"

"'Poor girl' be blowed!" said Bush. "She's only trying to do you a good turn."

Hornblower looked at him for a long time without speaking, and then he made a little hopeless gesture as though despairing of ever making Bush see the matter from his point of view.

"You can look like that if you like," said Bush, steadily, determined to stick to his guns, "but there's no need to act as if the French had landed just because a girl slips half a crown into your pocket."

"But don't you see —" began Hornblower, and then he finally abandoned all attempt at explanation. Under Bush's puzzled gaze he mastered himself. The unhappiness left his face, and he assumed his old inscrutable look — it was as if he had shut down the vizor of a helmet over his face.

"Very well," he said. "We'll make the most of it, by God!"

Then he rapped on the table:

"Boy!"

"Yessir."

"We'll have a pint of wine. Let someone run and fetch it at once. A pint of wine — port wine."

"Yessir."

"And what's the pudding today?"

"Currant duff, sir."

"Good. We'll have some. Both of us. And let's have a saucer of jam to spread on it."

"Yessir."

"And we'll need cheese before our wine. Is there any cheese in the house, or must you send out for some?"

"There's some in the house, sir."

"Then put it on the table."

"Yessir."

Now was it not, thought Bush, exactly what might be expected of Hornblower that he should push away the half of his huge slice of currant duff unfinished? And he only had a nibble of cheese, hardly enough to clear his palate. He raised his glass, and Bush followed his example.

"To a lovely lady," said Hornblower.

They drank, and now there was an irresponsible twinkle in Hornblower's eyes that worried Bush even while he told himself that he was tired of Hornblower's tantrums. He decided to change the subject, and he prided himself on the tactful way in which he did so.

"To a fortunate evening," he said, raising his glass in his turn.

"A timely toast," said Hornblower.

"You can afford to play?" asked Bush

"Naturally."

"You can stand another run of bad luck?"

"I can afford to lose one rubber," answered Hornblower.

"Oh."

"But on the other hand if I win the first I can afford to lose the next two. And if I win the first and second I can afford to lose the next three. And so on."

"Oh."

That did not sound too hopeful; and Hornblower's gleaming eyes looking at him from his wooden countenance were positively disturbing. Bush shifted uneasily in his seat and changed the conversation again.

"They're putting the *Hastings* into commission again," he said. "Had you heard?"

"Yes. Peacetime establishment — three lieutenants, and all three selected two months back."

"I was afraid that was so."

"But our chance will come," said Hornblower. "Here's to it."

"D'you think Parry will bring Lambert to the Long Rooms?" asked Bush when he took the glass from his lips.

"I have no doubt about it," said Hornblower.

Now he was restless again.

"I must be back there soon," he said. "Parry might hurry Lambert through his dinner."

"My guess is that he would," said Bush, preparing to rise.

There's no necessity for you to come back with me if you don't care to," said Hornblower. "You might find it wearisome to sit idle there."

"I wouldn't miss it for worlds," said Bush.

Chapter XX

The Long Rooms were full with the evening crowd. At nearly every table in the outer room there were earnest parties playing serious games, while through the curtained door that opened into the inner room came a continuous murmur that indicated that play in there was exciting and noisy. But for Bush standing restlessly by the fire, occasionally exchanging absent-minded remarks with the people who came and went, there was only one point of interest, and that was the candle-lit table near the wall where Hornblower was playing in very

exalted society. His companions were the two admirals and a colonel of infantry, the latter a bulky man with a face almost as red as his coat, whom Parry had brought with him along with Admiral Lambert. The flag lieutenant who had previously partnered Parry was now relegated to the role of onlooker, and stood beside Bush, and occasionally made incomprehensible remarks about the play. The Marquis had looked in more than once. Bush had observed his glance to rest upon the table with something of approval. No matter if there were others who wanted to play; no matter if the rules of the room gave any visitor the right to join a table at the conclusion of a rubber; a party that included two flag officers and a field officer could do as it pleased.

Hornblower had won the first rubber to Bush's enormous relief, although actually he had not been able to follow the details of the play and the score well enough to know that such was the case until the cards were swept up and payments made. He saw Hornblower tuck away some money into that breast pocket.

"It would be pleasant," said Admiral Parry, "if we could restore the old currency, would it not? If the country could dispense with these dirty notes and go back again to our good old golden guineas?"

"Indeed it would," said the colonel.

"The longshore sharks," said Lambert, "meet every ship that comes in from abroad. Twenty-three and sixpence they offer for every guinea, so you can be sure they are worth more than that."

Parry took something from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"Boney has restored the French currency, you see," he said. "They call this a napoleon, now that he is First Consul for life. A twenty-franc piece — a louis d'or, as we used to say."

"Napoleon, First Consul," said the colonel, looking at the coin with curiosity, and then he turned it over.

"French Republic."

"The 'republic' is mere hypocrisy, of course," said Parry. "There never was a worse tyranny since the days of Nero."

"We'll show him up," said Lambert.

"Amen to that," said Parry, and then he put the coin away again. "But we are delaying the business of the evening. I fear that is my fault. Let us cut again. Ah, I partner you this time, colonel. Would you care to sit opposite me? I omitted to thank you, Mr Hornblower, for your excellent partnership."

"You are too kind, my lord," said Hornblower, taking the chair at the admiral's right.

The next rubber began and progressed silently to its close.

"I am glad to see that the cards have decided to be kind to you, Mr Hornblower," said Parry, "even though our honours have reduced your winnings. Fifteen shillings, I believe?"

"Thank you," said Hornblower taking the money.

Bush remembered what Hornblower had said about being able to afford to lose three rubbers if he won the first two.

"Damned small stakes in my opinion, my lord," said the colonel. "Must we play as low as this?"

"That is for the company to decide," replied Parry. "I myself have no objection. Half a crown instead of a shilling? Let us ask Mr Hornblower."

Bush turned to look at Hornblower with renewed anxiety

"As you will, my lord," said Hornblower, with the most elaborate indifference.

"Sir Richard?"

"I don't mind at all," said Lambert.

"Half a crown a trick, then," said Parry. "Waiter, fresh cards, if you please."

Bush had hurriedly to revise his estimate of the amount of losses Hornblower could endure. With the stakes nearly trebled it would be bad if he lost a single rubber.

"You and I again, Mr Hornblower," said Parry, observing the cut. "You wish to retain your present seat?"

"I am indifferent, my lord."

"I am not," said Parry. "Nor am I yet so old as to decline to change my seat in accordance with the run of the cards. Our philosophers have not yet decided that it is a mere vulgar superstition."

He heaved himself out of his chair and moved opposite Hornblower, and play began again, with Bush watching more anxiously even than at the start. He watched each side in turn take the odd trick, and then three times running he saw Hornblower lay the majority of tricks in front of him. During the next couple of hands he lost count of the score, but finally he was relieved to see only two tricks before the colonel when the rubber

ended.

"Excellent," said Parry, "a profitable rubber, Mr Hornblower. I'm glad you decided to trump my knave of hearts. It must have been a difficult decision for you, but it was undoubtedly the right one."

"It deprived me of a lead I could well have used," said Lambert. "The opposition was indeed formidable, colonel."

"Yes," agreed the colonel, not quite as good-temperedly.

"And twice I held hands neither an ace nor a king, which helped the opposition to be formidable. Can you give me change, Mr Hornblower?"

There was a five-pound note among the money that the colonel handed over to Hornblower, and it went into the breast pocket of his coat.

"At least, colonel," said Parry, when they cut again, "you have Mr Hornblower as your partner this time."

As the rubber proceeded Bush was aware that the flag lieutenant beside him was watching with greater and greater interest.

"By the odd trick, by George," said he when the last cards were played.

"That was a close shave, partner," said the colonel, his good humour clearly restored. "I hoped you held that queen, but I couldn't be sure."

"Fortune was with us, sir," said Hornblower.

The flag lieutenant glanced at Bush; it seemed as if the flag lieutenant was of opinion that the colonel should have been in no doubt, from the previous play, that Hornblower held the queen. Now that Bush's attention was drawn to it, he decided that Hornblower must have thought just the same — the slightest inflection in his voice implied it — but was sensibly not saying so.

"I lose a rubber at five pounds ten and win one at fifteen shillings," said the colonel, receiving his winnings from Lambert. "Who'd like to increase the stakes again?"

To the credit of the two admirals they both glanced at Hornblower without replying.

"As you gentlemen wish," said Hornblower.

"In that case I'm quite agreeable," said Parry.

"Five shillings a trick, then," said the colonel. "That makes the game worth playing."

"The game is always worth playing," protested Parry.

"Of course, my lord," said the colonel, but without suggesting that they should revert to the previous stakes.

Now the stakes were really serious; by Bush's calculation a really disastrous rubber might cost Hornblower twenty pounds, and his further calculation told him that Hornblower could hardly have more than twenty pounds tucked away in his breast pocket. It was a relief to him when Hornblower and Lambert won the next rubber easily.

"This is a most enjoyable evening," said Lambert, and he smiled with a glance down at the fistful of the colonel's money he was holding; "nor am I referring to any monetary gains."

"Instructive as well as amusing," said Parry, paying out to Hornblower.

Play proceeded, silently as ever, the silence only broken by the brief interchanges of remarks between rubbers. Now that he could afford it, fortunately, Hornblower lost a rubber, but it was a cheap one, and he immediately won another profitable one. His gains mounted steadily with hardly a setback. It was growing late, and Bush was feeling weary, but the players showed few signs of fatigue, and the flag lieutenant stayed on with the limitless patience he must have acquired during his present appointment, philosophic and fatalistic since he could not possibly do anything to accelerate his admiral's decision to go to bed. The other players drifted away from the room; later still the curtained door opened and the gamblers from the inner room came streaming out, some noisy, some silent, and the Marquis made his appearance, silent and unruffled, to watch the final rubbers with unobtrusive interest, seeing to it that the candles were snuffed and fresh ones brought, and new cards ready on demand. It was Parry who first glanced at the clock.

"Half past three," he said. "Perhaps you gentlemen?"

"Too late to go to bed now, my lord," said the colonel. "Sir Richard and I have to be up early, as you know."

"My orders are all given," said Lambert.

"So are mine," said the colonel.

Bush was stupid with long late hours spent in a study atmosphere, but he thought he noticed an admonitory

glance from Parry, directed at the two speakers. He wondered idly what orders Lambert and the colonel would have given, and still more idly why they should be orders that Parry did not wish to be mentioned. There seemed to be just the slightest trace of hurry, just the slightest hint of a desire to change the subject, in Parry's manner when he spoke.

"Very well, then, we can play another rubber, if Mr Hornblower has no objection?"

"None at all, my lord."

Hornblower was imperturbable; if he had noticed anything remarkable about the recent interchange he gave no sign of it. Probably he was weary, though — Bush was led to suspect that by his very imperturbability. Bush knew by now that Hornblower worked as hard to conceal his human weaknesses as some men worked to conceal ignoble birth.

Hornblower had the colonel as partner, and no one could be in the room without being aware that this final rubber was being played in an atmosphere of even fiercer competition than its predecessors. Not a word was spoken between the hands; the score was marked, the tricks swept up, the other pack proffered and cut in deadly silence. Each hand was desperately close, too. In nearly every case it was only a single trick that divided the victors and the vanquished, so that the rubber dragged on and on with painful slowness. Then a hand finished amid a climax of tension. The flag lieutenant and the Marquis had kept count of the score, and when Lambert took the last trick they uttered audible sighs, and the colonel was so moved that he broke the silence at last.

"Neck and neck, by God!" he said. "This next hand must settle it."

But he was properly rebuked by the stony silence with which his remark was received. Parry merely took the cards from the colonel's right side and passed them over to Hornblower to cut. Then Parry dealt, and turned up the king of diamonds as trump, and the colonel led. Trick succeeded trick. For a space, after losing a single trick, Lambert and Parry carried all before them. Six tricks lay before Parry, and only one before Hornblower. The colonel's remark about being neck and neck was fresh in Bush's ears. One more trick out of the next six would give the rubber to the two admirals. Five to one was long odds, and Bush uncomfortably resigned himself to his friend losing this final rubber. Then the colonel took a trick and the game was still alive.

Hornblower took the next trick, so that there was still hope. Hornblower led the ace of diamonds, and before it could be played to he laid down his other three cards to claim the rest of the tricks; the queen and knave of diamonds lay conspicuously on the table.

"Rubber!" exclaimed the colonel, "we've won it, partner! I thought all was lost."

Parry was ruefully contemplating his fallen king.

"I agree that you had to lead your ace, Mr Hornblower," he said, "but I would be enchanted to know why you were so certain that my king was unguarded. There were two other diamonds unaccounted for. Would it be asking too much of you to reveal the secret?"

Hornblower raised his eyebrows in some slight surprise at a question whose answer was so obvious.

"You were marked with the king, my lord," he said, "but it was the rest of your hand which was significant, for you were also marked with holding three clubs. With only four cards in your hand the king could not be guarded."

"A perfect explanation," said Parry; "it only goes to confirm me in my conviction that you are an excellent whist player, Mr Hornblower."

"Thank you, my lord."

Parry's quizzical smile had a great deal of friendship in it. If Hornblower's previous behaviour had not already won Parry's regard, this last coup certainly had.

"I'll bear your name in mind, Mr Hornblower," he said. "Sir Richard has already told me the reason why it was familiar to me. It was regrettable that the policy of immediate economy imposed on the Admiralty by the Cabinet should have resulted in your commission as commander not being confirmed."

"I thought I was the only one who regretted it, my lord."

Bush winced again when he heard the words; this was the time for Hornblower to ingratiate himself with those in authority, not to offend them with unconcealed bitterness. This meeting with Parry was a stroke of good fortune that any, half-pay naval officer would give two fingers for. Bush was reassured, however, by a glance at the speakers. Hornblower was smiling with infectious lightheartedness, and Parry was smiling back at

him. Either the implied bitterness had escaped Parry's notice or it had only existed in Bush's mind.

"I was actually forgetting that I owe you a further thirty-five shillings," said Parry, with a start of recollection.

"Forgive me. There, I think that settles my monied indebtedness; I am still in your debt for a valuable experience."

It was a thick wad of money that Hornblower put back in his pocket.

"I trust you will keep a sharp lookout for footpads on your way back, Mr Hornblower," said Parry with a glance.

"Mr Bush will be walking home with me, my lord. It could be a valiant footpad that would face him."

"No need to worry about footpads tonight," interposed the colonel. "Not tonight."

The colonel wore a significant grin; the others displayed a momentary disapproval of what apparently was an indiscretion, but the disapproval faded out again when the colonel waved a hand at the clock.

"Our orders go into force at four, my lord," said Lambert.

"And now it is half past. Excellent."

The flag lieutenant came in at that moment; he had slipped out when the last card was played.

"The carriage is at the door, my lord," he said.

"Thank you. I wish you gentlemen a good evening, then."

They all walked to the door together; there was the carriage in the street, and the two admirals, the colonel and the flag lieutenant mounted into it. Hornblower and Bush watched it drive away.

"Now what the devil are those orders that come into force at four?" asked Bush. The earliest dawn was showing over the rooftops.

"God knows," said Hornblower.

They headed for the corner of Highbury Street.

"How much did you win?"

"It was over forty pounds — it must be about forty-five pounds," said Hornblower.

"A good night's work."

"Yes. The chances usually right themselves in time." There was something flat and listless in Hornblower's tone as he spoke. He took several more strides before he burst out into speech again with a vigour that was in odd contrast. "I wish to God it had happened last week. Yesterday, even."

"But why?"

"That girl. That poor girl."

"God bless my soul!" said Bush. He had forgotten all about the fact that Maria had slipped half a crown into Hornblower's pocket and he was surprised that Hornblower had not forgotten as well. "Why trouble your head about her?"

"I don't know," said Hornblower, and then he took two more strides. "But I do."

Bush had no time to meditate over this curious avowal for he heard a sound that made him grasp Hornblower's elbow with sudden excitement.

"Listen!"

Ahead of them, along the silent street, a heavy military tread could be heard. It was approaching. The faint light shone on white crossbelts and brass buttons. It was a military patrol, muskets at the slope, a sergeant marching beside it, his chevrons and his half pike revealing his rank.

"Now, what the deuce?" said Bush.

"Halt!" said the sergeant to his men; and then to the other two, "May I ask you two gentlemen who you are?"

"We are naval officers," said Bush.

The lantern the sergeant carried was not really necessary to reveal them. The sergeant came to attention.

"Thank you, sir," he said.

"What are you doing with this patrol, sergeant?" asked Bush.

"I have my orders, sir," replied the sergeant. "Begging your pardon, sir. By the left, quick — march!"

The patrol strode forward, and the sergeant clapped his hand to his half pike in salute as he passed on.

"What in the name of all that's holy?" wondered Bush. "Boney can't have made a surprise landing. Every bell would be ringing if that were so. You'd think the press gang was out, a real hot press. But it can't be."

"Look there!" said Hornblower.

Another party of men was marching along the street, but not in red coats, not with the military stiffness of the

soldiers. Checked shirts and blue trousers; a midshipman marching at the head, white patches on his collar and his dirk at his side.

"The press gang for certain!" exclaimed Bush. "Look at the bludgeons!"

Every seaman carried a club in his hand.

"Midshipman!" said Hornblower, sharply. "What's all this?"

The midshipman halted at the tone of command and the sight of the uniforms.

"Orders, sir," he began, and then, realising that with the growing daylight he need no longer preserve secrecy, especially to naval men, he went on: "Press gang, sir. We've orders to press every seaman we find. The patrols are out on every road."

"So I believe. But what's the press for?"

"Dunno, sir. Orders, sir."

That was sufficient answer, maybe.

"Very good. Carry on."

"The press, by jingo!" said Bush. "Something's happening."

"I expect you're right," said Hornblower.

They had turned into Highbury Street now, and were making their way along to Mrs Mason's house.

"There's the first results," said Hornblower.

They stood on the doorstep to watch them go by, a hundred men at least, escorted along by a score of seamen with staves, a midshipman in command. Some of the pressed men were bewildered and silent; some were talking volubly — the noise they were making was rousing the street. Every man among them had at least one hand in a trouser pocket; those who were not gesticulating had both hands in their pockets.

"It's like old times," said Bush with a grin. "They've cut their waistbands."

With their waistbands cut it was necessary for them to keep a hand in a trouser pocket, as otherwise their trouser would fall down. No one could run away when handicapped in this fashion.

"A likely looking lot of prime seamen," said Bush, running a professional eye over them.

"Hard luck on them, all the same," said Hornblower.

"Hard luck?" said Bush in surprise.

Was the ox unlucky when it was turned into beef? Or for that matter was the guinea unlucky when it changed hands? This was life; for a merchant seaman to find himself a sailor of the King was as natural a thing as for his hair to turn grey if he should live so long. And the only way to secure him was to surprise him in the night, rouse him out of bed, snatch him from the grog shop and the brothel, converting him in a single second from a free man earning his livelihood in his own way into a pressed man who could not take a step on shore of his own free will without risking being flogged round the fleet. Bush could no more sympathise with the pressed man than he could sympathise with the night being replaced by day.

Hornblower was still looking at the press gang and the recruits.

"It may be war," he said, slowly.

"War!" said Bush.

"We'll know when the mail comes in," said Hornblower. "Party could have told us last night, I fancy."

"But — war!" said Bush.

The crowd went on down the street towards the dockyard, its noise dwindling with the increasing distance, and Hornblower turned towards the street door, taking the ponderous key out of his pocket. When they entered the house they saw Maria standing at the foot of the staircase, a candlestick with an unlighted candle in her hand. She wore a long coat over her nightclothes; she had put on her mobcap hastily, for a couple of curling papers showed under its edge.

"You're safe!" she said.

"Of course we're safe, Maria," said Hornblower. "What do you think could happen to us?"

"There was all that noise in the street," said Maria. "I looked out. Was it the press gang?"

"That's just what it was," said Bush.

"Is it — is it war?"

"That's what it may be."

"Oh!" Maria's face revealed her distress. "Oh!"

Her eyes searched their faces.

"No need to worry, Miss Maria," said Bush. "It'll be many a long year before Boney brings his flat-bottoms up Spithead."

"It's not that," said Maria. Now she was looking only at Hornblower. In a flash she had forgotten Bush's existence.

"You'll be going away!" she said.

"I shall have my duty to do if I am called upon, Maria," said Hornblower.

Now a grim figure appeared climbing the stairs from the basement — Mrs Mason; she had no mobcap on so that her curl papers were all visible.

"You'll disturb my other gentlemen with all this noise," she said.

"Mother, they think it's going to be war," said Maria

"And not a bad thing perhaps if it means some people will pay what they owe."

"I'll do that this minute," said Hornblower hotly. "What's my reckoning, Mrs Mason?"

"Oh, please, please —" said Maria, interposing.

"You just shut your mouth, miss," snapped Mrs Mason. "It's only because of you that I've let this young spark run on."

"Mother!"

"I'll pay my reckoning" he says, like a lord. And not a shirt in his chest. His chest'd be at the pawnbroker's too if I hadn't nobbled it."

"I said I'd pay my reckoning and I mean it, Mrs Mason," said Hornblower with enormous dignity.

"Let's see the colour of your money, then," stipulated Mrs Mason, not in the least convinced. "Twenty-seven and six."

Hornblower brought a fistful of silver out of his trouser pocket. But there was not enough there, and he had to extract a note from his breast pocket, revealing as he did so that there were many more.

"So!" said Mrs Mason. She looked down at the money in her hand as if it were fairy gold, and opposing emotions waged war in her expression.

"I think I might give you a week's warning, too," said Hornblower, harshly.

"Oh no!" said Maria.

"That's a nice room you have upstairs," said Mrs Mason. "You wouldn't be leaving me just on account of a few words."

"Don't leave us, Mr Hornblower," said Maria.

If ever there was a man completely at a loss it was Hornblower. After a glance at him Bush found it hard not to grin. The man who could keep a cool head when playing for high stakes with admirals — the man who fired the broadside that shook the *Renown* off the mud when under the fire of red-hot shot — was helpless when confronted by a couple of women. It would be a picturesque gesture to pay his reckoning — if necessary to pay an extra week's rent in lieu of warning — and to shake the dust of the place from his feet. But on the other hand he had been allowed credit here, and it would be a poor return for that consideration to leave the moment he could pay. But to stay on in a house that knew his secrets was an irksome prospect too. The dignified Hornblower who was ashamed of ever appearing human would hardly feel at home among people who knew that he had been human enough to be in debt. Bush was aware of all these problems as they confronted Hornblower, of the kindly feelings and the embittered ones. And Bush could be fond of him even while he laughed at him, and could respect him even while he knew of his weaknesses.

"When did you gentlemen have supper?" asked Mrs Mason.

"I don't think we did," answered Hornblower, with a side glance at Bush.

"You must be hungry, then, if you was up all night. Let me cook you a nice breakfast. A couple of thick chops for each of you. Now how about that?"

"By George!" said Hornblower.

"You go on up," said Mrs Mason. "I'll send the girl up with hot water an' you can shave. Then when you come down there'll be a nice breakfast ready for you. Maria, run and make the fire up."

Up in the attic Hornblower looked whimsically at Bush.

"That bed you paid a shilling for is still virgin," he said. "You haven't had a wink of sleep all night and it's my

fault. Please forgive me."

"It's not the first night I haven't slept," said Bush. He had not slept on the night they stormed Samaná; many were the occasions in foul weather when he had kept the deck for twenty-four hours continuously. And after a month of living with his sisters in the Chichester cottage, of nothing to do except to weed the garden, of trying to sleep for twelve hours a night for that very reason, the variety of excitement he had gone through had been actually pleasant. He sat down on the bed while Hornblower paced the floor.

"You'll have plenty more if it's war," Hornblower said; and Bush shrugged his shoulders.

A thump on the door announced the arrival of the maid of all work of the house, a can of hot water in each hand. Her ragged dress was too large for her — handed down presumably from Mrs Mason or from Maria — and her hair was tousled, but she, too, turned wide eyes on Hornblower as she brought in the hot water. Those wide eyes were too big for her skinny face, and they followed Hornblower as he moved about the room, and never had a glance for Bush. It was plain that Hornblower was as much the hero of this fourteen-year-old foundling as he was of Maria.

"Thank you, Susie," said Hornblower; and Susie dropped an angular curtsey before she scuttled from the room with one last glance round the door as she left.

Hornblower waved a hand at the wash-hand stand and the hot water.

"You first," said Bush.

Hornblower peeled off his coat and his shirt and addressed himself to the business of shaving. The razor blade rasped on his bristly cheeks; he turned his face this way and that so as to apply the edge. Neither of them felt any need for conversation, and it was practically in silence that Hornblower washed himself, poured the wash water into the slop pail, and stood aside for Bush to shave himself.

"Make the most of it," said Hornblower. "A pint of fresh water twice a week for shaving'll be all you'll get if you have your wish."

"Who cares?" said Bush.

He shaved, restopped his razor with care, and put it back into his roll of toilet articles. The scars that seamed his ribs gleamed pale as he moved. When he had finished dressing he glanced at Hornblower.

"Chops," said Hornblower. "Thick chops. Come on."

There were several places laid at the table in the diningroom opening out of the hall, but nobody else was present; apparently it was not the breakfast hour of Mrs Mason's other gentlemen.

"Only a minute, sir," said Susie, showing up in the doorway for a moment before hurrying down into the kitchen.

She came staggering back laden with a tray; Hornblower pushed back his chair and was about to help her, but she checked him with a scandalised squeak and managed to put the tray safely on the side table without accident.

"I can serve you, sir," she said.

She scuttled back and forward between the two tables like the boys running with the nippers when the cab was being hove in. Coffee-pot and toast, butter and jam, sugar and milk, cruet and hot plates and finally a wide dish which she laid before Hornblower; she took off the cover and there was a noble dish of chops whose delightful scent, hitherto pent up, filled the room.

"Ah!" said Hornblower, taking up a spoon and fork to serve. "Have you had your breakfast, Susie?"

"Me, sir? No, sir. Not yet, sir."

Hornblower paused, spoon and fork in hand, looking from the chops to Susie and back again. Then he put down the spoon and thrust his right hand into his trouser pocket.

"There's no way in which you can have one of these chops?" he said.

"Me, sir? Of course not, sir."

"Now here's half a crown."

"Half a crown, sir!"

That was more than a day's wages for a labourer.

"I want a promise from you, Susie."

"Sir — sir — !"

Susie's hands were behind her.

"Take this, and promise me that the first chance that comes your way, the moment Mrs Mason lets you out, you'll buy yourself something to eat. Fill that wretched little belly of yours. Faggots and Pease pudding, pig's trotters, all the things you like. Promise me."

"But, sir —"

Half a crown, the prospect of unlimited food, were things that could not be real.

"Oh, take it," said Hornblower testily.

"Yes, sir."

Susie clasped the coin in her skinny hand.

"Don't forget I have your promise."

"Yes, sir, please, sir, thank you, sir."

"Now put it away and clear out quick."

"Yes, sir."

She fled out of the room and Hornblower began once more to serve the chops.

"I'll be able to enjoy my breakfast now," said Hornblower self-consciously.

"No doubt," said Bush; he buttered himself a piece of toast, dabbed mustard on his plate — to eat mustard with mutton marked him as a sailor, but he did it without a thought. With good food in front of him there was no need for thought, and he ate in silence. It was only when Hornblower spoke again that Bush realised that Hornblower had been construing the silence as accusatory of something.

"Half a crown," said Hornblower, defensively, "may mean many things to many people. Yesterday —"

"You're quite right," said Bush, filling in the gap as politeness dictated, and then he looked up and realised that it was not because he had no more to say that Hornblower had left the sentence uncompleted.

Maria was standing framed in the dining-room door; her bonnet, gloves, and shawl indicated that she was about to go out, presumably to early marketing since the school where she taught was temporarily closed.

"I — I looked in to see that you had everything you wanted," she said. The hesitation in her speech seemed to indicate that she had heard Hornblower's last words, but it was not certain.

"Thank you. Delightful," mumbled Hornblower.

"Please don't get up," said Maria, hastily and with a hint of hostility, as Hornblower and Bush began to rise. Her eyes were wet.

A knocking on the street door relieved the tension, and Maria fled to answer it. From the dining-room they heard a masculine voice, and Maria reappeared, a corporal of marines towering behind her dumpy form.

"Lieutenant Hornblower?" he asked.

"That's me."

"From the admiral, sir."

The corporal held out a letter and a folded newspaper. There was a maddening delay while a pencil was found for Hornblower to sign the receipt. Then the corporal took his leave with a clicking of heels and Hornblower stood with the letter in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

"Oh, open it — please open it," said Maria

Hornblower tore the wafer and unfolded the sheet. He read the note, and then reread it, nodding his head as if the note confirmed some preconceived theory.

"You see that sometimes it is profitable to play whist," he said, "in more ways than one."

He handed the note over to Bush; his smile was a little lopsided.

SIR [read Bush]

It is with pleasure that I take this opportunity of informing you in advance of any official notification that your promotion to Commander is now confirmed and that you will shortly be appointed to the Command of a Sloop of War.

"By God, sir!" said Bush. "Congratulations. For the second time, sir. It's only what you deserve, as I said before."

"Thank you," said Hornblower. "Finish reading it."

The arrival at this moment of the Mail Coach with the London newspapers [said the second paragraph] enables me to send you the information regarding the changed situation without being unnecessarily prolix in this letter. You will gather from what you read in the accompanying copy of the *Sun* the reasons why conditions of military secrecy should prevail during our very pleasant evening so that I need not apologise for not having enlightened you, while I remain,

Your obedient servant,

PARRY

By the time Bush had finished the letter Hornblower had opened the newspaper at the relevant passage, which he pointed out to Bush.

Message from HIS MAJESTY

House of Commons, March 8, 1803

The CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER brought down the following message from HIS MAJESTY:

'His Majesty thinks it necessary to acquaint the House of Commons, that, as very considerable military preparations are carrying on in the ports of France and Holland, he has judged it expedient to adopt additional measures of precaution for the security of his dominions.

GEORGE R.'

That was all Bush needed to read. Boney's fleet of flat-bottomed boats, and his army of invasion mustered along the Channel coast, were being met by the appropriate and necessary countermove. Last night's press-gang measures, planned and carried out with a secrecy for which Bush could feel nothing except wholehearted approval (he had led too many press gangs not to know how completely seamen made themselves scarce at the first hint of a press), would provide the crews for the ships necessary to secure England's safety. There were ships in plenty, laid up in every harbour in England; and officers — Bush knew very well how many officers were available. With the fleet manned and at sea England could laugh at the treacherous attack Boney had planned.

"They've done the right thing for once, by God!" said Bush, slapping the newspaper.

"But what is it?" asked Maria.

She had been standing silent, watching the two men, her glance shifting from one to the other in an endeavour to read their expressions. Bush remembered that she had winced at his outburst of congratulation.

"It'll be war next week," said Hornblower. "Boney won't endure a bold answer."

"Oh," said Maria. "But you — what about you?"

"I'm made commander," said Hornblower. "I'm going to be appointed to a sloop of war."

"Oh," said Maria again.

There was a second or two of agonised effort at self-control, and then she broke down. Her head dropped farther and farther, until she put her gloved hands to her face, turning away from the two men so that they only saw her shoulders with the shawl across them, shaking with sobs.

"Maria," said Hornblower gently. "Please, Maria, please don't."

Maria turned and presented a slobbered face to him, unevenly framed in the bonnet which had been pushed askew.

"I'll n-n-never see you again," sobbed Maria. "I've been so happy with the m-m-mumps at school, I thought I'd m-m-make your bed and do your room. And n-now this happens!"

"But, Maria," said Hornblower — his hands flapped helplessly — "I've my duty to do."

"I wish I was d-dead! Indeed I wish I was dead!" said Maria, and the tears poured down her cheeks to drip upon her shawl; they streamed from eyes which had a fixed look of despair, while the wide mouth was shapeless.

This was something Bush could not endure. He liked pretty, saucy women. What he was looking at now jarred on him unbearably — perhaps it rasped his aesthetic sensibility, unlikely though it might seem that Bush should have such a thing. Perhaps he was merely irritated by the spectacle of uncontrolled hysteria, but if that was the case he was irritated beyond all bearing. He felt that if he had to put up with Maria's water-works for

another minute he would break a blood vessel.

"Let's get out of here," he said to Hornblower.

In reply he received a look of surprise. It had not occurred to Hornblower that he might run away from a situation for which his temperament necessarily made him feel responsible. Bush knew perfectly well that, given time, Maria would recover. He knew that women who wished themselves dead one day could be as lively as crickets the next day after another man had chucked them under the chin. In any case he did not see why he and Hornblower should concern themselves about something which was entirely Maria's fault.

"Oh!" said Maria; she stumbled forward and supported herself with her hands upon the table with its cooling coffeepot and its congealing half-consumed chops. She lifted her head and wailed again.

"Oh, for God's sake —" said Bush in disgust. He turned to Hornblower. "Come along."

By the time Bush was on the staircase he realised that Hornblower had not followed him, would not follow him. And Bush did not go back to fetch him. Even though Bush was not a man to desert a comrade in peril; even though he would gladly take his place in a boat launching out through the most dreadful surf to rescue men in danger; even though he would stand shoulder to shoulder with Hornblower and be hewn to pieces with him by an overwhelming enemy; for all this he would not go back to save Hornblower. If Hornblower was going to be foolish Bush felt he could not stop him. And he salved his conscience by telling himself that perhaps Hornblower would not be foolish.

Up in the attic Bush set about rolling up his nightshirt with his toilet things. The methodical checking over of his razor and comb and brushes, seeing that nothing was left behind, soothed his irritated nerves. The prospect of immediate employment and immediate action revealed itself to him in all its delightful certainty, breaking through the evaporating clouds of his irritation. He began to hum to himself tunelessly. It would be sensible to call in again at the dockyard — he might even look in at the Keppel's Head to discuss the morning's amazing news; both courses would be advisable if he wanted to secure for himself quickly a new appointment. Hat in hand he tucked his neat package under his arm and cast a final glance round the room to make sure that he had left nothing, and he was still humming as he closed the attic door behind him. On the staircase, about to step down into the hall, he stood for a moment with one foot suspended, not in doubt as to whether he should go into the dining-room, but arranging in his mind what he should say when he went in.

Maria had dried her tears. She was standing there smiling, although her bonnet was still askew. Hornblower was smiling too; it might be with relief that Maria had left off weeping. He looked round at Bush's entrance, and his face revealed surprise at the sight of Bush's hat and bundle.

"I'm getting under way," said Bush. "I have to thank you for your hospitality, sir."

"But —" said Hornblower, "you don't have to go just yet."

There was that 'sir' again in Bush's speech. They had been through so much together, and they knew so much about each other. Now war was coming again, and Hornblower was Bush's superior officer. Bush explained what he wanted to do before taking the carrier's cart back to Chichester, and Hornblower nodded.

"Pack your chest," he said. "It won't be long before you need it."

Bush cleared his throat in preparation for the formal words he was going to use.

"I didn't express my congratulations properly," he said portentously. "I wanted to say that I don't believe the Admiralty could have made a better choice out of the whole list of lieutenants when they selected you for promotion, sir."

"You're too kind," said Hornblower.

"I'm sure Mr Bush is quite right," said Maria.

She gazed up at Hornblower with adoration shining in her face, and he looked down at her with infinite kindness. And already there was something a little proprietorial about the adoration, and perhaps there was something wistful about the kindness.



A HORATIO HORNBLOWER TALE OF THE SEA

C. S. FORESTER

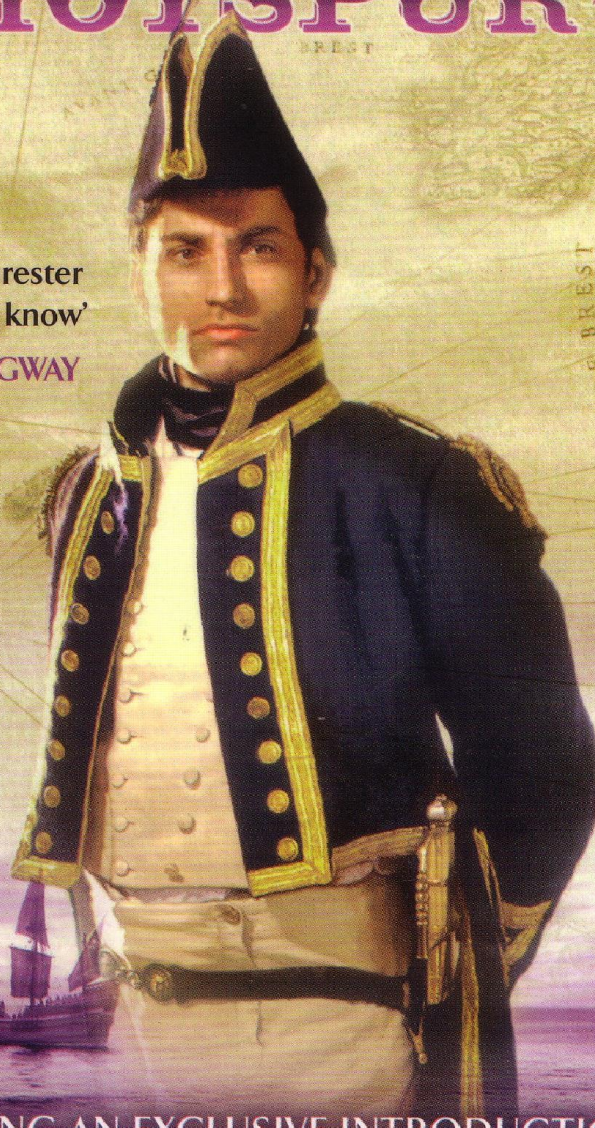
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AND THE

HOTSPUR

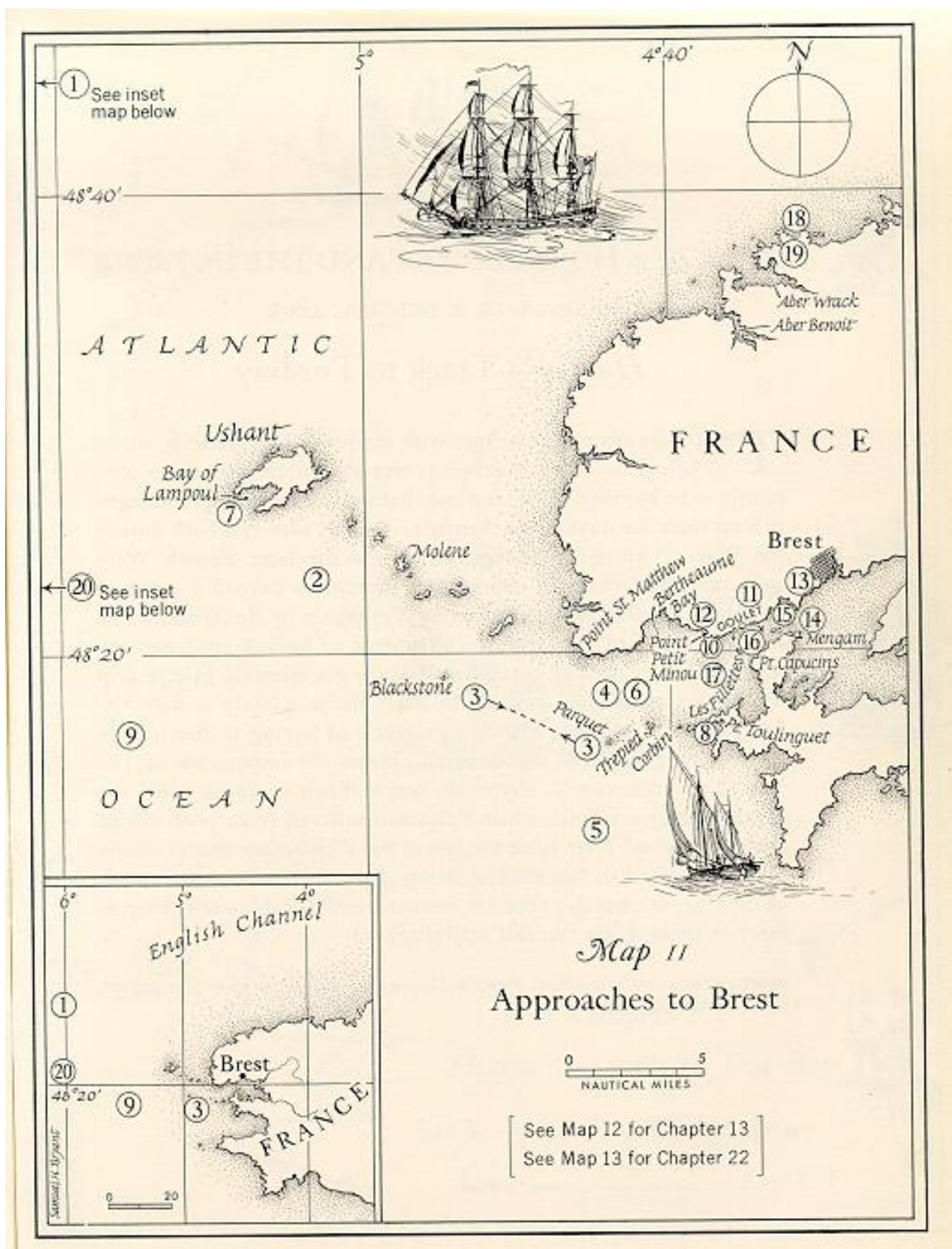
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Hornblower and the Hotspur

Chapters 4 to 25

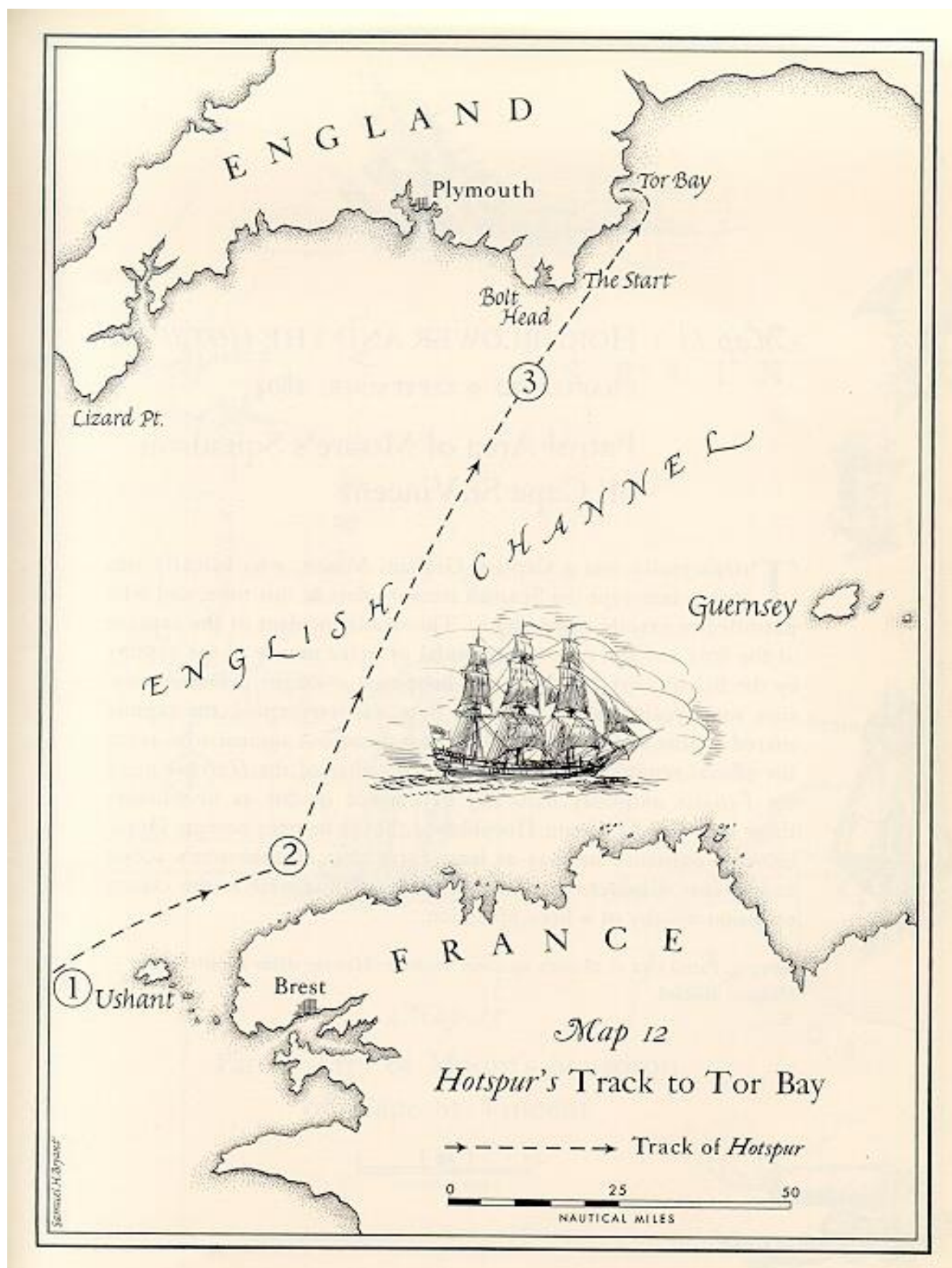
April, 1803 to July, 1805

Map 11 - Approaches to Brest

- ① 6 degrees W. longitude: opening of sealed orders.
- ② Sighting of the *Deux Frères*.
- ③ *Hotspur's* usual patrol route.
- ④ Peacetime encounter with the *Loire*.

- ⑤ and ⑥ Positions of *Hotspur* and *Loire* respectively at wartime encounter.
- ⑦ Disabling of the *Loire*.
- ⑧ Encounter with French coasters.
- ⑨ Dinner on board the *Tonnant*.
- ⑩ Landing jetty for shore expedition.
- Point 11: Location of signal station.
- Point 12: Location of battery.
- Point 13: Encampment of French troops.
- Point 14: First meeting with French transports.
- Point 15: First transport grounded here.
- Point 16: Two transports grounded here (on Les Fillettes).
- Point 17: Encounter with fourth transport and French frigate.
- Point 18: *Grasshopper* dismasted.
- Point 19: Mobile battery.
- Point 20: *Hibernia*'s usual station.





Hornblower and the Hotspur

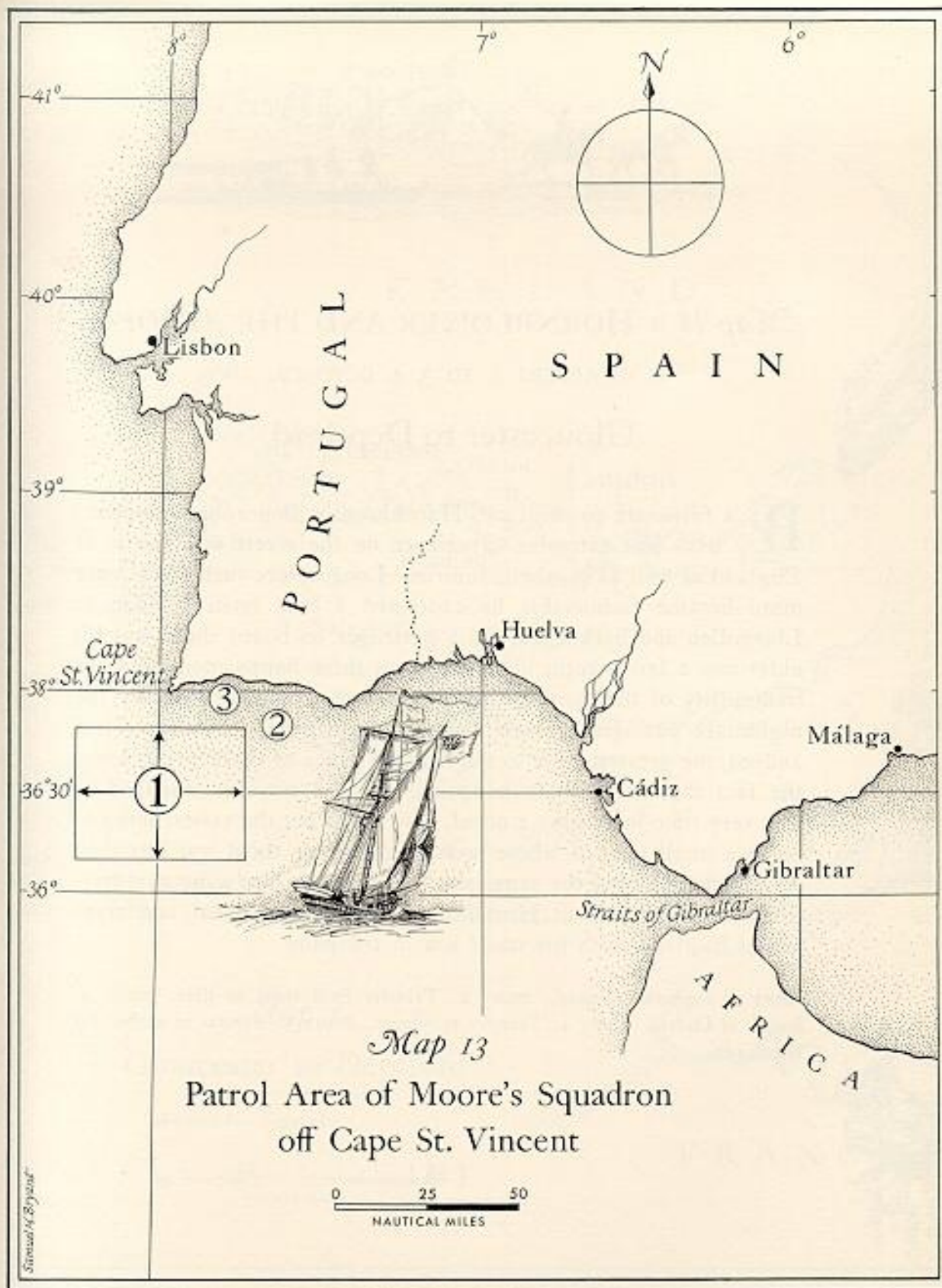
Chapter 13 October, 1803

Map 12 - Hotspur's Track to Tor Bay

① Encounter with *Naiad*.

② Course altered to put wind on port quarter.

③ Sounding taken here.



Hornblower and the Hotspur

Chapter 22 September, 1804

Map 13 - Patrol Area of Moore's Squadron off Cape St. Vincent

① Patrol area of Moore's squadron.

② *Hotspur* sights *Félicité*.

③ *Hotspur* disabled.

Hornblower and the Hotspur

C. S. Forester

(1962)

Chapter 1

"REPEAT after me," said the parson. "'I Horatio, take thee, Maria Ellen —'"

The thought came up in Hornblower's mind that these were the last few seconds in which he could withdraw from doing something which he knew to be ill-considered. Maria was not the right woman to be his wife, even admitting that he was suitable material for marriage in any case. If he had a grain of sense, he would break off this ceremony even at this last moment, he would announce that he had changed his mind, and he would turn away from the altar and from the parson and from Maria, and he would leave the church a free man.

"To have and to hold —" he was still, like an automaton, repeating the parson's words. And there was Maria beside him, in the white that so little became her. She was melting with happiness. She was consumed with love for him, however misplaced it might be. He could not, he simply could not, deal her a blow so cruel. He was conscious of the trembling of her body beside him. He could no more bring himself to shatter that trust than he could have refused to command the *Hotspur*.

"And thereto I plight thee my troth," repeated Hornblower. That settled it, he thought. Those must be the final deciding words that made the ceremony legally binding. He had made a promise and now there was no going back on it. There was a comfort in the odd thought that he had really been committed from a week back, when Maria had come into his arms sobbing out her love for him, and he had been too soft-hearted to laugh at her and too — too weak? too honest? — to take advantage of her with the intention of betraying her. From the moment that he had listened to her, from the moment that he had returned her kisses, gently, all these later results, the bridal dress, this ceremony in the church of St Thomas à Beckett — and the vague future of cloying affection — had been inevitable.

Bush was ready with the ring, and Hornblower slipped it over Maria's finger, and the final words were said.

"I now pronounce that they are man and wife," said the parson, and he went on with the blessing, and then a blank five seconds followed, until Maria broke the silence.

"Oh, Horry," she said, and she laid her hand on his arm.

Hornblower forced himself to smile down at her, concealing the newly discovered fact that he disliked being called 'Horry' even more than he disliked being called Horatio.

"The happiest day of my life," he said; if a thing had to be done it might as well be done thoroughly, so that in the same spirit he continued. "In my life so far."

It was actually painful to note the unbounded happiness of the smile that answered this gallant speech. Maria put her other hand up to him, and he realized she expected to be kissed, then and there, in front of the altar. It hardly seemed a proper thing to do, in a sacred edifice — in his ignorance he feared lest he should affront the devout — but once more there was no drawing back, and he stooped and kissed the soft lips that she proffered.

"Your signatures are required in the register," prompted the parson, and led the way to the vestry.

They wrote their names.

"Now I can kiss my son-in-law," announced Mrs Mason loudly, and Hornblower found himself clasped by two powerful arms and soundly kissed on the cheek. He supposed it was inevitable that a man should feel a distaste for his mother-in-law.

But here was Bush to disengage him, with outstretched hand and unusual smile, offering felicitations and best wishes.

"Many thanks," said Hornblower, and added, "Many thanks for many services."

Bush was positively embarrassed, and tried to brush away Hornblower's gratitude with the same gestures as he would have used to brush away flies. He had been a tower of strength in this wedding, just as he had been in the preparation of the *Hotspur* for sea

"I'll see you again at breakfast, sir," he said, and with that he withdrew from the vestry, leaving behind him an awkward gap.

"I was counting on Mr Bush's arm for support down the aisle," said Mrs Mason, sharply.

It certainly was not like Bush to leave everyone in the lurch like this; it was in marked contrast with his behaviour during the last few whirlwind days.

"We can bear each other company, Mrs Mason," said the parson's wife. "Mr Clive can follow us."

"You are very kind, Mrs Clive," said Mrs Mason, although there was nothing in her tone to indicate that she meant what she said. "Then the happy pair can start now. Maria, take the captain's arm."

Mrs Mason marshalled the tiny procession in businesslike fashion. Hornblower felt Maria's hand slipped under his arm, felt the light pressure she could not help giving to it, and — he could not be cruel enough to ignore it — he pressed her hand in return, between his ribs and his elbow, to be rewarded by another smile. A small shove from behind by Mrs Mason started him back in the church, to be greeted by a roar from the organ. Half a crown for the organist and a shilling for the blower was what that music had cost Mrs Mason; there might be better uses for the money. The thought occupied Hornblower's mind for several seconds, and was naturally succeeded by the inevitable wonderment as to how anyone could possibly find enjoyment in these distasteful noises. He and Maria were well down the aisle before he came back to reality.

"The sailors are all gone," said Maria with a break in her voice. "There's almost no one in the church."

Truth to tell, there were only two or three people in the pews, and these obviously the most casual idlers. All the few guests had trooped into the vestry for the signing, and the fifty seamen whom Bush had brought from *Hotspur* — all those who could be trusted not to desert — had vanished already. Hornblower felt a vague disappointment that Bush had failed again to rise to the situation.

"Why should we care?" he asked, groping wildly for words of comfort for Maria. "Why should any shadow fall on our wedding day?"

It was strangely painful to see and to feel Maria's instant response, and her faltering step changed to a brave stride as they marched down the empty church. There was bright sunshine awaiting them at the west door, he could see; and he thought of something else a tender bridegroom might say.

"Happy is the bride the sun shines on."

They came out of the dim light into the bright sun, and the transition was moral as well as physical, for Bush had not disappointed them; he had not been found wanting after all. Hornblower heard a sharp word and a ragged clash of steel, and there were the fifty seamen in a double rank stretching away from the door, making an arch of their drawn cutlasses for the couple to walk beneath.

"Oh, how nice!" said Maria, in childish delight; furthermore the array of seamen at the church door had attracted a crowd of spectators, all craning forward to see the captain and his bride. Hornblower darted a professional glance first down one line of seamen and then down the other. They were all dressed in the new blue and white checked shirts with which he had stocked the slop chest of the *Hotspur*; their white duck trousers were mostly well worn but well washed, and long enough and baggy enough to conceal the probable deficiencies of their shoes. It was a good turnout.

Beyond the avenue of cutlasses stood a horseless post-chaise, with Bush standing behind it. Wondering a little, Hornblower led Maria towards it; Bush gallantly handed Maria up into the front seat and Hornblower climbed up beside her, finding time now to take his cocked hat from under his arm and clap it on his head. He had heard the cutlasses rasp back into their sheaths; now the guard of honour came pattering forward in a disciplined rush. There were pipe-clayed drag ropes where the traces should have been, and the fifty men seized their coils, twenty-five to a coil, and ran them out. Bush craned up towards Hornblower.

"Let the brake off, if you please, sir. That handle there, sir."

Hornblower obeyed, and Bush turned away and let loose a subdued bellow. The seamen took the strain in half a dozen quickening steps and then broke into a trot, the post chaise rattling over the cobbles, while the crowd waved their hats and cheered.

"I never thought I could be so happy — Horry — darling," said Maria.

The men at the drag ropes, with the usual exuberance of the seaman on land, swung round the corner into the High Street and headed at the double towards the George, and with the turn Maria was flung against him and clasped him in delicious fear. As they drew up it was obvious that there was a danger of the chaise rolling forward into the seamen, and Hornblower had to think fast and reach for the brake lever, hurriedly casting himself free from Maria's arm. Then he sat for a moment, wondering what to do next. On this occasion there should be a group to welcome them, the host of the inn and his wife, the boots, the ostler, the drawer, and the maids, but as it was there was no one. He had to leap down from the chaise unassisted and single handed help Maria down.

"Thank you, men," he said to the parting seamen, who acknowledged his thanks with a knuckling of foreheads and halting words.

Bush was in sight now round the corner, hurrying towards them; Hornblower could safely leave Bush in charge while he led Maria into the inn with a sad lack of ceremony.

But here was the host at last, bustling up with a napkin over his arm and his wife at his heels.

"Welcome, sir, welcome, madam. This way, sir, madam." He flung open the door into the coffee-room to reveal the wedding breakfast laid on a snowy cloth. "The Admiral arrived only five minutes ago, sir, so you must excuse us, sir."

"Which Admiral?"

"The Honourable Admiral Sir William Cornwallis, sir, commanding the Channel Fleet. 'Is coachman says war's certain, sir."

Hornblower had been convinced of this ever since, nine days ago, he had read the King's message to Parliament, and witnessed the activities of the press gangs, and had been notified of his appointment to the command of the *Hotspur* — and (he remembered) had found himself betrothed to Maria. Bonaparte's unscrupulous behaviour on the Continent meant —

"A glass of wine, madam? A glass of wine, sir?"

Hornblower was conscious of Maria's inquiring glance when the innkeeper asked this question. She would not venture to answer until she had ascertained what her new husband thought.

"We'll wait for the rest of the company," said Hornblower. "Ah —"

A heavy step on the threshold announced Bush's arrival.

"They'll all be here in two minutes," said Bush.

"Very good of you to arrange about the carriage and seamen, Mr Bush," said Hornblower, and he thought that moment of something else that a kind and thoughtful husband would say. He slipped his hand under Maria's arm and added — "Mrs Hornblower says you made her very happy."

A delighted giggle from Maria told him that he had given pleasure by this unexpected use of her new name, as he expected.

"Mrs Hornblower, I give you joy," said Bush, solemnly, and then to Hornblower, "By your leave, sir, I'll return to the ship."

"Now, Mr Bush?" asked Maria.

"I fear I must, ma'am," replied Bush, turning back at once to Hornblower. "I'll take the hands back with me, sir. There's always the chance that the lighters with the stores may come off."

"I'm afraid you're right, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "Keep me informed, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush, and with that he was gone.

Here came the others, pouring in, and any trace of awkwardness about the party disappeared as Mrs Mason marshalled the guests and set the wedding breakfast into its stride. Corks popped and preliminary toasts were drunk. There was the cake to be cut, and Mrs Mason insisted that Maria should make the first cut with Hornblower's sword; Mrs Mason was sure that in this Maria would be following the example of naval brides in good society in London. Hornblower was not so sure; he had lived for ten years under a strict convention that cold steel should never be drawn under a roof or a deck. But his timid objections were swept away, and Maria,

the sword in both hands, cut the cake amid general applause. Hornblower could hardly restrain his impatience to take the thing back from her, and he quickly wiped the sugar icing from the blade, wondering grimly what the assembled company would think if they knew he had once wiped human blood from it. He was still engaged on this work when he became aware of the innkeeper whispering hoarsely at his side.

"Begging your pardon, sir. Begging your pardon."

"Well?"

"The Admiral's compliments, sir, and he would be glad to see you when you find it convenient."

Hornblower stood sword in hand, staring at him in momentary uncomprehension.

"The Admiral, sir. 'E's in the first floor front, what we always calls the Admiral's Room."

"You mean Sir William, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. My respects to the Admiral and — No, I'll go up at once. Thank you."

"Thank'ee, sir. Begging your pardon again."

Hornblower shot his sword back into its sheath and looked round at the company. They were watching the maid bustling round handing slices of wedding cake and had no eyes for him at present. He settled his sword at his side, twitched at his neckcloth, and unobtrusively left the room, picking up his hat as he did so.

When he knocked at the door of the first floor front a deep voice that he well remembered said, "Come in." It was so large a room that the four-poster bed at the far end was inconspicuous; so was the secretary seated at the desk by the window. Cornwallis was standing in the middle, apparently engaged in dictation until this interruption.

"Ah, it's Hornblower. Good morning."

"Good morning, sir."

"The last time we met was over that unfortunate business with the Irish rebel. We had to hang him, I remember."

Cornwallis, 'Billy Blue', had not changed perceptibly during those four years. He was still the bulky man with the composed manner, obviously ready to deal with any emergency.

"Please sit down. A glass of wine?"

"No, thank you, sir."

"I expected that, seeing the ceremony you've just come from. My apologies for interrupting your wedding, but you must blame Boney, not me."

"Of course, sir." Hornblower felt that a more eloquent speech would have been in place here, but he could not think of one.

"I'll detain you for as short a time as possible. You know I've been appointed to the command of the Channel fleet?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know that *Hotspur* is under my command?"

"I expected that, but I didn't know, sir."

"The Admiralty letter to that effect came down in my coach. You'll find it awaiting you on board."

"Yes, sir."

"Is *Hotspur* ready to sail?"

"No, Sir." The truth and no excuses. Nothing else would do.

"How long?"

"Two days, sir. More if there's delay with the ordnance stores."

Cornwallis was looking at him very sharply indeed, but Hornblower returned glance for glance. He had nothing with which to reproach himself; nine days ago *Hotspur* was still laid up in ordinary.

"She's been docked and breamed?"

"Yes, sir."

"She'd manned?"

"Yes, sir. A good crew — the cream of the press."

"Rigging set up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yards crossed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Officers appointed?"

"Yes, sir. A lieutenant and four master's mates."

"You'll need three months' provisions and water."

"I can stow a hundred and eleven days at full rations, sir. The cooperage is delivering the water-butts at noon. I'll have it all stowed by nightfall, sir."

"Have you warped her out?"

"Yes, sir. She's at anchor now in Spithead."

"You've done well," said Cornwallis.

Hornblower tried not to betray his relief at that speech; from Cornwallis that was more than approval — it was hearty praise.

"Thank you, sir."

"So what do you need now?"

"Bos'n's stores, sir. Cordage, canvas, spare spars."

"Not easy to get the dockyard to part with those at this moment. I'll have a word with them. And then the ordnance stores, you say?"

"Yes, sir. Ordnance are waiting for a shipment of nine-pounder shot. None to be had here at the moment."

Ten minutes ago Hornblower had been thinking of words to please Maria. Now he was selecting words for an honest report to Cornwallis.

"I'll deal with that, too," said Cornwallis. "You can be certain of sailing the day after tomorrow if the wind serves."

"Yes, sir."

"Now for your orders. You'll get them in writing in the course of the day, but I'd better tell you now, while you can ask questions. War's coming. It hasn't been declared yet, but Boney may anticipate us."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm going to blockade Brest as soon as I can get the fleet to sea, and you're to go ahead of us."

"Yes, sir."

"You're not to do anything to precipitate war. You're not to provide Boney with an excuse."

"No, sir."

"When war's declared you can of course take the appropriate action. Until then you have merely to observe. Keep your eye on Brest. Look in as far as you can without provoking fire. Count the ships of war — the number and rate of ships with their yards crossed, ships still in ordinary, ships in the roads, ships preparing for sea."

"Yes, sir."

"Boney sent the best of his ships and crews to the West Indies last year. He'll have more trouble manning his fleet even than we have. I'll want your report as soon as I arrive on the station. What's the *Hotspur's* draught?"

"She'll draw thirteen feet aft when she's complete with stores, sir."

"You'll be able to use the Goulet pretty freely, then. I don't have to tell you not to run her aground."

"No, sir."

"But remember this. You'll find it hard to perform your duty unless you risk your ship. There's folly and there's foolhardiness on one side, and there's daring and calculation on the other. Make the right choice and I'll see you through any trouble that may ensue."

Cornwallis's wide blue eyes looked straight into Hornblower's brown ones. Hornblower was deeply interested in what Cornwallis had just said, and equally interested in what he had left unsaid. Cornwallis had made a promise of sympathetic support, but he had refrained from uttering the threat which was the obvious corollary. This was no rhetorical device, no facile trick of leadership — it was a simple expression of Cornwallis's natural state of mind. He was a man who preferred to lead rather than to drive; most interesting. Hornblower realized with a start that for several seconds he had been staring his commander-in-chief out of countenance while following up this train of thought; it was not the most tactful behaviour, perhaps.

"I understand, sir," he said, and Cornwallis rose from his chair.

"We'll meet again at sea. Remember to do nothing to provoke war before war is declared," he said, with a smile — and the smile revealed the man of action. Hornblower could read him as someone to whom the prospect of action was stimulating and desirable and who would never seek reasons or excuses for postponing decisions.

Cornwallis suddenly withheld his proffered hand.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "I was forgetting. This is your wedding day."

"Yes, sir."

"You were only married this morning?"

"An hour ago, sir."

"And I've taken you away from your wedding breakfast."

"Yes, sir." It would be cheap rhetoric to add anything trite like 'For King and Country,' or even 'Duty comes first.'

"Your good lady will hardly be pleased."

Nor would his mother-in-law, more especially, thought Hornblower, but again it would not be tactful to say so.

"I'll try to make amends, sir," he contented himself with saying.

"It's I who should make amends," replied Cornwallis. "Perhaps I could join the festivities and drink the bride's health?"

"That would be most kind of you, sir," said Hornblower.

If anything could reconcile Mrs Mason to his breach of manners, it would be the presence of Admiral the Hon. Sir William Cornwallis, K.B., at the breakfast table.

"I'll come, then, if you're certain I shan't be unwelcome. Hachett, find my sword. Where's my hat?"

So that when Hornblower appeared again through the door of the coffee-room Mrs Mason's instant and bitter reproaches died away on her lips, the moment she saw that Hornblower was ushering in an important guest. She saw the glittering epaulettes, and the red ribbon and the star which Cornwallis had most tactfully put on in honour of the occasion. Hornblower made the introductions.

"Long life and much happiness," said Cornwallis, bowing over Maria's hand, "to the wife of one of the most promising officers in the King's service."

Maria could only bob, overwhelmed with embarrassment in this glittering presence.

"Enchanted to make your acquaintance, Sir William," said Mrs Mason.

And the parson and his wife, and the few neighbours of Mrs Mason's who were the only other guests, were enormously gratified at being in the same room as — let alone being personally addressed by — the son of an Earl, a Knight of the Bath, and a Commander-in-chief combined in one person.

"A glass of wine, sir?" asked Hornblower.

"With pleasure."

Cornwallis took the glass in his hand and looked round: It was significant that it was Mrs Mason whom he addressed.

"Has the health of the happy couple been drunk yet?"

"No, sir," answered Mrs Mason, in a perfect ecstasy.

"Then may I do so? Ladies, gentlemen. I ask you all to stand and join me on this happy occasion. May they never know sorrow. May they always enjoy health and prosperity. May the wife always find comfort in the knowledge that the husband is doing his duty for King and Country, and may the husband be supported in his duty by the loyalty of the wife. And let us hope that in time to come there will be a whole string of young gentlemen who will wear the King's uniform after their father's example, and a whole string of young ladies to be mothers of further young gentlemen. I give you the health of the bride and groom."

The health was drunk amid acclamation, with all eyes turned on the blushing Maria, and then from her all eyes turned on Hornblower. He rose; he had realized, before Cornwallis had reached the midpoint of his speech, that the Admiral was using words he had used scores of times before, at scores of weddings of his officers. Hornblower, keyed up on the occasion, met Cornwallis's eyes and grinned. He would give as good as he got; he would reply with a speech exactly similar to the scores that Cornwallis had listened to.

"Sir William, ladies and gentlemen, I can only thank you in the name of" — Hornblower reached down and took Maria's hand — "my wife and myself."

As the laughter died away — Hornblower had well known that the company would laugh at his mention of Maria as his wife, although he himself did not think it a subject for laughter — Cornwallis looked at his watch, and Hornblower hastened to thank him for his presence and to escort him to the door. Beyond the threshold Cornwallis turned and thumped him on the chest with his large hand.

"I'll add another line to my orders for you," he said; Hornblower was acutely aware that Cornwallis's friendly smile was accompanied by a searching glance.

"Yes, sir?"

"I'll add my written permission for you to sleep out of your ship for tonight and tomorrow night."

Hornblower opened his mouth to reply, but no words came; for once in his life his readiness of wit had deserted him. His mind was so busy reassessing the situation that it had nothing to spare for his organ of speech.

"I *thought* you might have forgotten," said Cornwallis, grinning. "*Hotspur's* part of the Channel fleet now. Her captain is forbidden by law to sleep anywhere except on board without the permission of the Commander-in-Chief. Well, you have it."

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower, at last able to articulate.

"Maybe you won't sleep ashore again for a couple of years. Maybe more than that, if Boney fights it out."

"I certainly think he'll fight, sir."

"In that case you and I will meet again off Ushant in three weeks' time. So now good-bye, once more."

For some time after Cornwallis had left Hornblower stood by the half-closed door of the coffee-room in deep thought, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, which was the nearest he could get to pacing up and down. War was coming; he had always been certain of that, because Bonaparte would never retreat from the position he had taken up. But until this moment Hornblower had thought recklessly that he would not be ordered to sea until war was declared, in two or three weeks' time, after the final negotiations had broken down. He had been utterly wrong in this surmise, and he was angry with himself on that account. The facts that he had a good crew — the first harvest of the press — that his ship could be quickly made ready for sea, that she was small and of no account in the balance of power, even that she was of light draught and therefore well adapted to the mission Cornwallis had allotted her, should have warned him that he would be packed off to sea at the earliest possible moment. He should have foreseen all this and he had not.

That was the first point, the first pill to swallow. Next he had to find out why his judgement had been so faulty. He knew the answer instantly, but — and he despised himself for this even more — he flinched from expressing it. But here it was. He had allowed his judgement to be clouded on account of Maria. He had shrunk from hurting her, and in consequence he had refused to allow his mind to make calculations about the future. He had gone recklessly forward in the wild hope that some stroke of good fortune would save him from having to deal her this blow.

He pulled himself up abruptly at this point. Good fortune? Nonsense. He was in command of his own ship, and was being set in the forefront of the battle. This was his golden chance to distinguish himself. That was his good fortune — it would have been maddening bad luck to have been left in harbour. Hornblower could feel the well-remembered thrill of excitement at the thought of seeing action again, of risking reputation — and life — in doing his duty, in gaining glory, and in (what was really the point) justifying himself in his own eyes. Now he was sane again; he could see things in their proper proportion. He was a naval officer first, and a married man only second, and a bad second at that. But — but — that did not make things any easier. He would still have to tear himself free from Maria's arms.

Nor could he stay here outside the coffee-room any longer. He must go back, despite his mental turmoil. He turned and re-entered the room, closing the door behind him.

"It will look well in the *Naval Chronicle*," said Mrs Mason, "that the Commander-in-Chief proposed the health of the happy pair. Now, Horatio, some of your guests have empty plates."

Hornblower was still trying to be a good host when he saw across the room the worried face of the innkeeper again; it called for a second glance to see what had caused him to come in. He was ushering in Hornblower's new coxwain, Hewitt, a very short man who escaped observation across the room. Hewitt made up in breadth a good deal of what he lacked in height, and he sported a magnificent pair of glossy black side-whiskers in the style which was newly fashionable on the lower-deck. He came rolling across the room, his straw hat in his

hand, and, knuckling his forehead, gave Horatio a note. The address was in Bush's handwriting and in the correct phrasing, although now a lithe old-fashioned — Horatio Hornblower, Esq., Master and Commander. Silence fell on the assembled company — a little rudely, Hornblower thought — as he read the few lines.

H.M. Sloop *Hotspur*

2 April, 1803

Sir,

I hear from the dockyard that the first of the lighters is ready to come alongside. Extra pay is not yet authorized for dockyard hands, so that work will cease at nightfall. I respectfully submit that I can supervise the embarkation of the stores if you should find it inconvenient to return on board.

Your obdt servant,

Wm Bush.

"Is the boat at the Hard?" demanded Hornblower.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. I'll be there in five minutes."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Oh, Horry," said Maria, with a hint of reproach in her voice. No, it was disappointment, not reproach.

"My dear —" said Hornblower. It occurred to him that he might now quote 'I could not love thee, dear, so much' but he instantly discarded the idea; it would not be at all suitable at this moment, with this wife.

"You're going to the ship again," said Maria.

"Yes."

He could not stay away from the ship while there was work to be done. Today, by driving the hands, they could get half the stores on board at least. Tomorrow they could finish, and if Ordnance responded to the prodding of the Admiral, they could get the powder and shot on board as well. Then they could sail at dawn the day after tomorrow.

"I'll be back again this evening," he said. He forced himself to smile, to look concerned, to forget that he was on the threshold of adventure, that before him lay a career of possible distinction.

"Nothing shall keep me from you, dear," he said.

He clapped his hands on her shoulders and gave her a smacking kiss that drew applause from the others; that was the way to reintroduce a note of comedy into the proceedings, and, under cover of the laughter, he made his exit. As he hastened down to the Hard two subjects for thought intertwined in his mind, like the serpents of the medical caduceus — the tender love that Maria wished to lavish upon him, and the fact that the day after tomorrow he would be at sea, in command.

Chapter 2

Someone must have been knocking at the bedroom door for some time; Hornblower had been conscious of it but was too stupid with sleep to think more about it. But now the door opened with a clank of the latch, and Maria, awakening with a start, clutched at him in sudden fright, and he was now fully awake. There was the faintest gleam of light through the thick bed curtains, a shuffling step on the oak floor of the bedroom, and a high-pitched female voice.

"Eight bells, sir. Eight bells."

The curtains opened an inch to let in a ray of brighter light still, and Maria's grip tightened, but they came together again as Hornblower found his voice.

"Very well. I'm awake."

"I'll light your candles for you," piped the voice, and the shuffling step went round the room and the light through the curtains grew brighter.

"Where's the wind? What way's the wind?" asked Hornblower, now so far awake as to feel the quickening of his heart beat and the tensing of his muscles as he realized what this morning meant to him.

"Now that I can't tell you, sir," piped the voice. "I'm not one who can box the compass, and there's no one else awake as yet."

Hornblower snorted with annoyance at being kept in ignorance of this vital information, and without a thought reached to fling off the bedclothes so as to get up and find out for himself. But there was Maria clasping him, and he knew that he could not leap out of bed in such a cavalier fashion. He had to go through the proper ritual and put up with the delay. He turned and kissed her, and she returned his kisses, eagerly and yet differently from on other occasions. He felt something wet on his cheek; it was a tear, but there was only that one single tear as Maria forced herself to exert self control. His rather perfunctory embrace changed in character.

"Darling, we're being parted," whispered Maria. "Darling, I know you must go. But — but — I can't think how I'm going to live without you. You're my whole life. You're . . ."

A great gust of tenderness welled up in Hornblower's breast, and there was compunction too, a pricking of conscience. Not the most perfect man on earth could merit this devotion. If Maria knew the truth about him she would turn away from him, her whole world shattered. The cruellest thing he could do would be to let her find him out; he must never do that. Yet the thought of being loved so dearly set flowing deeper and deeper wells of tenderness in his breast and he kissed her cheeks and sought out the soft eager lips. Then the soft lips hardened, withdrew.

"No, angel, darling. No, I mustn't keep you. You would be angry with me — afterwards. Oh, my dear life, say goodbye to me now. Say that you love me — say that you'll always love me. Then say good-bye, and say that you'll think of me sometimes as I shall always think of you."

Hornblower said the words, the right words, and in his tenderness he used the right tone. Maria kissed him once more, and then tore herself free and flung herself on to the far side of the bed face downward.

Hornblower lay still, trying to harden his heart to rise, and Maria spoke again; her voice was half muffled by the pillow, but her forced change of mood was apparent even so.

"Your clean shirt's on the chair, dear, and your second-best shoes are beside the fireplace."

Hornblower flung himself out of bed and out through the curtains. The air of the bedroom was certainly fresher than that inside. The door latch choked again and he had just time to whip his bedgown in front of him as the old chambermaid put her head in. She let out a high cackle of mirth at Hornblower's modesty.

"The ostler says 'light airs from the s'uth'ard,' sir."

"Thank you."

The door closed behind her.

"Is that what you want, darling?" asked Maria, still behind the curtains. "Light airs from the s'uth'ard — that means south, does it not?"

"Yes, it may serve," said Hornblower, hurrying over to the wash basin and adjusting the candles so as to illuminate his face.

Light airs from the south now, at the end of March, were hardly likely to endure. They might back or they might veer, but would certainly strengthen with the coming of day. If *Hotspur* handled as well as he believed she would he could weather the Foreland and be ready for the next development, with plenty of sea room. But of course — as always in the Navy — he could not afford to waste any time. The razor was rasping over his cheeks, and as he peered into the mirror he was vaguely conscious of Maria's reflection behind his own as she moved about the room dressing herself. He poured cold water into the basin with which to wash himself, and felt refreshed, turning away with his usual rapidity of movement to put on his shirt.

"Oh, you dress so fast," said Maria in consternation.

Hornblower heard her shoes clacking on the oaken floor; she was hurriedly putting on a fresh mob cap over her hair, and clearly she was dressing as quickly as she could, even at the cost of some informality.

"I must run down to see that your breakfast is ready," she said, and was gone before he could protest.

He folded his neckcloth carefully, but with practiced fingers, and slipped on his coat, glanced at his watch, put it in his pocket and then put on his shoes. He rolled his toilet things into his housewife and tied the tapes. Yesterday's shirt and his nightshirt and bedgown he stuffed in the canvas bag that awaited them, and the

housewife on top. A glance round the room told him that he had omitted nothing, although he had to look more carefully than usual because there were articles belonging to Maria scattered here and there. Bubbling with excitement, he opened the window curtains and glanced outside; no sign of dawn as yet. Bag in hand, he went downstairs and into the coffee-room. This smelt of stale living, and was dimly lit by an oil lamp dangling from the ceiling. Maria looked in at him from the farther door.

"Here's your place, dear," she said. "Only a moment before breakfast."

She held the back of the chair for him to be seated.

"I'll sit down after you," said Hornblower; it went against the grain to have Maria waiting on him.

"Oh, no," said Maria. "I have your breakfast to attend to — only the old woman is up as yet."

She coaxed him into the chair. Hornblower felt her kiss the top of his head, felt a momentary touch of her cheek against his, but before he could seize her, reaching behind him, she was gone. She left behind her the memory of something between a sniff and a sob; the opening of the door into the kitchen admitted a smell of cooking, the sizzling of something in a pan, and a momentary burst of conversation between Maria and the old woman. Then in came Maria, her rapid steps indicating that the plate she held was too hot to be comfortable. She dropped it in front of him, a vast rump steak, still sizzling on the plate.

"There, dear," she said, and busied herself with putting the rest of the meal within his reach, while Hornblower looked down at the steak with some dismay.

"I picked that out for you specially yesterday," she announced proudly. "I walked over to butcher's while you were on the ship."

Hornblower steeled himself not to wince at hearing a naval officer's wife speak about being 'on' a ship; he also had to steel himself to having steak for breakfast, when steak was by no means his favourite dish, and when he was so excited that he felt he could eat nothing. And dimly he could foresee a future — if ever he returned, if ever, inconceivably, he settled down in domestic life — when steak would be put before him on any special occasion. That thought was the last straw; he felt he could not eat a mouthful, and yet he could not hurt Maria's feelings.

"Where's yours?" he asked, temporizing.

"Oh, I shan't be having any steak," replied Maria. The tone of her voice proved that it was quite inconceivable to her that a wife should eat equally well as her husband. Hornblower raised his voice and turned his head.

"Hey, there!" he called. "In the kitchen! Bring another plate — a hot one."

"Oh, no, darling," said Maria, all fluttered, but Hornblower was by now out of his chair and seating her at her own place.

"Now, sit there," said Hornblower. "No more words. I'll have no mutineers in my family. Ah!"

Here came the other plate. Hornblower cut the steak in two, and helped Maria to the larger half.

"But darling —"

"I said I'll have no truck with mutiny," growled Hornblower parodying his own quarter-deck rasp.

"Oh, Horry, darling. You're good to me, far too good to me." Momentarily Maria clapped hands and handkerchief to her face, and Hornblower feared she would break down finally, but then she put her hands in her lap and straightened her back, controlling her emotions in an act of the purest heroism. Hornblower felt his heart go out to her. He reached out and pressed the hand she gladly proffered him.

"Now let me see you eat a hearty breakfast," he said; he was still using his mock-bullying tone, but the tenderness he felt was still evident. Maria took up her knife and fork and Hornblower did the same. He forced himself to eat a few mouthfuls, and so mangled the rest of his steak that it did not appear as if he had left too much. He took a pull at his pot of beer — he did not like drinking beer for breakfast, not even beer as small as this, but he realized that the old woman could not be expected to have access to the tea-caddy.

A rattling at the window attracted their attention. The ostler was opening the shutters, and they could dimly see his face for a moment, but it was still quite dark outside. Hornblower looked at his watch; ten minutes to five, and he had ordered his boat to be at the Sally Port at five. Maria saw the gesture and looked over at him. There was a slight trembling of her lips, a slight moisture in her eyes, but she kept herself under control.

"I'll get my cloak," she said quietly, and fled from the room. She was back in no time, her grey cloak round her, and her face shadowed in her hood; in her arms was Hornblower's heavy coat.

"You're leaving us now, sir?" piped the old woman coming into the coffee-room.

"Yes. Madam will settle the score when she returns," said Hornblower; he fumbled out half a crown from his pocket and put it on the table.

"Thank you kindly, sir. And a good voyage, and prize money galore." The sing-song tone reminded Hornblower that she must have seen naval officers by the hundreds leaving the George to go to sea — her memories must go back to Hawke and Boscawen.

He buttoned up his coat and took up his bag.

"I'll have the ostler come with us with a lantern to escort you back," he said, consideringly.

"Oh, no please, darling. It's so short a way, and I know every step," pleaded Maria, and there was enough truth in what she said for him not to insist.

They walked out into the keen cold air, having to adjust their eyes to the darkness even after the miserable light of the coffee-room. Hornblower realized that if he had been an Admiral or even a distinguished Captain, he would never have been allowed to leave with so little ceremony; the innkeeper and his wife would certainly have risen and dressed to see him on his way. They turned the corner and started on the steep slope down to the Sally Port, and it was borne in anew on Hornblower that he was about to start out for the wars. His concern for Maria had actually distracted him from this thought, but now he found himself gulping with excitement.

"Dear," said Maria. "I have a little present for you."

She was bringing something out from the pocket of her cloak and pressing it into his hand.

"It's only gloves, dear, but my love comes with them," she went on. "I could make nothing better for you in this little time. I would have liked to have embroidered something for you — I would have liked to give you something worthy of you. But I have been stitching at these every moment since — since —"

She could not go on, but once more she straightened her back and refused to break down.

"I'll be able to think of you every moment I wear them," said Hornblower. He struggled into the gloves despite the handicap of the bag he was carrying; they were splendid thick woollen gloves, each with separate thumb and forefinger.

"They fit me to perfection. I thank you for the kind thought, dear."

Now they were at the head of the steep slope down the Hard, and this horrible ordeal would soon be over.

"You have the seventeen pounds safely?" asked Hornblower — an unnecessary question.

"Yes, thank you, dearest. I fear it is too much —"

"And you'll be able to draw my monthly half pay," went on Hornblower harshly, to keep the emotion from his voice, and then, realizing how harshly, he continued. "It is time to say good-bye now, darling."

He had forced himself to use that unaccustomed last word. The water level was far up the Hard; that meant, as he had known when he had given the orders, that the tide was at the flood. He would be able to take advantage of the ebb.

"Darling!" said Maria, turning to him and lifting up her face to him in its hood.

He kissed her; down at the water's edge there was the familiar rattle of oars on thwarts, and the sound of male voices, as his boat's crew perceived the two shadowy figures on the Hard. Maria heard those sounds as clearly as Hornblower did, and she quickly snatched away from him the cold lips she had raised to his.

"Good-bye, my angel."

There was nothing else to say now, nothing else to do; this was the end of this brief experience. He turned his back on Maria; he turned his back on peace and on civilian married life and walked down towards war.

Chapter 3

"Slack water now, sir," announced Bush. "First of the ebb in ten minutes. And anchor's hove short, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Bush." There was enough grey light in the sky now to see Bush's face as something more definite than a blur. At Bush's shoulder stood Prowse, the acting-master, senior master's mate with an acting-warrant. He was competing unobtrusively with Bush for Hornblower's attention. Prowse was charged, by Admiralty instructions, with 'navigating and conducting the ship from port to port under the direction of the

captain'. But there was no reason at all why Hornblower should not give his other officers every opportunity to exercise their skill; on the contrary. And it was possible, even likely, that Prowse, with thirty years of sea duty behind him, would endeavour to take the direction of the ship out of the hands of a young and inexperienced captain.

"Mr Bush!" said Hornblower. "Get the ship under way, if you please. Set a course to weather the Foreland."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower watched Bush keenly, while doing his best not to appear to be doing so. Bush took a final glance round him, gauging the gentle wind and the likely course of the ebb.

"Stand by there, at the capstan," he ordered. "Loose the heads'ls. Hands aloft to loose the tops'ls."

Hornblower could see in a flash that he could place implicit reliance on Bush's seamanship. He knew he should never have doubted it, but his memories were two years old and might have been blurred by the passage of time. Bush gave his orders in a well-timed sequence. With the anchor broken out *Hotspur* gathered momentary sternway. With the wheel hard over and the forecastle hands drawing at the headsail sheets she brought her head round. Bush sheeted home and ordered hands to the braces. In the sweetest possible way *Hotspur* caught the gentle wind, lying over hardly more than a degree or two. In a moment she was under way, slipping forward through the water, rudder balanced against sail-pressure, a living, lovely thing.

There was no need to drop any word of commendation to Bush regarding such a simple operation as getting under way. Hornblower could savour the pleasure of being afloat, as the hands raced to set the topgallant sails and then the courses. Then suddenly he remembered.

"Let me have that glass, please, Mr Prowse."

He put the massive telescope to his eye and trained it out over the port quarter. It was still not yet full daylight, and there was the usual hint of haze, and *Hotspur* had left her anchorage half a mile or more astern. Yet he could just see it; a solitary, lonely speck of grey, on the water's edge, over there on the Hard. Perhaps — just possibly — there was a flicker of white; Maria might be waving her handkerchief, but he could not be sure. In fact he thought not. There was just the solitary grey speck. Hornblower looked again, and then he made himself lower the telescope; it was heavy, and his hands were trembling a trifle so that the image was blurred. It was the first time in all his life that he had put to sea leaving behind him someone who was interested in his fate.

"Thank you, Mr Prowse," he said, harshly, handing back the telescope.

He knew he had to think about something different, that he must quickly find something else to occupy his thoughts; fortunately as captain of a ship just setting sail there was no lack of subjects.

"Now, Mr Prowse," he said, glancing at the wake and at the trim of the sails. "The wind's holding steady at the moment. I want a course for Ushant."

"Ushant, sir?" Prowse had a long lugubrious face like a mule's, and he stood there digesting this piece of information without any change of expression.

"You heard what I said," snapped Hornblower, in sudden irritation.

"Yes, sir," answered Prowse, hastily. "Ushant, sir. Aye aye, sir."

There was of course, some excuse for his first reaction. Nobody in the ship save Hornblower knew the content of the orders which were taking *Hotspur* to sea; nobody knew to what point in the whole world she was destined to sail. The mention of Ushant narrowed down the field to some extent at least. The North Sea and the Baltic were ruled out. So were Ireland and the Irish Sea and the St Lawrence across the Atlantic. But it still might be the West Indies or the Cape of Good Hope or the Mediterranean; Ushant was a point of departure for all those.

"Mr Bush!" said Hornblower.

"Sir!"

"You may dismiss the watch below, and send the hands to breakfast when you think proper."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Who's the officer of the watch?"

"Cargill, sir."

"He has charge of the deck, then."

Hornblower looked about him. Everything was in order, and *Hotspur* was standing out for the Channel. But there was something odd, something different, something unusual. Then it dawned upon him. For the first time in his life he was going to sea in time of peace. He had served ten years as a naval officer without this experience. Always before, whenever his ship emerged from harbour, she was in instant danger additional to the hazards of the sea. In every previous voyage any moment might bring an enemy up over the horizon; at an hour's notice ship and ship's company might be fighting for their lives. And the most dangerous time of all was when first putting to sea with a raw crew, with drill and organization incomplete — it was a likely moment to meet an enemy, as well as the most inconvenient one.

Now here they were putting to sea without any of these worries. It was an extraordinary sensation, something new — something new, like leaving Maria behind. He tried to shake that thought from him; as a buoy slithered past the starboard quarter he tried to leave the thought with it. It was a relief to see Prowse approaching again, with a piece of paper in his hand as he glanced up to the commission pendant and then out to the horizon in an attempt to forecast the weather.

"Course is sou'west by west, half west, sir," he said. "When we tack we may just be able to make that good, close-hauled."

"Thank you, Mr Prowse. You may mark it on the board."

"Aye aye, sir," Prowse was pleased at this mark of confidence. He naturally had no idea that Hornblower, revolving in his mind, yesterday afternoon, all the responsibilities he would be carrying on the morrow, had made the same calculation to reach the same result. The green hills of the Isle of Wight were momentarily touched by a watery and level sun.

"There's the buoy, sir," said Prowse.

"Thank you. Mr Cargill! Tack the ship, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower withdrew aft. He wanted not merely to observe how Cargill handled the ship, but also how *Hotspur* behaved. When war should come it was not a mere possibility, but a definite probability, that success or failure, freedom or captivity, might hinge on how *Hotspur* went about, how handy she was in stays.

Cargill was a man of thirty, red-faced and corpulent in advance of his years; he was obviously trying hard to forget that he was under the simultaneous scrutiny of the captain, the first lieutenant, and the sailing master, as he applied himself to the manoeuvre. He stood beside the wheel looking warily up at the sails and aft at the wake. Hornblower watched Cargill's right hand, down by his thigh, opening and shutting. That might be a symptom of nervousness or a mere habitual gesture of calculation. The watch on deck were all at their stations. So far the men were all unknown faces to Hornblower; it would be profitable to devote some of his attention to the study of their reactions as well.

Cargill obviously braced himself for action and then gave his preliminary order to the wheel.

"Helm's alee!" he bellowed, but not a very effective bellow, for his voice cracked half-way.

"Headsail sheets!" That was hardly better. It would not have served in a gale of wind, although it carried forward in present conditions. Jib and fore-topsail began to shiver.

"Raise up tacks and sheets!"

Hotspur was coming round into the wind, rising to an even keel. She was coming round, coming round — now was she going to hang in stays?

"Haul, mains'!! Haul!"

This was the crucial moment. The hands knew their business; the port-side bowlines and braces were cast off smartly, and the hands tailed on to the starboard-side ones. Round came the yards, but the *Hotspur* refused to answer. She baulked. She hung right in the eye of the wind, and then fell off again two points to port, with every sail ashiver and every yard of way lost. She was in irons, helpless until further action should be taken.

"A fine thing if we were on a lee shore, sir," growled Bush.

"Wait," said Hornblower. Cargill was glancing round at him for orders, and that was disappointing. Hornblower would have preferred an officer who went stolidly on to retrieve the situation. "Carry on, Mr Cargill."

The hands were behaving well. There was no chatter, and they were standing by for further orders. Cargill was drumming on his right thigh with his fingers, but for his own sake he must find his way out of his troubles unaided. Hornblower saw the fingers clench, saw Cargill glance ahead and astern as he pulled himself

together. *Hotspur* was slowly gathering stern-way as the wind pushed directly back on the sails. Cargill took the plunge, made the effort. A sharp order put the wheel hard-a-port, another order brought the yards ponderously round again. *Hotspur* hung reluctant for a moment, and then sulkily turned back on the starboard tack and gathered way as Cargill in the nick of time sent the wheel spinning back and took a pull on the braces. There was no lack of sea room, there was no dangerous lee shore to demand instant action, and Cargill could wait until every sail was drawing fully again, and *Hotspur* had plenty of way on her to enable the rudder to bite. Cargill even had the sense to allow her head to fall off another point so as to give plenty of momentum for his next attempt, although Hornblower noticed with a slight pang of regret that he hurried it a trifle more than he should have done. He should have waited perhaps two more minutes.

"Headsail sheets!" ordered Cargill again; his fingers started drumming on his thigh once more with the strain of waiting.

But Cargill's head was clear enough to give his orders in the correct sequence. Round came *Hotspur* into the wind again. Sheets and braces were handled smartly. There was a paralysing moment as she baulked again, hung as though she was determined once more to miss stays, but this time she had a trifle more momentum, and in the last possible second a fortunate combination of wind and wave pushed her bows round through the vital final degrees of swing. Round she came, at last.

"Full and bye!" said Cargill to the helmsman, the relief very evident in his voice. "Fore tack, there! Sheets! Braces!"

With the operation completed he turned to face the criticism of his superiors; there was sweat trickling down his forehead. Hornblower could feel Bush beside him ready to rate him thoroughly; Bush believed sincerely that everyone was the better for a severe dressing-down in any circumstance, and he was usually right. But Hornblower had been watching *Hotspur's* behaviour closely.

"Carry on, Mr Cargill," he said, and Cargill, relieved turned away again, and Bush met Hornblower's glance with some slight surprise.

"The ship's trimmed too much by the head," said Hornblower. "That makes her unhandy in stays."

"It might do so," agreed Bush, doubtfully.

If the bow gripped the water more firmly than the stern *Hotspur* would act like a weather-vane, persisting in keeping her bow to the wind.

"We'll have to try it," said Hornblower. "She'll never do as she is. We'll have to trim her so that she draws six inches more aft. At least that. Now, what is there we can shift aft?"

"Well —" began Bush.

In his mind's eye he called up a picture of the interior of the *Hotspur*, with every cubic foot crammed with stores. It had been a Herculean feat to prepare her for sea; to find room for everything necessary had called for the utmost ingenuity. It seemed as if no other arrangement could be possible. Yet maybe —

"Perhaps —" went on Bush, and they were instantly deep in a highly technical discussion.

Prowse came up and touched his hat, to report that *Hotspur* was just able to make good the course for Ushant. Bush could hardly help but prick up his ears at the mention of the name; Prowse could hardly help but be drawn into the discussion regarding the alteration in the trim of the ship. They had to move aside to make room for the hourly casting of the log; the breeze flapped their coats round them. Here they were at sea; the nightmare days and nights of fitting out were over, and so were the — what was the right word? Delirious, perhaps — the delirious days of marriage. This was normal life. Creative life, making a living organism out of *Hotspur*, working out improvements in material and in personnel.

Bush and Prowse were still discussing possible alteration in the ship's trim as Hornblower came back into his present world.

"There's a vacant port right aft on each side," said Hornblower; a simple solution had presented itself to his mind, as so often happened when his thoughts had strayed to other subjects. "We can bring two of the forward guns aft."

Prowse and Bush paused while they considered the matter; Hornblower's rapid mind was already dealing with the mathematics of it. The ship's nine-pounders weighed twenty-six hundred-weight each. Along with the gun carriages and the ready use shot which would have to be brought aft too there would be a total transfer of four tons. Hornblower's eye measured the distances, forward and aft of the centre of flotation, from forty feet

before to thirty feet abaft. No, the leverage would be a little excessive, even though *Hotspur's* dead weight was over four hundred tons.

"Maybe she'd gripe a little, sir," suggested Prowse, reaching the same conclusions two minutes later.

"Yes. We'll take the No. 3 guns. That should be exactly right."

"And leave a gap, sir?" asked Bush in faint protest.

It certainly would, as conspicuous as a missing front tooth. It would break into the two ordered rows of cannon, conveying a make-shift appearance to the ship.

"I'd rather have an ugly ship afloat," said Hornblower, "than a good-looking one on the rocks of a lee shore."

"Yes, sir," said Bush, swallowing this near-heresy.

"As the stores are consumed we can put things to rights again," added Hornblower soothingly. "Perhaps you'll be good enough to attend to it now?"

"Aye aye, sir." Bush turned his mind to the practical aspects of the problem of shifting cannon in a moving ship. "I'll hoist 'em out of the carriages with the stay tackle and lower them on to a mat —"

"Quite right. I'm sure you can deal with it, Mr Bush."

No one in his senses would try to move a gun in its carriage along a heeling deck — it would go surging about out of control in a moment. But out of its carriage, lying helpless on a mat, with its trunnions prohibiting any roll, it could be dragged about comparatively easily, and hoisted up into its carriage again after that had been moved into its new position. Bush had already passed the word for Mr Wise, the boatswain, to have the stay-tackles rigged.

"The quarter-bill will have to be changed," said Hornblower incautiously as the thought struck him — the guns' crews would need to be re-allotted.

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush. His sense of discipline was too acute to allow more than a hint of reproach to be apparent in his tone. As first lieutenant it was his business to remember these things without being reminded by his captain. Hornblower made amends as best he could.

"I'll leave it all in your charge, then, Mr Bush. Report to me when the guns are moved."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower crossed the quarter-deck to go to his cabin, passing Cargill as he went; Cargill was keeping an eye on the hands rigging the stay-tackles.

"The ship will be more handy in stays when those guns are shifted, Mr Cargill," said Hornblower. "Then you'll have another opportunity to show how you can handle her."

"Thank you, sir," replied Cargill. He had clearly been brooding over his recent failure.

Hornblower walked along to his cabin; the moving cogs in the complex machine that was a ship always needed lubrication, and it was a captain's duty to see that it was provided. The sentry at his door came to attention as he passed in. He glanced round at the bare necessities there. His cot swung from the deck-beams; there was a single chair, a mirror on the bulkhead with a canvas basin on a frame below it. On the opposite bulkhead was clamped his desk, with his sea chest beneath it. A strip of canvas hanging from the deck-beams served as a wardrobe to screen the clothes hanging within. That was all; there was no room for anything else, but the fact that the cabin was so tiny was an advantage in one way. There were no guns mounted in it — it was right aft — and there would be no necessity when the ship cleared for action, to sweep all this away.

And this was luxury, this was affluence, this was the most superlative good fortune. Nine days ago — no, ten days, now — he had been a half-pay lieutenant, under stoppage of pay because the Peace of Amiens had resulted in his promotion not being confirmed. He had been doubtful where his next meal would be coming from. A single night had changed all this. He had won forty-five pounds at a sitting of whist from a group of senior officers, one of them a Lord of Admiralty. The King had sent a message to Parliament announcing the government's decision to set the Navy on a war footing again. And he had been appointed Commander and given the *Hotspur* to prepare for sea. He could be sure now of his next meal, even though it would be salt beef and biscuit. And — not so much as a coincidence, but rather as a sequel to all this — he had found himself betrothed to Maria and committed to an early marriage.

The fabric of the ship transmitted the sound of one of the nine-pounders being dragged aft; Bush was a fast worker. Bush had been a half-pay lieutenant too, ten days ago, and senior to Hornblower. It was with diffidence that Hornblower had asked him if he would care to serve as first lieutenant — as the only lieutenant

allowed on the establishment of a sloop of war — of the *Hotspur*, under Hornblower's command. It had been astonishing, and extremely flattering, to see the delight in Bush's face at the invitation.

"I'd been hoping you'd ask me, sir," said Bush. "I couldn't really think you'd want me as a first lieutenant."

"Nobody I'd like better," Hornblower had replied.

At this moment he nearly lost his footing as *Hotspur* heaved up her bows, rolled, and then cocked up her stern in the typical motion of a ship close-hauled. She was out now from the lee of the Wight, meeting the full force of the Channel rollers. Fool that he was! He had almost forgotten about this; on the one or two occasions during the past ten days when the thought of seasickness had occurred to him he had blithely assumed that he had grown out of that weakness in eighteen months on land. He had not thought about it all this morning, being too busy. Now with his first moment of idleness here it came. He had lost his sea-legs — a new roll sent him reeling — and he was going to be sick. He could feel a cold sweat on his skin and the first wave of nausea rising to his throat. There was time for a bitter jest — he had just been congratulating himself on knowing where his next meal was coming from, but now he could be more certain still about where his last meal was going to. Then the sickness struck, horribly.

Now he lay face downward across his cot. He heard the rumble of wheels, and cleared his thoughts sufficiently to make the deduction that, with the guns brought aft, Bush was bringing the gun-carriages aft as well. But he hardly cared. His stomach heaved again and he cared even less. He could think about nothing but his own misery. Now what was that? Someone pounding vigorously on the door, and he realized that the pounding had grown up from an earlier gentle tapping that he had ignored.

"What is it?" he called, croaking.

"Message from the master, sir," said an unknown voice. "From Mr Prowse."

He had to hear what it was. He dragged himself from his cot, and staggered over and dumped himself into his chair, hunching his shoulders over his desk so that his face could not be seen.

"Come in!" he called.

The opening of the door admitted considerably more of the noise that had been more and more insistently making itself heard.

"What is it?" repeated Hornblower, hoping that his attitude indicated deep concentration upon the paper-work of the ship.

"Message from Mr Prowse, sir," said a voice that Hornblower could hardly place. "Wind's freshening an' hauling forward. Course will have to be altered, sir."

"Very well. I'll come."

"Aye aye, sir."

He certainly would have to come. He stood up, holding on to the desk with one hand while he adjusted his clothes with the other. He braced himself, and then he plunged out on to the quarter-deck. He had forgotten all these things; he had forgotten how fresh the wind blew at sea, how the rigging shrieked in a gust, how the deck heaved under unwary feet. As the stern rose he was hurried forward, struggling vainly to retain his dignity, and just managed to fetch up without disaster against the hammock netting. Prowse came up at once. "Course is sou'west by south, now, sir," he said. "I had to let her fall off a couple of points. Wind's still backing westerly."

"So I see," said Hornblower. He looked at sky and sea, making himself think. "How's the glass?"

"Hardly fallen at all, sir. But it's going to blow harder before nightfall, sir."

"Perhaps you're right."

Bush appeared at this moment, touching the hat that was now pulled down hard on to his head.

"The guns are shifted aft, sir. The lashings are bowsed up taut."

"Thank you."

Hornblower kept his hands on the hammock netting, and his gaze steadily forward, so that, by not turning either to Bush on one side or to Prowse on the other, the whiteness of his landlubber's face might not be noticed. He struggled to picture the chart of the Channel that he had studied so carefully yesterday. There was the twenty-league gap between the Casquets and the Start; an incorrect decision now might keep them wind-bound for days inside it.

"We might just weather the Start on this course, sir," prompted Prowse.

Unexpected nausea suddenly welled up in Hornblower, and he moved restlessly as he fought with it. He did not want Prowse to prompt him, and as he swung about he caught sight of Cargill standing by the wheel. It was still Cargill's watch — that was one more factor to bring Hornblower to a decision, along with Bush's report and Prowse's prompting.

"No," he said. "We'll put the ship about."

"Aye aye, sir," said Prowse, in reluctant agreement.

Hornblower looked towards Cargill, summoning him with a glance; he did not wish to leave the comforting support of the hammock netting.

"Mr Cargill," said Hornblower. "Let's see you tack the ship again, now that we've altered her trim."

"Aye aye, sir," answered Cargill. That was the only thing the poor devil could say in any case, in reply to a direct order. But he was clearly nervous. He went back to the wheel and took the speaking trumpet from its becket — the freshening wind made that necessary.

"Hands 'bout ship!" he called, and the order was instantly underlined by the calls of the bos'n's mates and the bellowings of Mr Wise. The hands ran to their stations. Cargill stared round at wind and sea; Hornblower saw him swallow as he nerved himself. Then he gave the order to the wheel; this time it was the fingers of his left hand that drummed upon his thigh, for his right was occupied by the speaking-trumpet. *Hotspur* rose to an even keel while sheets and braces were being handled. She was turning — she was turning.

"Let go and haul!" yelled Cargill into the speaking-trumpet. Hornblower felt he would have waited three or four more seconds before giving that order, but he knew that he might be wrong; not only was sea-sickness dulling his judgement but, standing as he did, looking aft, he did not have the 'feel' of the ship. Events proved that Cargill did, or else was lucky, for *Hotspur* came on round without hesitation.

"Hard-a-lee!" snapped Cargill to the helmsman, and the wheel spun round in a blur of spokes, catching *Hotspur* at the moment when she was beginning to fall off. A straining group of men hauled out the fore-tack; others tailed on to the bowlines. *Hotspur* was on the new tack, having handled as sweetly, apparently, as anyone could ask.

Hornblower walked up to the wheel.

"Does she gripe?" he asked the quartermaster.

The quartermaster eased off the wheel a couple of spokes, squinting up at the leech of the main-topsail, and then brought her up to the wind again.

"Can't say that she does, sir," he decided. "Mebbe she does, a trifle. No, sir, I can't say that she gripes. Just a touch of weather helm's all she needs now, sir."

"That's as it should be," said Hornblower. Bush and Prowse had not spoken a word, and there was no need even for a glance to underline the situation, but a word to Cargill would not be out of place. "You can go off watch feeling better pleased with yourself now, Mr Cargill."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," said Cargill.

Cargill's round red face split into a grin. *Hotspur* rose to a wave, lay over, and Hornblower, taken by surprise, staggered down the deck on to Cargill's broad chest. Luckily Cargill was a heavyweight and fast of footing; he took the shock without staggering — otherwise he and his captain might have gone reeling across the deck into the scuppers. Hornblower felt a burst of shame. He had no more sea-legs than the merest landlubber; his envy of Cargill and Bush and Prowse, standing firm and swaying easily with the send of the ship, amounted to positive dislike. And his stomach was about to betray him again. His dignity was in peril, and he summoned up all that was left of it, turning to Bush stiff-legged and stiff-necked.

"See that I am called when any alteration of course is necessary, if you please, Mr Bush," he said.

"Aye aye, sir."

The deck was heaving, but he knew it was not heaving as much as his distorted mind told him it was. He forced himself somehow to walk aft to his cabin; twice he had to stop and brace himself, and when *Hotspur* rose to a wave he was nearly made to run — certainly he had to walk faster than a captain should — past the sentry, and he fetched up against the door with some little violence. It was no comfort — in fact it added to his distress — to see that the sentry had a bucket on the deck beside him. He wrenched open the door, hung suspended for a moment as *Hotspur* completed her pitch, with her stern in the air, and then crashed down groaning on to his cot, his feet dragging on the deck as the cot swung.

Chapter 4

Hornblower sat at his desk in his cabin holding a package in his hand. Five minutes earlier he had unlocked his chest and taken this out; in five minutes more he would be entitled to open it — at least, that was what his dead reckoning indicated. It was a remarkably heavy package; it might be weighted with shot or scrap metal, except that Admiral Cornwallis was hardly likely to send shot or scrap metal to one of his captains. It was heavily sealed, in four places, and the seals were unbroken. Inked upon the canvas wrapper was the superscription:

'Instructions for Horatio Hornblower, Esq., Master and Commander, H.M. Sloop *Hotspur*. To be opened on passing the Sixth Degree of Longitude West of Greenwich.'

Sealed orders. Hornblower had heard about such things all his professional life, but this was his first contact with them. They had been sent on board the *Hotspur* on the afternoon of his wedding day, and he had signed for them. Now the ship was about to cross the sixth meridian; she had come down-Channel with remarkable ease; there had been only one single watch when she had not been able to make good her direct course. Putting her about in order to restore Cargill's selfconfidence had been extraordinarily fortunate. The wind had hardly backed westerly at all, and only momentarily even then. *Hotspur* had escaped being embayed in Lyme Bay; she had neatly weathered the Casquets, and it all stemmed from that fortunate order. Hornblower was aware that Prowse was feeling a new respect for him as a navigator and a weather prophet. That was all to the good, and Hornblower had no intention of allowing Prowse to guess that the excellent passage was the result of a fortunate fluke, of a coincidence of circumstances.

Hornblower looked at his watch and raised his voice in a shout to the sentry at the door.

"Pass the word for Mr Bush."

Hornblower could hear the sentry shouting, and the word being passed on along the quarter-deck. *Hotspur* rose in a long, long, pitch with hardly any roll about it. She was meeting the long Atlantic swell now, changing her motion considerably, and all for the better, in Hornblower's opinion — and his seasickness was rapidly coming under control. Bush was taking a long time to respond to the call — he obviously was not on the quarter-deck, and the chances were he was taking a nap or was engaged in some other private business. Well, it would do him no harm and cause him no surprise to be summoned from it, for that was the way of the Navy. At last came the knock on the door, and Bush entered.

"Sir?"

"Ah, Mr Bush," said Hornblower pedantically. Bush was the closest friend he had, but this was a formal matter, to be carried through formally. "Can you tell me the ship's position at this moment?"

"No, sir, not exactly, sir," replied the puzzled Bush. "Ushant bears ten leagues to the east'ard, I believe, sir."

"At this moment," said Hornblower, "we are in longitude six degrees and some seconds west. Latitude 48° 40', but we do not have to devote any thought to our latitude at present, oddly enough. It is our longitude that matters. Would you be so kind as to examine this packet?"

"Ah. I see, sir," said Bush, having read the superscription.

"You observe that the seals are unbroken?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then perhaps you will have the further kindness, when you leave this cabin, to make sure of the ship's longitude so that, should it become necessary, you can bear witness that I have carried out my orders?"

"Yes, sir, I will," said Bush, and then, after a pause long enough for him to realize that Hornblower intended the interview to be at an end, "Aye aye, sir."

The temptation to tease Bush was a very strong one, Hornblower realized as Bush left the cabin. It was a temptation he must resist. It might be indulged to the extent of causing resentment; in any case, Bush was too easy a target — he was a sitting bird.

And thinking along those lines had actually delayed for several seconds the exciting moment of opening the orders. Hornblower took out his penknife and cut the stitching. Now the weight of the packet was explained.

There were three rolls of coins — golden coins. Hornblower split them out on to his desk. There were fifty small ones, about the size of sixpences; twenty larger ones, and ten larger still. Examination revealed that the medium-sized ones were French twenty-franc pieces, exactly like one he had seen in Lord Parry's possession a week or two ago, with 'Napoleon First Consul' on one side and 'French Republic' on the other. The small ones were ten franc pieces, the larger ones forty francs. Altogether it made a considerable sum, over fifty pounds without allowing for the premium on gold in an England plagued by a depreciating paper currency.

And here were his supplementary instructions, explaining how he should employ the money. 'You are therefore required —' said the instructions after the preliminary sentences. Hornblower had to make contact with the fishermen of Brest; he had to ascertain if any of them would accept bribes; he had to glean from them all possible information regarding the French fleet in that port; finally he was informed that in case of war information of any kind, even newspapers, would be acceptable.

Hornblower read his instructions through twice; he referred again to the unsealed orders he had received at the same time; the ones that had sent him to sea. There was need for thought, and automatically he rose to his feet, only to sit down again, for there was no chance whatever of walking about in that cabin. He must postpone his walk for a moment. Maria had stitched neat linen bags in which to put his hair brushes — quite useless, of course, seeing that he always rolled his brushes in his housewife. He reached for one, and swept the money into it, put the bag and the orders back into his chest and was about to lock it when a further thought struck him, and he counted out ten ten-franc pieces and put them into his trouser pocket. Now, with his chest locked, he was free to go on deck.

Prowse and Bush were pacing the weather side of the quarter-deck in deep conversation; no doubt the news that their captain had opened his sealed orders would spread rapidly through the ship — and no one on board save Hornblower could be really sure that *Hotspur* was not about to set course for the Cape and India. It was a temptation to keep them all on tenterhooks, but Hornblower put the temptation aside. Besides, it would be to no purpose — after a day or two of hanging about outside Brest everyone would be able to guess *Hotspur's* mission. Prowse and Bush were hurriedly moving over to the lee side, leaving the weather side for their captain, but Hornblower halted them.

"Mr Bush! Mr Prowse! We are going to look into Brest and see what our friend Boney is up to."

Those few words told the whole story to men who had served in the last war and who had beaten about in the stormy waters off the Brittany coast.

"Yes, sir," said Bush, simply.

Together they looked into the binnacle, out to the horizon, up to the commission pendant. Simple enough to set a course; Bush and Prowse could do that easily, but it was not so simple to deal with problems of international relations, problems of neutrality, problems of espionage.

"Let's look at the chart, Mr Prowse. You can see that we'll have to keep well clear of Les Fillettes."

The Islands of the Little Girls, in the middle of the fairway into Brest; it was a queer name for rocks that would be sites for batteries of guns.

"Very well, Mr Prowse. You can square away and set course."

There were light airs from the northwestward today, and it was the easiest matter in the world to stand down towards Brest; *Hotspur* was hardly rolling at all and was pitching only moderately. Hornblower was fast recovering his sea-legs and could trust himself to walk the deck, and could almost trust his stomach to retain its contents. There was a certain feeling of well-being that came with a remission from sea-sickness. The April air was keen and fresh, but not paralytically cold; Hornblower's gloves and heavy coat were barely necessary. In fact Hornblower found it hard to concentrate on his problems; he was willing to postpone their consideration, and he halted his step and looked across at Bush with a smile that brought the latter over with hurried steps.

"I suppose you have plans for exercising the crew, Mr Bush?"

"Yes, sir." Bush did not say, "Of course, sir," for he was too good a subordinate. But his eyes lit up, for there was nothing Bush enjoyed more than reefing topsails and unreeling them, sending down topgallant yards and sending them up again, rousting out cables and carrying them to a stern port in readiness to be used as a spring, and in fact rehearsing all the dozens — hundreds — of manoeuvres that weather or war might make necessary.

"Two hours of that will do for today, Mr Bush. I can only remember one short exercise at the guns?"

Tortured by sea-sickness while running down the Channel he could not be sure.

"Only one, sir."

"Then after dinner we'll have an hour at the guns. One of these days we might use them."

"We might, sir," said Bush.

Bush could face with equanimity the prospects of a war that would engulf the whole world.

The pipes of the bos'n's mates called all hands, and very soon the exercises were well under way, the sweating sailors racing up and down the rigging tailing on to ropes under the urgings of the petty officers and amid a perfect cloud of profanity from Mr Wise. It was as well to drill the men, simply to keep them exercised, but there were no serious deficiencies to make up. *Hotspur* had benefited by being the very first ship to be manned after the press had been put into force. Of her hundred and fifty hands no fewer than a hundred were prime seamen, rated A.B. She had twenty ordinary seamen and only ten landsmen all told, and no more than twenty boys. It was an extraordinary proportion, one that would never be seen again as the manning of the fleet continued. Not only that but more than half the men had seen service in men o' war before the Peace of Amiens. They were not only seamen, but Royal Navy seamen, who had hardly had time to make more than a single voyage in the merchant navy during the peace before being pressed again. Consequently most of them had had experience with ship's guns; twenty or thirty of them had actually seen action. The result was that when the gun exercise was ordered they went to their stations in business-like fashion. Bush turned to Hornblower and touched his hat awaiting the next order.

"Thank you, Mr Bush. Order 'silence', if you please."

The whistles pealed round the deck, and the ship fell deathly still.

"I shall now inspect, if you will be so kind as to accompany me, Mr Bush."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower began by glowering down at the starboard-side quarter-deck carronade. Everything was in order there, and he walked down into the waist to inspect the starboard-side nine-pounders. At each he stopped to look over the equipment. Cartridge, crowbar, hand-spike. Sponge, quoin. He passed on from gun to gun.

"What's your station if the larboard guns are being worked?"

He had picked for questioning the youngest seaman visible, who moved uneasily from one foot to another finding himself addressed by the captain.

"Stand to attention, there!" bellowed Bush.

"What's your station?" repeated Hornblower, quietly.

"O — over there, sir. I handle the rammer, sir."

"I'm glad you know. If you can remember your station when the captain and the first lieutenant are speaking to you I can trust you to remember it when round-shot are coming in through the side."

Hornblower passed on; a captain could always be sure of raising a laugh if he made a joke. Then he halted again.

"What's this? Mr Cheeseman!"

"Sir."

"You have an extra powder-horn here. There should be only one for every two guns."

"Er — yessir. It's because —"

"I know the reason. A reason's no excuse, though, Mr Cheeseman. Mr Orrock! What powder-horns have you in your section? Yes, I see."

Shifting No. 3 gun aft had deprived Orrock's section of a powder-horn and given an additional one to Cheeseman's.

"It's the business of you young gentlemen to see that the guns in your section are properly equipped. You don't have to wait for orders."

Cheeseman and Orrock were two of the four 'young gentlemen' sent on board from the Naval College to be trained as midshipmen. Hornblower liked nothing he had seen as yet of any of them. But they were what he had to use as petty officers, and for his own sake he must train them into becoming useful lieutenants — his needs corresponded with his duty. He must make them and not break them.

"I'm sure I won't have to speak to you young gentlemen again," he said. He was sure he would, but a promise was better than a threat. He walked on, completing the inspection of the guns on the starboard-side. He went up to the forecastle to look at the two carronades there, and then back down the main-deck guns of the port side. He stopped at the marine stationed at the fore-hatchway.

"What are your orders?"

The marine stood stiffly at attention, feet at an angle of forty-five degrees, musket close in at his side, forefinger of the left hand along the seam of his trousers, neck rigid in its stock, so that, as Hornblower was not directly in front of him, he stared over Hornblower's shoulder.

"To guard my post —" he began, and continued in a monotonous sing-song, repeating by rote the sentry's formula which he had probably uttered a thousand times before. The change in his tone was marked when he reached the final sentence added for this particular station — "To allow no one to go below unless he is carrying an empty cartridge bucket."

That was so that cowards could not take refuge below the water-line.

"What about men carrying wounded?"

The astonished marine found it hard to answer; he found it hard to think after years of drill.

"I have no orders about them, sir," he said at last, actually allowing his eyes, though not his neck, to move. Hornblower glanced at Bush.

"I'll speak to the sergeant of marines, sir," said Bush.

"Who's on the quarter-bill to attend to the wounded?"

"Cooper and his mate, sir. Sailmaker and his mate. Four altogether, sir."

Trust Bush to have all those details at his fingers' ends, even though Hornblower had found two small points to find fault with, for which Bush was ultimately responsible. No need to stress those matters with Bush — he was burning with silent shame.

Down the hatchway to the magazine. A candle glimmered faintly through the glass window of the light-room, throwing just enough light for powder boys to see what they were doing as they received loaded cartridges through the double serge curtains opening into the magazine; inside the magazine the gunner and his mate, wearing list slippers, were ready to pass out, and, if necessary, fill cartridges. Down the after hatchway to where the surgeon and his lob-lolly boy were ready to deal with the wounded. Hornblower knew that he himself might at some time be dragged in here with blood streaming from some shattered limb — it was a relief to ascend to the main-deck again.

"Mr Foreman," — Foreman was another of the 'young gentlemen' — "what are your orders regarding lanterns during a night action?"

"I am to wait until Mr Bush expressly orders them, sir."

"And who do you send if you receive those orders?"

"Firth, sir."

Foreman indicated a likely-looking young seaman at his elbow. But was there perhaps the slightest moment of hesitation about that reply? Hornblower turned on Firth.

"Where do you go?"

Firth's eyes flickered towards Foreman for a moment. That might be with embarrassment; but Foreman swayed a little on his feet, as if he were pointing with his shoulder, and one hand made a small sweeping gesture in front of his middle, as if he might be indicating Mr Wise's abdominal rotundity.

"For'ard, sir," said Firth. "The bos'n issues them. At the break of the fo'c'sle."

"Very well," said Hornblower.

He had no doubt that Foreman had quite forgotten to pass on Bush's orders regarding battle lanterns. But Foreman had been quick-witted enough to remedy the situation, and Firth had not merely been quick-witted but also loyal enough to back up his petty officer. It would be well to keep an eye on both those two, for various reasons. The break of the forecastle had been an inspired guess, as being adjacent to the bos'n's locker.

Hornblower walked up on to the quarterdeck again, Bush following him, and he cast a considering eye about him, taking in the last uninspected gun — the port-side quarter-deck carronade. He selected a position where the largest possible number of ears could catch his words.

"Mr Bush," he said, "we have a fine ship. If we work hard we'll have a fine crew too. If Boney needs a lesson we'll give it to him. You may continue with the exercises."

"Aye aye, sir."

The six marines on the quarter-deck, the helmsman, the carronades' crews, Mr Prowse and the rest of the afterguard had all heard him. He had felt it was not the time for a formal speech, but he could be sure his words would be relayed round the ship during the next dog watch. And he had chosen them carefully. That 'we' was meant as a rallying call. Meanwhile Bush was continuing with the exercise. "Cast loose your guns. Level your guns. Take out your tompions," and all the rest of it.

"We'll have them in shape soon enough, sir," said Bush. "Then we'll only have to get alongside the enemy."

"Not necessarily alongside, Mr Bush. When we come to burn powder at the next exercise I want the men schooled in firing at long range."

"Yes, sir. Of course," agreed Bush.

But that was lip-service only on Bush's part. He had not really thought about the handling of *Hotspur* in battle — close action, where the guns could not miss, and only needed to be loaded and fired as rapidly as possible, was Bush's ideal. Very well for a ship of the line in a fleet action, but perhaps not so suitable for *Hotspur*. She was only a sloop of war, her timbers and her scantlings more fragile even than those of a frigate. Her twenty nine-pounders that gave her 'rate' — the four carronades not being counted — were 'long guns', better adapted for work at a couple of cables' lengths than for close action when the enemy's guns stood no more chance of missing than hers did. She was the smallest thing with three masts and quarter-deck and forecastle in the Navy List. The odds were heavy that any enemy she might meet would be her superior in size, in weight of metal, in number of men — probably immeasurably her superior. Dash and courage might snatch a victory for her, but skill and forethought and good handling might be more certain. Hornblower felt the tremor of action course through him, accentuated by the vibrating rumble of the guns being run out.

"Land ho! Land ho!" yelled the look-out of the fore-topmast head. "Land one point on the lee bow!"

That would be France, Ushant, the scene of their future exploits, perhaps where they would meet with disaster or death. Naturally there was a wave of excitement through the ship. Heads were raised and faces turned.

"Sponge your guns!" bellowed Bush through his speaking-trumpet. Bush could be relied on to maintain discipline and good order through any distraction. "Load!"

It was hard for the men to go through the play-acting of gun drill in these circumstances; discipline on the one side, resentment, disillusionment on the other.

"Point your guns! Mr Cheeseman! The hand-spike man on No. 7 gun isn't attending to his duty. I want his name."

Prowse was training a telescope forward; as the officer responsible for navigation that was his duty, but it was also his privilege.

"Run your guns in!"

Hornblower itched to follow Prowse's example, but he restrained himself; Prowse would keep him informed of anything vital. He allowed the drill to go on through one more mock broadside before he spoke.

"Mr Bush, you may secure the guns now, thank you."

"Aye aye, sir."

Prowse was offering his telescope.

"That's the light-tower on Ushant, sir," he said.

Hornblower caught a wavering glimpse of the thing, a gaunt framework topped by a cresset, where the French government in time of peace maintained a light for the benefit of the ships — half the world's trade made a landfall off Ushant — that needed it.

"Thank you, Mr Prowse." Hornblower visualized the chart again; recalled the plans he had made in the intervals of commissioning his ship, in the intervals of his honeymoon, in the intervals of sea-sickness, during the past crowded days. "Wind's drawing westerly. But it'll be dark before we can make Cape Matthew. We'll stand to the s'uth'ard under easy sail until midnight. I want to be a league off the Black Stones an hour before dawn."

"Aye aye, sir."

Bush joined them, fresh from the business of securing the guns.

"Look at that, sir! There's a fortune passing us by."

A large ship was hull-up to windward, her canvas reflecting the weltering sun.

"French Indiaman," commented Hornblower, turning his glass on her.

"A quarter of a million pounds, all told!" raved Bush. "Maybe a hundred thousand for you, sir, if only war were declared. Doesn't that tease you, sir? She'll carry this wind all the way to Havre and she'll be safe."

"There'll be others," replied Hornblower soothingly.

"Not so many, sir. Trust Boney. He'll send warnings out the moment he's resolved on war, and every French flag'll take refuge in neutral ports. Madeira and the Azores, Cadiz and Ferrol, while we could make our fortunes!"

The possibilities of prize money bulked large in the thoughts of every naval officer.

"Maybe we will," said Hornblower. He thought of Maria and his allotment of pay; even a few hundreds of pounds would make a huge difference.

"Maybe, sir," said Bush, clearly discounting the possibility.

"And there's another side to the picture," added Hornblower, pointing round the horizon.

There were half a dozen other sails all visible at this time, all British. They marked the enormous extent of British maritime commerce. They bore the wealth that could support navies, sustain allies, maintain manufactories of arms — to say nothing of the fact that they provided the basic training for seamen who later would man the ships of war which kept the seas open for them and closed them to England's enemies.

"They're only British, sir," said Prowse, wonderingly. He had not the vision to see what Hornblower saw. Bush had to look hard at his captain before it dawned upon him.

The heaving of the log, with the changing of the watch, relieved Hornblower of the temptation to preach a sermon.

"What's the speed, Mr Young?"

"Three knots and a half, sir."

"Thank you." Hornblower turned back to Prowse. "Keep her on her present course."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower was training his telescope out over the port bow. There was a black dot rising and falling out there towards Molene Island. He kept it under observation.

"I think, Mr Prowse," he said, his glass still at his eye, "we might edge in a little more inshore. Say two points. I'd like to pass that fishing-boat close."

"Aye aye, sir."

She was one of the small craft employed in the pilchard fishery, very similar to those seen off the Cornish coast. She was engaged at the moment in hauling in her seine; as *Hotspur* approached more closely the telescope made plain the rhythmical movements of the four men.

"Up with the helm a little more, Mr Prowse, if you please. I'd like to pass her closer still."

Now Hornblower could make out a little area of water beside the fishing-boat that was of a totally different colour. It had a metallic sheen quite unlike the rest of the grey sea; the fishing-boat had found a shoal of pilchards and her seine was now closing in on it.

"Mr Bush. Please try to read her name."

They were fast closing on her; within a few moments Bush could make out the bold white letters on her stern.

"From Brest, sir. *Duke's Freers*."

With that prompting Hornblower could read the name for himself, the *Deux Frères*, Brest.

"Back the maintops'l, Mr Young!" bellowed Hornblower to the officer of the watch, and then, turning back to Bush and Prowse, "I want fish for my supper tonight."

They looked at him in ill-concealed surprise.

"Pilchards, sir?"

"That's right."

The seine was close in alongside the *Deux Frères*, and masses of silver fish were being heaved up into her. So intent were the fishermen on securing their catch that they had no knowledge of the silent approach of the *Hotspur*, and looked up in ludicrous astonishment at the lovely vessel towering over them in the sunset. They

even displayed momentary panic, until they obviously realized that in time of peace a British ship of war would do them less harm than a French one might, a French one enforcing the *Inscription Maritime*.

Hornblower took the speaking-trumpet from its beackets. He was pulsing with excitement now, and he had to be firm with himself to keep calm. This might be the first step in the making of the history of the future; besides, he had not spoken French for a considerable time and he had to concentrate on what he was going to say.

"Good day, captain!" he yelled, and the fishermen, reassured, waved back to him in friendly fashion. "Will you sell me some fish?"

Hurriedly they conferred, and then one of them replied.

"How much?"

"Oh, twenty pounds."

Again they conferred.

"Very well."

"Captain," went on Hornblower, searching in his mind not only for the necessary French words but also for an approach to bring about the situation he desired. "Finish your work. Then come aboard. We can drink a glass of rum to the friendship of nations."

The beginning of that sentence was clumsy, he knew, but he could not translate 'Get in your catch;' but the prospect of British navy rum he knew would be alluring — and he was a little proud of *l'amitié des nations*. What was the French for 'dinghy?' *Chaloupe*, he fancied. He expanded on his invitations and someone in the fishing-boat waved in assent before bending to the business of getting in the catch. With the last of it on board two of the four men scrambled into the dinghy that lay alongside the *Deux Frères*; it was nearly as big as the fishing-boat itself, as was to be expected when she had to lay out the seine. Two oars stoutly handled brought the dinghy rapidly towards *Hotspur*.

"I'll entertain the captain in my cabin," said Hornblower. "Mr Bush, see that the other man is taken forward and well looked after. See he has a drink."

"Aye aye, sir."

A line over the side brought up two big buckets of fish, and these were followed by two blue-jerseyed men who scrambled up easily enough despite their sea-boots.

"A great pleasure, captain," said Hornblower in the waist to greet him. "Please come with me."

The captain looked curiously about him as he was led up to the quarter-deck and aft to the cabin. He sat down cautiously in the only chair while Hornblower perched on the cot. The blue jersey and trousers were spangled with fish scales — the cabin would smell of fish for a week. Hewitt brought rum and water, and Hornblower poured two generous glasses; the captain sipped appreciatively.

"Has your fishing been successful?" asked Hornblower, politely.

He listened while the captain told him, in his almost unintelligible Breton French, about the smallness of the profits to be earned in the pilchard fishery. The conversation drifted on. It was an easy transition from the pleasure of peace to the possibilities of war — two seamen could hardly meet without that prospect being discussed.

"I suppose they make great efforts to man the ships of war?"

The captain shrugged.

"Certainly."

The shrug told much more than the word.

"It marches very slowly, I imagine," said Hornblower, and he captain nodded.

"But of course the ships are ready to take the sea?"

Hornblower had no idea of how to say 'laid-up in ordinary' in French, and so he had to ask the question in the opposite sense.

"Oh, no," said the captain. He went on to express his contempt for the French naval authorities. There was not a single ship of the line ready for service. Of course not.

"Let me refill your glass, captain," said Hornblower. "I suppose the frigates receive the first supplies of men?"

Such supplies as there were, perhaps. The Breton captain was not sure. Of course there was — Hornblower had more than a moment's difficulty at this point. Then he understood. The frigate *Loire* had been made ready

for sea last week (it was the Breton pronunciation of that name which had most puzzled Hornblower) for service in Far Eastern waters, but with the usual idiocy of the naval command had now been stripped of most of her trained men to provide nuclei for the other ships. The Breton captain, whose capacity for rum was quite startling, did nothing to conceal either the smouldering Breton resentment against the atheist regime now ruling France or the contempt of a professional user of the sea for the blundering policies of the Republican Navy. Hornblower had only to nurse his glass and listen, his faculties at full stretch to catch all the implications of a conversation in a foreign language. When at last the captain rose to say good-bye there was a good deal of truth in what Hornblower said, haltingly, about his regrets at the termination of the visit.

"Yet perhaps even if war should come, captain, we may still meet again. As I expect you know, the Royal Navy of Great Britain does not make war on fishing vessels. I shall always be glad to buy some of your catch."

The Frenchman was looking at him keenly now, perhaps because the subject of payment was arising. This was a most important moment, calling for accurate judgement. How much? What to say?

"Of course I must pay for today's supply," said Hornblower, his hand in his pocket. He took out two ten-franc pieces and dropped them into the horny palm, and the captain could not restrain an expression of astonishment from appearing in his weather-beaten face. Astonishment, followed instantly by avarice, and then by suspicion, calculation, and finally by decision as the hand clenched and hurried the money into a trouser-pocket. Those emotions had played over the captain's face like the colours of a dying dolphin. Twenty francs in gold, for a couple of buckets of pilchards; most likely the captain supported himself, his wife and children for a week on twenty francs. Ten francs would be a week's wage for his hands. This was important money; either the British captain did not know the value of gold or —. At least there was the indubitable fact that the French captain was twenty francs richer, and there was at least the possibility of more gold where this came from.

"I hope we shall meet again, captain," said Hornblower. "As of course you understand, out here at sea we are always glad to have news of what is happening on land."

The two Bretons went over the side with their two empty buckets, leaving Bush ruefully contemplating the mess left on the deck.

"That can be swabbed up, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "It will be a good ending to a good day."

Chapter 5

The cabin was quite dark when Hornblower awoke; there was not even the glimmering of light through the two stern windows. He lay curled on his side only half conscious, and then a single sharp note from the ship's bell recalled him to the world, and he turned over on his back and stretched himself, half fretfully and half luxuriously trying to put his thoughts into order. That must be one bell in the morning watch, because one bell in the middle watch had sounded as he was getting back into bed after being roused when the ship was put about at midnight. He had had six hours of sleep, even after making allowance for that break; there were great advantages about being in command of a ship; the watch which had retired to bed at that time had been up on deck again for half an hour already.

The cot on which he lay was swaying easily and slowly. *Hotspur* must be under very easy sail indeed, and, as far as he could judge, with a moderate wind on the starboard beam. That was as it should be. He would soon have to get up — he turned on to his other side and went to sleep again.

"Two bells, sir," said Grimes, entering the cabin with a lighted lamp. "Two bells, sir. Bit of haze, and Mr Prowse says he'd like to go about on the other tack." Grimes was a weedy young seaman who affirmed that he had acted as captain's steward in a West India packet.

"Get me my coat," said Hornblower.

It was cold in the misty dawn, with only a greatcoat on over his nightshirt. Hornblower found Maria's gloves in a pocket and pulled them on gratefully.

"Twelve fathoms, sir," reported Prowse as the ship steadied on her new course with the lead going in the forechains.

"Very well."

There was time to dress, there was time to have breakfast. There was time for — Hornblower felt a wave of temptation breaking round him. He wanted a cup of coffee. He wanted two or three cups of coffee, strong and scalding hot. Yet he had on board no more than two pounds of coffee. At seventeen shillings a pound that was all he had been able to afford to buy. The miraculous forty-five pounds had melted away which he had won at whist the night before the appearance of the King's message regarding the fleet. There had been his seagoing clothing and his sword to get out of pawn, his cabin furniture to buy, and he had had to leave seventeen pounds with Maria for her support until she could draw his allotment of pay. So there had been little enough left over for 'captain's stores'. He had not bought a sheep or a pig; not a single chicken. Mrs Mason had bought six dozen eggs for him — they were packed in shavings in a tub lashed to the deck in the chart room — and six pounds of heavily salted butter. There was a loaf of sugar and some pots of jam, and then the money had run out. He had no bacon, no potted meat. He had dined yesterday on pilchards — the fact that they had been bought with secret service money was some kind of sauce for them, but pilchards were unattractive fish. And of course there was the absurd prejudice of seamen regarding fish, creatures from their own element. They hated having their eternal round of salt beef and pork interrupted by a meal of fish — allowance must be made, of course, for the fact that the cooking of fish left behind a lingering scent, hard to eradicate from utensils sketchily washed in seawater. At this very moment, in the growing dawn, one of the lambs netted down in the boat chocked in the waist emitted a lingering baa-aaa as it woke. The wardroom officers had invested in four of the creatures while the *Hotspur* was commissioning, and any day now they would be dining on roast lamb — Hornblower determined to get himself invited to dinner in the wardroom that day. The thought reminded him that he was hungry; but that was quite minor compared with his yearning for coffee.

"Where's my servant?" he suddenly roared, "Grimes! Grimes!"

"Sir?"

Grimes put his head round the chart-room door.

"I'm going to dress, and I'll want my breakfast. I'll have coffee."

"Coffee, sir?"

"Yes." Hornblower bit off the 'damn you' he nearly added. To swear at a man who could not swear back and whose only offence lay in being unoffending was not to his taste, just as some men could not shoot foxes. "You don't know anything about coffee?"

"No, sir."

"Get the oak box and bring it in to me."

Hornblower explained about coffee to Grimes while working up a lather with a quarter of a pint of fresh-water.

"Count out twenty of those beans. Put them in an open jar — get that from the cook. Then you toast 'em over the galley fire. And be careful with 'em. Keep shaking 'em. They've got to be brown, not black. Toasted, not burnt. Understand?"

"Well, yes, sir."

"Then you take 'em to the surgeon, with my compliments."

"The surgeon? Yes, sir." Grimes, seeing Hornblower's brows come together like thunderclouds, had the sense to suppress in the nick of time his astonishment at the entry of the surgeon's name into this conversation.

"He has a pestle and mortar to pound his jalap with. You pound those beans in that mortar. You break 'em up small. Small, mark you, but you don't make dust of 'em. Like large grain gunpowder, not mealed gunpowder. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. I suppose so, sir."

"Next you — oh go and get that done and then report to me again."

Grimes was clearly not a man to do things quickly. Hornblower had shaved and dressed and was pacing the quarterdeck, raging for his breakfast, before Grimes appeared again with a panful of dubious powder.

Hornblower gave him brief instructions on how to make coffee with it, and Grimes listened doubtfully.

"Go and get it done. Oh, and Grimes!"

"Sir?"

"I'll have two eggs. Fried. Can you fry eggs?"

"Er — yes, sir."

"Fry 'em so the yolk's nearly hard but not quite. And get out a crock of butter and a crock off jam."

Hornblower was throwing discretion to the winds; he was determined on a good breakfast. And those winds to which he had thrown discretion suddenly asserted themselves. With hardly a warning puff there was a sudden gust which almost took *Hotspur* aback, and with it, while *Hotspur* paid off and recovered herself, there came driving rain, an April shower, icy cold. Hornblower shook off Grimes the first time he appeared to report that breakfast was ready, and only went off with him on his second appearance, after *Hotspur* was steady on her course again. With the weather clearing and daylight growing there was little time he could spare.

"I'll be on deck again in ten minutes, Mr Young," he said.

The chart-room was a minute compartment beside his cabin — cabin, chart-room, and the captain's pantry and head occupied the whole space of the *Hotspur's* tiny poop. Hornblower squeezed himself into the chair at the little table.

"Sir," said Grimes. "You didn't come when breakfast was ready."

Here were the eggs. The rim of the whites was black; the yolks were obviously hard.

"Very well," growled Hornblower. He could not blame Grimes for that.

"Coffee, sir?" said Grimes. With the chart-room door shut he was wedged against it hardly able to move. He poured from a jug into a cup, and Hornblower sipped. It was only just hot enough to drink, which meant that it was not hot enough, and it was muddy.

"See that it's hotter than this another time," said Hornblower. "And you'll have to strain it better than this."

"Yes, sir." Grimes' voice seemed to come from a great distance. The man could hardly whisper. "Sir —"

Hornblower looked up at him; Grimes was cold with fright.

"What is it?"

"I kept these to show you, sir." Grimes produced a pan containing a bloody and stinking mess. "The first two eggs was bad, sir. I didn't want you to think —"

"Very well." Grimes was afraid in case he should be accused of stealing them. "Take the damned things away." Now was it not exactly like Mrs Mason to buy eggs for him of which half were bad? Hornblower ate his unpleasant eggs — even these two, although not exactly bad, were flavoured — while reconciling himself with the prospect of making up for it all with the jam. He spread a biscuit with the precious butter, and here was the jam. Blackcurrant! Of all the misguided purchases! Grimes, squeezing back into the chart-room, positively jumped as Hornblower let out the oath that had been seeking an outlet for several minutes.

"Sir?"

"I'm not speaking to you, damn you," said Hornblower, his restraint at an end.

Hornblower was fond of jam, but of all the possible varieties he liked blackcurrant least. It was a poor last best. Well, it would have to do; he bit at the iron-hard biscuit.

"Don't knock at the door when you're serving a meal," he said to Grimes.

"No, sir. I won't sir. Not any more, sir."

Grimes's hand holding the coffeepot was shaking, and when Hornblower looked up he could see that his lips were trembling too. He was about to ask sharply what was the matter, but he suppressed the question as the answer became apparent to him. It was physical fear that was affecting Grimes. A word from Hornblower could have Grimes bound to a grating at the gangway, there to have the flesh flogged from the bones of his writhing body. There were captains in the navy who would give just that order when served with such a breakfast. There would never be a time when more things went wrong than this.

There was a knocking at the door.

"Come in!"

Grimes shrank against the bulkhead to avoid falling out through the door as it opened.

"Message from Mr Young, sir," said Orrock. "Wind's veering again."

"I'll come," said Hornblower.

Grimes cowered against the bulkhead as he pushed his way out; Hornblower emerged on to the quarter-deck. Six dozen eggs, and half of them bad. Two pounds of coffee — far less than a month's supply if he drank coffee every day. Blackcurrant jam, and not much even of that. Those were the thoughts coursing through his mind

as he walked past the sentry, and then they were expunged by the blessed air from the sea, and the instant approach of professional problems.

Prowse was peering out to port through his telescope; it was almost full daylight, and the haze had dissipated with the rain.

"Black Stones broad on the port-beam, sir," reported Prowse. "You can see the breakers sometimes."

"Excellent," said Hornblower. At least his breakfast troubles had kept him from fretting during these final minutes before entering on to a decisive day. In fact he had actually to pause for several seconds to collect his thoughts before issuing the orders that would develop the plans already matured in his fevered mind.

"Do you have good eyesight, Mr Orrock?"

"Well, sir —"

"Have you or haven't you?"

"Well, yes, sir."

"Then take a glass and get aloft. See what you can see of the shipping as we pass the entrance to the roadstead. Consult with the look-out."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Good morning, Mr Bush. Call the hands."

"Aye aye, sir."

Not for the first time Hornblower was reminded of the centurion in the New Testament who illustrated his authority by saying: 'I say to one, come, and he cometh, and to another, go, and he goeth.' The Royal Navy and the Roman Army were identical in discipline.

"Now, Mr Prowse. How far is the horizon now?"

"Two miles, sir. Perhaps three miles," answered Prowse, looking round and collecting his thoughts after being taken by surprise by the question.

"Four miles, I should think," said Hornblower.

"Maybe, sir," admitted Prowse.

"Sun's rising. Air's clearing. It'll be ten miles soon. Wind's north of west. We'll go down to the Parquette."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Mr Bush, get the topgallants in, if you please. And the courses. Tops'ls and jib's all we need."

"Aye aye, sir."

That way they would attract less notice; also they would, by moving more slowly, have longer for observation as they crossed the passage that led into Brest.

"Sunset on a clear day," said Hornblower to Prowse, "would be a better moment. Then we could look in with the sun behind us."

"Yes, sir. You're right, sir," answered Prowse. There was a gleam of appreciation in his melancholy face as he said this; he knew, of course, that the Goulet lay almost east and west, but he had not made any deductions or plans on that basis.

"But we're here. We have this chance. Wind and weather serve us now. It may be days before we have another opportunity."

"Yes, sir," said Prowse.

"Course east by south, Mr Prowse."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hotspur crept along. The day was cloudy but clear, and the horizon was extending every minute. There was the mainland of France, Pointe St Mathieu — Point Matthew — in plain view. From there the land trended away out of sight again.

"Land on the lee bow!" yelled Orrock from the foretopmast-head.

"That'll be the other headland, sir," said Prowse.

"Toulinguet," agreed Hornblower and then he corrected his pronunciation of 'Toolingwette'. For months or years to come he might be beating about this coast, and he wanted no chance of misunderstanding with any of his officers when he gave orders.

Between those two headlands the Atlantic broke in through the wild Breton coast and reached deep inland to form the roadstead of Brest.

"Can you make out the channel yet, Mr Orrock?" yelled Hornblower.

"Not yet, sir. At least, not very well."

A ship of war — a King's ship — approaching a foreign coast was under a handicap on this sort of mission in peacetime. She could not enter into foreign territorial waters (except under stress of weather) without permission previously asked and obtained; she certainly could not trespass within the limits of a foreign naval base without occasioning a series of angry notes between the respective governments.

"We must keep out of long cannon shot of the shore," said Hornblower.

"Yes, sir. Oh yes, of course, sir," agreed Prowse.

The second more hearty agreement was called forth when Prowse realized the implications of what Hornblower was saying. Nations asserted sovereignty over all the waters that could be dominated by their artillery, even if there was no cannon mounted at any particular point. In fact international law was hardening into a convention fixing an arbitrary limit of three miles.

"Deck!" yelled Orrock. "I can see masts now. Can just see 'em."

"Count all you can see, very carefully, Mr Orrock."

Orrock went on with his report. He had an experienced sailor beside him at the masthead, but Hornblower, listening, had no intention of trusting entirely to their observation, and Bush was fuming with impatience.

"Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "I'll be wearing ship in fifteen minutes. Would you be so kind as to take a glass to the mizzen topmast-head? You'll have a good chance of seeing all that Orrock's seeing. Please take notes."

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush.

He was at the mizzen shrouds in a moment. Soon he was running up the ratlines at a speed that would have been a credit to any young seaman.

"That makes twelve of the line, sir," yelled Orrock. "No topmasts hoisted. No yards crossed."

The seaman beside him interrupted his report.

"Breakers on the lee bow!"

"That's the Parquette," said Hornblower.

The Black Stones on the one side, the Parquette on the other, and, farther up, the Little Girls in the middle, marked off the passage into Brest. On a clear day like this, with a gentle wind, they were no menace, but lives by the hundred had been lost on them during storms. Prowse was pacing restlessly back and forward to the binnacle taking bearings. Hornblower was carefully gauging the direction of the wind. If the French squadron had no ship of the line ready for sea there was no need to take risks. A shift in the wind might soon find *Hotspur* embayed on a lee shore. He swept his glass round the wild coast that had grown up round his horizon.

"Very well, Mr Prowse. We'll wear ship now, while we can still weather the Parquette."

"Aye aye, sir."

Prowse's relief was obvious. His business was to keep the ship out of danger, and he clearly preferred a wide margin of safety. Hornblower looked around at the officer of the watch.

"Mr Poole! Wear the ship, if you please."

The pipes shrilled and the orders were passed. Hands went to the braces as the helm was put up while Hornblower scanned the shore warily.

"Steady as you go!"

Hotspur settled sweetly on her new course. Hornblower was growing intimate with her ways, like a bridegroom learning about his bride. No, that was an unlucky simile, to be discarded instantly. He hoped that he and *Hotspur* were better suited to each other than he and Maria. And he must think about something else.

"Mr Bush! Mr Orrock! You will please come down when you are sure you will see nothing more useful."

The ship was alive with a new atmosphere; Hornblower was sensitively aware of it as the hands went about their duties. Everyone on board was conscious that they were bearding Boney in his den, that they were boldly looking into the principal naval base of France, proclaiming the fact that England was ready to meet any challenge at sea. High adventure was looming up in the near future. Hornblower had the gratifying feeling, that during these past days he had tempered a weapon ready for his hand, ship and ship's company ready for any exploit, like a swordsman knowing well the weight and balance of his sword before entering upon a duel. Orrock appeared, touching his hat, and Hornblower listened to his report. It was fortunate that Bush in the mizzen-top still had a view up the Goulet and had not descended; reports should be made independently, each

officer out of the hearing of the other, but it would have been tactless to ask Bush to stand aside. Bush did not descend for several more minutes; he had methodically taken notes with paper and pencil, but Orrock could hardly be blamed for not having done so. The thirteen or fourteen ships of the line at anchor in the Roads were none of them ready for sea and three of them were missing at least one mast each. There were six frigates, three with their topmasts sent up and one with her yards crossed and sails furled.

"That will be the *Loire*," commented Hornblower to Bush.

"You know about her, sir?" asked Bush.

"I know she's there," answered Hornblower. He would gladly have explained further, but Bush was going on with his report, and Hornblower was content to have something more added to his reputation for omniscience.

On the other hand, there was considerable activity in the roadstead. Bush had seen lighters and tenders moving about, and believed he had identified a sheer hulk, a vessel rigged solely for the purpose of putting new masts into large ships.

"Thank you, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "That is excellent. We must look in like this every day if possible."

"Yes, sir."

Constant observations would increase their information in geometrical progression — ships changing anchorage, ships sending up topmasts, ships setting up their rigging. The changes would be more significant than anything that could be deduced from a single inspection.

"Now let's find some more fishing boats," went on Hornblower.

"Yes, sir."

Bush trained his glass out towards the Parquette, whose sullen black rocks, crowned by a navigation beacon, seemed to rise and fall as the Atlantic swell surged round them.

"There's one in the lee of the reef there, sir," said Bush.

"What's he doing there?"

"Lobster pots, sir," reported Bush. "Getting in his catch, I should say, sir."

"Indeed?"

Twice in his life Hornblower had eaten lobster, both occasions being during those bleak bitter days when under the compulsion of hunger and cold he had acted as a professional gambler in the Long Rooms. Wealthy men there had called for supper, and had tossed him an invitation. It was a shock to realize that it was only a fortnight ago that that horrible period in his life had ended.

"I think," said Hornblower, slowly, "I should like lobster for my supper tonight. Mr Poole! Let her edge down a little towards the reef. Mr Bush, I would be obliged if you would clear away the quarter-boat ready for launching."

The contrast between these days and those was quite fantastic. These were golden April days; a strange limbo between peace and war. They were busy days, during which Hornblower had friendly chats with fishing boats' captains and dispensed gold pieces in exchange for a small portion of their catch. He could drill his crew and he could take advantage of those exercises to learn all he could about the behaviour of the *Hotspur*. He could peep up the Goulet and measure the preparation of the French fleet for sea. He could study this Gulf of Iroise — the approaches to Brest, in other words — with its tides and its currents. By observing the traffic there he could obtain an insight into the difficulties of the French naval authorities in Brest.

Brittany was a poor province, neither productive nor well-populated, at the extremity of France, and by land the communications between Brest and the rest of the country were most inferior. There were no navigable rivers, no canals. The enormously ponderous materials to equip a fleet could never be brought to Brest by road. The artillery for a first-rate weighed two hundred tons; guns and anchors and shot could only be brought by sea from the foundries in Belgium round to the ships in Brest. The mainmast of a first-rate was a hundred feet long and three feet thick; only ships could transport those, in fact only ships specially equipped.

To man the fleet that lay idle in Brest would call for twenty thousand men. The seamen — what seamen there were — would have to march hundreds of miles from the merchant ports of Le Havre and Marseille if they were not sent round by sea. Twenty thousand men needed food and clothing, and highly specialized food and clothing moreover. The flour to make biscuit, the cattle and pigs and the salt to salt them down, and the barrel-staves in which to store them — where were they to come from? And provisioning was no day-to-day,

hand-to-mouth operation, either. Before going to sea the ships would need rations for a hundred days — two million rations to be accumulated over and above daily consumption. Coasting vessels by the hundred were needed — Hornblower observed a constant trickle of them heading into Brest, rounding Ushant from the north and the Pointe du Raz from the south. If war should come — when war should come — it would be the business of the Royal Navy to cut off this traffic. More particularly it would be the business of the light craft to do this — it would be *Hotspur's* business. The more he knew about all these conditions the better.

These were the thoughts that occupied Hornblower's mind as *Hotspur* stood in once more past the Parquette for a fresh look into Brest. The wind was south-easterly this afternoon, and *Hotspur* was running free — creeping along under topsails — with her look-outs posted at her mastheads in the fresh morning sunshine. From foremast and mizzenmast came two successive hails.

"Deck! There's a ship coming down the channel!"

"She's a frigate, sir!" That was Bush supplementing Cheeseman's report.

"Very well," hailed Hornblower in return. Maybe the appearance of the frigate had nothing to do with his own evolutions in the Iroise, but the contrary was much more likely. He glanced round the ship; the hands were engaged in the routine of holystoning the decks, but he could effect a transformation in five minutes. He could clear for action or he could set all sail at a moment's notice.

"Steady as you go," he growled at the quartermaster. "Mr Cargill, we'll hoist our colours, if you please."

"There she is, sir," said Prowse. The glass showed a frigate's topgallant sails; she was reaching down the Goulet with a fair wind, on a course that would intersect *Hotspur's* some miles ahead.

"Mr Bush! I'd like you on deck, if you please, as soon as you have completed your observations."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hotspur stole quietly along; there was no purpose in hurriedly setting additional sail and pretending to be innocent — the French fleet must have heard from a dozen sources about her continued presence in the approaches.

"You're not going to trust 'em, sir?" This was from Bush, back on the quarter-deck and in a state of some anxiety; the anxiety was not displayed by any change in Bush's imperturbable manner, but by the very fact that he volunteered advice in this positive form.

Hornblower did not want to run away. He had the weather gauge, and in a moment he could set all sail and come to the wind and stand out to sea, but he did not want to. He could be quite sure that if he were to do so the frigate would follow his example and chase him, ignominiously, out into the Atlantic with his tail between his legs. A bold move would stimulate his crew, would impress the French and — this was the point — would subdue his own doubts about himself. This was a test. His instinct was to be cautious; but he told himself that his caution was probably an excuse for cowardice. His judgement told him that there was no need for caution; his fears told him that the French frigate was planning to lure him within range of her guns and then overwhelm him. He must act according to his judgement and he must abhor the counsel of his fears, but he wished his heart would not beat so feverishly, he wished his palms would not sweat nor his legs experience these pins-and-needles feelings. He wished Bush were not crowding him at the hammock netting, so that he might take a few paces up and down the quarter-deck, and then he told himself that he could not possibly at this moment pace up and down and reveal to the world that he was in a state of indecision.

Today coasters had been swarming out of Brest, taking advantage of their fair wind; if war had been declared they would have been doing nothing of the sort. He had spoken to three different fishing boats, and from none of them had he received a hint of war — they might all have been taking part in a conspiracy to lull him into a sense of security, but that was most unlikely. If news of war had reached Brest only an hour ago the frigate could never have prepared herself for sea and come down the Goulet in this time. And to support his judgement from the other direction was the thought that the French naval authorities, even if war was not declared, would act in just this way. Hearing of the audacious British sloop cruising outside they would find men enough for the frigate by stripping other ships of their skeleton crews and would send her out to scare the British ship away. He must not be scared away; this wind could easily persist for days, and if he once ran down to leeward it would be a long time before he could beat back and resume his observation of Brest.

The frigate was hull-up now; through his glass he could see her down to the waterline. She was big; there were her painted ports, twenty of them a side besides the guns on quarter-deck and forecastle. Eighteen pounders,

probably; she had not merely twice as many guns as *Hotspur* but would discharge a weight of broadside four times as great. But her guns were not run out, and then Hornblower raised his glass to study her yards. He strained his eyes; this time he must not only trust his judgement but his eyesight. He was sure of what he saw. Fore-yard and fore-topsail-yard, main-yard and main-topsail-yard; they were not supported by chain slings. If the frigate were ready for action they would never have omitted that precaution. She could not be planning to fight; this could not be an ambush.

"Any orders, sir?" asked Bush.

Bush would have liked to clear for action, to open the ports and run out the guns. If anything could precipitate hostilities it would be that, and Hornblower remembered how his orders from Cornwallis, both written and oral, had stressed the necessity to do nothing that would bring on England the odium of starting a war.

"Yes," said Hornblower in reply to Bush's question, but the relief that showed instantly in Bush's expression changed back into concern as he noted the gleam in Hornblower's eyes.

"We must render passing honours, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. There was something madly stimulating in forcing himself to be coldly formal when internally he was boiling with excitement. That must be what went on inside one of Mr Watt's steam engines when the safety valve did not function.

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush; the disciplined answer, the only answer when a superior officer spoke.

"Do you remember the procedure, Mr Bush?"

Never in his life had Hornblower rendered honours to a French ship of war; through his whole professional career until now sighting had meant fighting.

"Yes, sir."

'Then be so good as to give the orders.'

"Aye aye, sir. All hands! All hands! Man the side! Mr Wise! See that the men keep order. Sergeant of marines! Parade your men on the quarter-deck! Smartly now. Drummer on the right. Bos'n's mates! Stand by to pipe on the beat of the drum." Bush turned to Hornblower. "We've no music, sir, except the drum and the pipes."

"They won't expect more," said Hornblower, his eye still at his glass. One sergeant, one corporal, twelve privates and a drummer were all the marines allotted to a sloop of war, but Hornblower was not devoting any further thought to the marines. His whole attention was concentrated on the French frigate. No doubt on the Frenchman's deck a dozen glasses were being trained on the *Hotspur*. As the bustle began on the *Hotspur's* deck he could see a corresponding bustle on the Frenchman's. They were manning the side, an enormous crowd of them. Carried by the water came the noise as four hundred excited Frenchmen took up their stations.

"Silence!" ordered Bush at that very moment. There was a certain strangeness about his voice as he continued, because he did not want his words to be overheard in the Frenchman, and so he was endeavouring to bellow *sotto voce*. "Show the Frogs how a British crew behaves. Heads up, there, and keep still."

Blue coats and white breeches; these were French soldiers forming up on the frigate's quarter-deck; Hornblower's glass detected the flash of steel as bayonets were fixed, and the gleam of brass from the musical instruments. The ships were closing steadily on their converging courses, with the frigate under her greater canvas drawing ahead of the sloop. Nearer and nearer. *Hotspur* was the visiting ship. Hornblower put away his telescope.

"Now," he said.

"Drum!" ordered Bush.

The drummer beat a long roll.

"Present-arr-ums!" ordered the sergeant of marines, and in a much lower voice, "One. Two. Three!"

The muskets of the marines and the half-pike of the sergeant came to the present in the beautiful movements of the prescribed drill. The pipes of the bos'n's mates twittered, long and agonizingly. Hornblower took off his hat and held it before his chest; the off-hand salute with hand to the brim was not for this occasion. He could see the French captain on his quarterdeck now, a bulky man, holding his hat over his head in the French fashion. On his breast gleamed a star, which must be this new-fangled Legion of Honour which Boney had instituted. Hornblower came back to reality; he had been the first to render the honours, and he must be the first to terminate them.

He growled a word to Bush.

"Drum!" ordered Bush, and the long roll ended. With that the twittering of the pipes died away, a little more raggedly than Hornblower liked. On the French quarter-deck someone — the drum major, perhaps — raised a long staff hung with brass bells into the air and brought it down again with a thump. Instantly the drums rolled, half a dozen of them, a martial, thrilling sound, and then over the water came the sound of music, that incomprehensible blend of noises which Hornblower could never appreciate; the drum major's staff rose and fell rhythmically. At last the music stopped, with a final roll of the drums. Hornblower put on his hat, and the French captain did the same.

"Sl-o-o-o-pe arrums," yelled the sergeant of marina.

"All hands! Dismiss!" yelled Bush, and then, reverting to his softer tone, "Quietly, there! Silence!"

The hands were excited and prone to chatter with the order to dismiss — never in any of their lives, either, had they passed a French ship of war so close without guns firing. But Bush was determined to make the Frenchman believe that *Hotspur* was manned entirely by stoics. Wise with his rattan enforced the order, and the crew dispersed in an orderly mob, the good order only disturbed by a single quickly suppressed yelp as the rattan struck home on some rash posterior.

"She's the *Loire*, surely enough, sir," said Bush. They could see the name entwined in gilded letters amid the scrollwork of the frigate's stern; Hornblower remembered that Bush still was in ignorance of his source of information. It was amusing to be thought omniscient, even without justification.

"And you were right, sir, not to run away from them," went on Bush. Why was it so intolerable in this case to note the gleam of admiration in Bush's eyes? Bush did not know of the quickening heartbeats and the sweaty palms.

"It's given our fellows a close look at a Frenchman," said Hornblower, uneasily.

"It certainly did that, sir," agreed Bush. "I never expected in all my life to hear that tune from a French frigate!"

"What tune?" asked Hornblower unguardedly, and was instantly furious with himself for this revelation of his weakness.

"God Save The King, sir," answered Bush, simply. Luckily it never occurred to him that anyone could possibly fail to recognize the national anthem. "If we'd had any music on board we'd have had to play their Marseillaise."

"So we would," said Hornblower; it was desperately necessary to change the subject. "Look! He's getting in his topgallants. Quick! Time him! We'll see what sort of seamen they are."

Chapter 6

Now it was blowing a gale, a two-reef gale from the westward. The unbelievably fine weather of the past week had come to an end, and now the Atlantic was asserting itself in its usual fashion. Under her close-reefed topsails *Hotspur* was battling against it, close-hauled on the port-tack. She was presenting her port bow to the huge rollers that were advancing upon her, unimpeded in their passage over three thousand miles of water, from Canada to France. She would roll, lift, pitch, and then roll again. The tremendous pressure of the wind on her topsails steadied her to the extent that she hardly leaned over at all to windward; she would heel over to starboard, hang for a moment, and then come back to the vertical. But even with her roll restricted in this fashion, she was pitching extravagantly, and she was rising and falling bodily as each wave passed under her bottom, so that a man standing on her deck would feel the pressure of his feet on her planking increasing and diminishing as she ascended and dropped away again. The wind was shrieking in the rigging, and her fabric groaned as the varying strains worked on her, bending her lengthwise, upward in the centre first and then upward at the ends next. But that groaning was a reassuring sound; there were no sharp cracks or disorderly noises, and what could be heard was merely an indication that *Hotspur* was being flexible and sensible instead of being rigid and brittle.

Hornblower came out on to the quarter-deck. He was pallid with sea-sickness because the change of motion had found him out, but the attack had not been as severe as he had experienced during the run down-channel. He was muffled in his coat, and he had to support himself against the roll, for his sea-legs had not yet learned

this advanced lesson. Bush appeared from the waist, followed by the boatswain; he touched his hat and then turned, with Wise beside him, to survey the ship in searching fashion.

"It's not until the first gale that you know what can carry away, sir," said Bush.

Gear that seemed perfectly well secured would begin to show alarming tendencies to come adrift when submitted to the unpredictable strains of continued heavy weather, and Bush and Wise had just completed a long tour of inspection.

"Anything amiss?" asked Hornblower.

"Only trifles, sir, except for the stream anchor. That's secure again now."

Bush had a grin on his face and his eyes were dancing; obviously he enjoyed this change of climate, this bustling of the wind, and the activity it called for. He rubbed his hands and breathed deep of the gale.

Hornblower could console himself with the memory that there had been times when he had enjoyed dirty weather, and even the hope that there would be more, but as he felt at present, he bitterly told himself, it was a hollow memory and an empty hope.

Hornblower took his glass and looked about him. Momentarily the weather was fairly clear and the horizon at some distance. Far away on the starboard quarter the telescope picked up a flash of white; steadying himself as best he could he managed to catch it in the field again. That was the surf on Ar Men — curious Breton name, that — the most southerly and the most seaward of the rocks and reefs that littered the approaches to Brest. As he watched a fresh roller came in to catch the rock fully exposed. The surf burst upon it in a towering pillar of white water, reaching up as high as a first-rate's main-topsails, before the wind hurled it into nothingness again. Then a fresh squall hurtled down upon the ship, bringing with it driving rain, so that the horizon closed in around them, and *Hotspur* became the centre of a tiny area of tossing grey sea, with the lowering clouds hardly clear of the mastheads.

She was as close in to that lee shore as Hornblower dared risk. A timid man would have gone out farther to sea at the first sign of bad weather, but then a timid man would be likely next to find himself with a shift of wind far away to leeward of the post he was supposed to be watching. Then whole days might pass before he could be back at his post — days when that wind would be fair for the French to do whatever they wanted, unobserved. It was as if there were a line drawn on the chart along with the parallels of longitude — rashness on the one side, boldness on the other, and Hornblower keeping to the very boundary of rashness. Now there was nothing further to do except — as always in the navy — to watch and wait. To battle with the gale with a wary eye noting every shift in the wind, to struggle northward on one tack and then to go about and struggle southward on the other, beating up and down outside Brest until he had a chance to risk a closer view again. So he had done all day yesterday, and so he would do for countless days to come should the threatening war break out. He went back into his cabin to conceal another flurry of sea-sickness.

Some time after the misery had in part subsided he was summoned by a thundering at the door.

"What is it?"

"Lookout's hailing from the masthead, sir. Mr Bush is calling him down."

"I'll come."

Hornblower emerged just in time to see the look-out transfer himself to the backstay and come sliding all the way down the deck.

"Mr Cargill," said Bush. "Send another hand aloft to take his place."

Bush turned to Hornblower.

"I couldn't hear what this man was saying, sir, thanks to the winds so I called him down. Well, what d'you have to say?"

The look-out stood cap in hand, a little abashed at confronting the officers.

"Don't rightly know if it's important, sir. But during that last clear spell I caught a glimpse of the French frigate."

"Where away?" demanded Hornblower; at the last moment before he spoke he had managed to modify his originally intended brusqueness. There was nothing to be gained and something to be lost by bullying this man.

"Two points on the lee bow, sir. She was hull-down but I could see her tops'ls, sir. I know 'em."

Since the incident of the passing honours *Hotspur* had frequently sighted the *Loire* at various points in the Iroise channel — it had been a little like a game of hide-and-seek.

"What was her course?"

"She was close-hauled, sir, under double-reefed tops'ls, on the starboard-tack, sir."

"You were quite right to report her. Get back to your post now. Keep that other man aloft with you."

"Aye aye, sir."

The man turned away and Hornblower gazed out to sea. Thick weather had closed round them again, and the horizon was close in. Was there anything odd about the *Loire*'s coming out and braving the gale? She might well wish to drill her men in heavy weather. No; he had to be honest in his thinking, and that was a rather un-French notion. There was a very marked tendency in the French navy to conserve material in a miserly fashion.

Hornblower became aware that Bush was standing beside him waiting for him to speak.

"What do you think, Mr Bush?"

"I expect she anchored last night in Berthon Bay, sir."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

Bush was referring to Bertheaume Bay, just on the seaward side of the Goulet, where it was just possible to ride to a long cable with the wind anywhere to the north of west. And if she lay there she would be in touch with the shore. She could receive news and orders sent overland from Brest, ten miles away. She might have heard of a declaration of war. She might be hoping to take *Hotspur* by surprise, and he must act on that assumption. In that case the safest thing to do would be to put the ship about. Heading south on the starboard-tack he would have plenty of sea room, would be in no danger from a lee shore, and would be so far ahead of the *Loire* as to be able to laugh at pursuit. But — this was like Hamlet's soliloquy, at the point where Hamlet says 'There's the rub' — he would be far from his post when Cornwallis should arrive, absent perhaps for days. No, this was a case where he must risk his ship. *Hotspur* was only a trifle in the clash of two enormous navies. She was important to him personally, but the information she had gleaned was a hundred times more important than her fabric to Cornwallis.

"We'll hold our course, Mr Bush," said Hornblower.

"She was two points on our lee bow, sir," said Bush. "We ought to be well to windward of her when we meet." Hornblower had already made that calculation; if the result had been different he would have put *Hotspur* about five minutes ago and would have been racing for safety.

"Clearing again a little, sir," commented Bush, looking about him, and at that very moment the masthead yelled again.

"There she is, sir! One point before the starboard beam!"

"Very well!"

With the moderation of the squall it was just possible to carry on a conversation with the masthead from the deck.

"She's there all right, sir," said Bush, training his glass

As *Hotspur* lifted to a wave Hornblower saw her topsails, not very plainly. They were braced sharp round, presenting only their edge to his telescope. *Hotspur* was at least four miles to windward of her.

"Look! She's going about, sir!"

The topsails were broadening into oblongs; they wavered for a moment, and then settled down; they were braced round now parallel to the *Hotspur*'s topsails; the two ships were now on the same tack.

"She went about the moment she was sure who we were, sir. She's still playing hide-and-seek with us."

"Hide-and-seek? Mr Bush, I believe we are at war."

It was hard to make that momentous statement in the quiet conversational tone that a man of iron nerve would employ; Hornblower did his best. Bush had no such inhibitions. He stared at Hornblower and whistled. But he could follow now the same lines of thought as Hornblower had already traced.

"I think you're right, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Bush." Hornblower said that spitefully, to his instant regret. It was not fair to make Bush pay for the tensions his captain had been experiencing; nor was it in accord with Hornblower's ideal of

imperturbability to reveal that such tensions had existed. It was well that the next order to be given would most certainly distract Bush from any hurt he might feel.

"I think you had better send the hands to quarters, Mr Bush. Clear for action, but don't run out the guns."

"Aye aye, sir!"

Bush's grin revealed his instant excitement. Now he was bellowing his orders. The pipes were twittering through the ship. The marine drummer came scrambling up from below. He was a child of no more than twelve, and his equipment was all higgledy-piggledy. He made not only a slap-dash gesture of coming to attention on the quarter-deck, he quite omitted the formal drill of raising the drumsticks high before he began to beat the long roll, so anxious was he to begin.

Prowse approached; as acting-master his station in battle was on the quarter-deck beside his captain.

"She's broad on the starboard beam now, sir," he said, looking over at the *Loire*. "She took a long time to go about. That's what you'd expect."

One of the factors that had entered into Hornblower's calculations was the fact that *Hotspur* would be quicker in stays than the *Loire*. Bush came up, touching his hat.

"Ship cleared for action, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Bush."

Now here was navy life epitomized in these few minutes. A moment of decision, of bustle, and excitement, and then — settle down to a long wait again. The two ships were thrashing along close-hauled, four miles apart. *Hotspur* almost dead to windward of the *Loire*. Those four miles, that direction of the wind, conferred immunity upon *Hotspur*. As long as she could preserve that distance she was safe. If she could not — if some accident occurred — then the *Loire*'s forty eighteen-pounders would make short work of her. She could fight for honour, but with no hope of victory. Clearing for action was hardly more than a gesture; men would die, men would be horribly mutilated, but the result would be the same as if *Hotspur* had tamely surrendered.

"Who's at the wheel?" asked Prowse of nobody in particular, and he walked over to supervise the steering — perhaps his thoughts were running along those same lines.

The boatswain came rolling aft; as the warrant officer charged with the general supervision of sails and rigging he had no particular station in action, and was justified in moving about. But he was being very formal at the moment. He took off his hat to Bush, instead of merely touching it, and stood holding it, his pigtail thumping his shoulders in the gale. He must be asking permission to speak.

"Sir," said Bush. "Mr Wise is asking on behalf of the hands, sir. Are we at war?"

Yes? Or no?

"The Frogs know, and we don't — yet, Mr Wise." There was no harm in a captain admitting ignorance when the reason for it should be perfectly clear as soon as the hands had time to consider the matter, as they would have. This might be the time to make a resplendent speech, but second thoughts assured Hornblower it was not. Yet Hornblower's instinct told him that the situation demanded something more than his last bald sentence.

"Any man in this ship who thinks there's a different way of doing his duty in peacetime is likely to have his back scratched, Mr Wise. Say that to the hands."

That was sufficient for the occasion; Prowse was back again, squinting up at the rigging and gauging the behaviour of the ship.

"Do you think she could carry the main-topmast stays'l, sir?"

That was a question with many implications, but there was only one answer.

"No," said Hornblower.

That staysail might probably give *Hotspur* a little more speed through the water. But it would lay her over very considerably, which along the additional area exposed to the wind would increase her leeway by an appreciable proportion. Hornblower had seen *Hotspur* in dry dock, knew the lines of the turn of her bilge, and could estimate the maximum angle at which she could retain her grip on the water. Those two factors would balance out, and there was a third one to turn the scale — any increase in the amount of canvas exposed would increase the chances of something carrying away. A disaster, petty or great, from the parting of a line to the loss of a topmast, would thrust *Hotspur* haplessly within range of the enemy's guns.

"If the wind moderates that's the first extra canvas I'll set," went on Hornblower to modify the brusqueness of his refusal, and he added, "Take note of how that ship bears from us."

"I've done that, sir," answered Prowse; a good mark to Prowse.

"Mr Bush! You may dismiss the watch below."

"Aye aye, sir."

This chase — this race — might continue for hours, even for days, and there was no purpose in fatiguing all hands prematurely. The gale developed a new gust within itself, hurling rain and spray across the deck; the *Loire* faded from sight again as he looked at her, while the *Hotspur* plunged and tossed like a toy boat as she battled against wind and wave.

"I wonder how many hands are sea-sick over there?" said Hornblower. He uttered that distasteful word in the same way that a man might tease a sore tooth.

"A good few, I dare say, sir," answered Bush in a completely neutral tone.

"Call me when she's in sight again," said Hornblower. "Call me in any case of need, of course."

He said these words with enormous dignity. Then it was an exhausting physical exercise to struggle aft again back into his cabin; his dizziness exaggerated the leaping of the deck under his feet, and the swing of his cot as he sank groaning across it. It was Bush himself who roused him later on.

"Weather's clearing, sir," came Bush's voice through the cabin door, over the clamour of the storm.

"Very well. I'll come."

A shadowy shape was already visible to starboard when he came out, and soon the *Loire* was revealed sharply as the air cleared. There she was, lying steeply over, yards braced up, her gun ports plain enough to be counted when she rose level again, spray bursting in clouds over her weather bow, and then, as she lay over again, a momentary glimpse, pinky-brown, of her copper bottom. Hornblower's eye told him something that Prowse and Bush put simultaneously into words.

"She's head-reaching on us!" said Bush.

"She's a full point for'rard of the beam now," said Prowse.

The *Loire* was going faster through the water than *Hotspur*, gaining in the race to that extent. Everyone knew that French ship designers were cleverer than English ones; French ships were usually faster. But in this particular case it might mean tragedy. But there was worse news than this.

"I think, sir," said Bush, slowly, as if each word caused him pain, "she's weathering on us, too."

Bush meant that the *Loire* was not yielding to the same extent as the *Hotspur* to the thrust of the wind down to leeward; relatively *Hotspur* was drifting down upon the *Loire*, closer to her guns. Hornblower, with a twinge of apprehension, knew that he was right. It would only be a question of time, if the present weather conditions persisted, before the *Loire* could open her ports and commence fire. So the simplest way of keeping out of trouble was denied him. If *Hotspur* had been the faster and the more weatherly of the two he could have maintained any distance he chose. His first line of defence was broken through.

"It's not to be wondered at," he said. He tried to speak coldly, or nonchalantly, determined to maintain his dignity as captain. "She's twice our size."

Size was important when clawing to windward. The same waves battered against small ships as against big ones, but they would push the small ships farther to leeward; moreover the keels of big ships reached down farther below the surface, farther below the turbulence, and maintained a better hold in the more tranquil water.

The three telescopes, as of one mind, trained out towards the *Loire*.

"She's luffing up a little," said Bush.

Hornblower could see the *Loire*'s topsails shiver momentarily. She was sacrificing some of her headway to gain a few yards to windward; having superior speed through the water she could afford to do so.

"Yes. We've drawn level with her again," said Prowse.

That French captain knew his business. Mathematically, the best course to take when trying to close on a ship to windward was to keep the ship being chased right in the wind's eye, and that was where the *Hotspur* now found herself again, relative to the *Loire*, while the latter, resuming her former course, closehailed, was twenty or thirty yards nearer to her in the direction of the wind. A gain of twenty or thirty yards, repeated

often enough, and added to the steady gain resulting from being the more weatherly ship, would eventually close the gap.

The three telescopes came down from the three eyes, and Hornblower met the gaze of his two subordinates. They were looking to him to make the next move in this crisis.

"Call all hands, if you please, Mr Bush. I shall put the ship about."

"Aye aye, sir."

Here was a moment of danger. If *Hotspur* were mishandled she was lost. If she missed stays — as she once had done with Cargill handling her — she would lie dead in the water for minutes, sagging down to leeward with the *Loire* coming up fast upon her, while in this gale the sails might thrash themselves to ribbons leaving her more helpless still, even if nothing more vital carried away. The operation must be carried out to perfection. Cargill by coincidence was officer of the watch. He could be given the task. So might Bush, or Prowse. But Hornblower knew perfectly well that he could not tolerate the thought of anyone other than himself bearing the responsibility, whether in his own eyes or in those of the ship's company.

"I'm going to put the ship about, Mr Cargill," he said, and that fixed the responsibility irrevocably.

He walked over the wheel, and stared round him. He felt the tension, he felt the beating of his heart, and noticed with momentary astonishment that this was pleasurable, that he was enjoying this moment of danger. Then he forced himself to forget everything except the handling of the ship. The hands were at their stations; every eye was on him. The gale shrieked past his ears as he planted his feet firmly and watched the approaching seas. This was the moment.

"Handsomely, now," he growled to the hands at the wheel. "Put your wheel down."

There was a brief interval before *Hotspur* answered. Now her bow was turning.

"Helm's alee!" shouted Hornblower.

Headsail sheets and bowlines were handled, with Hornblower watching the behaviour of the ship like a tiger stalking its prey.

"Tacks and sheets!" and then turning back to the wheel. "Now! Hard over!"

She was coming rapidly into the wind.

"Mains'l haul!" The hands were keyed up with the excitement of the moment. Bowlines and braces were cast off and the yards came ponderously round at the exact moment that *Hotspur* was pointing directly into the wind.

"Now! Meet her! Hard over!" snapped Hornblower to the wheel. *Hotspur* was turning fast, and still carrying so much way that the rudder could bite effectively, checking the swing before she could turn too far.

"Haul off all!"

The thing was done; *Hotspur* had gone from one tack to the other without the unnecessary loss of a second or a yard, thrashing along now with her starboard bow butting into the waves. But there was no time to feel relief or pleasure; Hornblower hurried to the port quarter to train his glass on the *Loire*. She was tacking naturally; the mathematics of the theory of the pursuit to windward demanded that the pursuer should tack at the same moment as the pursued. But she was bound to be a little late; her first inkling that *Hotspur* was about to tack would be when she saw her fore-topsail shiver, and even if *Loire* had all hands at their stations for going about the *Hotspur* would have two minutes' grace. And she was far slower in stays. Even now, when *Hotspur* was settled on the new tack with every inch of sail drawing, the *Loire*'s fore-topsail was still shivering, her bows were still turning. The longer she took to go about the more distance she would lose in the race to windward.

"We've weathered on her, sir," said Prowse, watching through his glass. "Now we're head reaching on her." *Hotspur* had won back some of her precious lead, and Hornblower's second line of defence was proving at least stronger than his first.

"Take the bearing again," ordered Hornblower.

Once settled on the new tack the *Loire*'s natural advantages asserted themselves once more. She showed her extra speed and extra weatherliness; she drew up again from *Hotspur*'s quarter to her beam; then she could luff up briefly and gain a little more to windward on the *Hotspur*. The minutes passed like seconds, an hour like a minute, as the *Hotspur* plunged along, with every man braced on the heeling deck and the wind shrieking.

"Time to go about again, sir?" asked Bush, tentatively and greatly daring, but the theoretically correct moment was passing.

"We'll wait a little longer," said Hornblower. "We'll wait for that squall."

It was hurtling down wind upon them, and as it reached them the world was blotted out with driving rain. Hornblower turned from the hammock netting over which he was peering and climbed up the steep deck to the wheel. He took the speaking-trumpet.

"Stand by to go about."

In the gusts that were blowing the crew could hardly hear what he said, but every eye was on him, everyone was alert, and, drilled as they were, they could not mistake his orders. It was a tricky business to tack while the squall prevailed, because the gusts were liable to veer a point or two, unpredictably. But the *Hotspur* was so handy — as long as the manoeuvre was well timed — that she had a good deal to spare for emergencies. The slight change in the wind's direction which threatened to take her aback was defeated because she still had sufficient steerage way and command to keep her swinging. The gust died away and the blinding chilly rain ceased while the hands were trimming all sharp, and the last of the squall drove off to leeward, still hiding the *Loire* from view.

"That's done him!" said Bush with satisfaction. He was revelling in the mental picture of the *Loire* still thrashing along on the one tack while the *Hotspur* was comfortably on the other and the gap between the two ships widening rapidly.

They watched the squall travelling over the foam-flecked grey water, shrieking towards France. Then in the thickness they saw a more solid nucleus take shape; they saw it grow sharper in outline.

"God —" exclaimed Bush; he was too disconcerted, too dumb founded, to finish the oath. For there was *Loire* emerging from the squall, comfortably on the same tack as *Hotspur*, plunging along in her relentless pursuit with the distance in no way diminished.

"That's a trick we won't try a second time," said Hornblower. He was forcing a smile, tight-lipped.

The French captain was no fool, evidently. He had observed the *Hotspur* delaying past the best moment for tacking, he had seen the squall engulfing her, and had anticipated her action. He must have tacked at the very same moment. In consequence he had lost little while tacking, and that little had been regained by the time the two ships were in sight of each other once more. Certainly he was a dangerous enemy. He must be one of the more able captains that the French navy possessed. There were several who had distinguished themselves in the last war; true, in consequence of the over-powering British naval strength, most of them had ended the war as prisoners, but the Peace of Amiens had set them free.

Hornblower turned away from Bush and Prowse and tried to pace the heeling deck, to think out all the implications. This was a dangerous situation, as dangerous as the worst he had envisaged. Inexorably wind and wave were forcing *Hotspur* closer to the *Loire*. Even as he tried to pace the deck he felt her shudder and lurch, out of the rhythm of her usual pitch and roll. That was the 'rogue wave', generated by some unusual combination of wind and water, thumping against *Hotspur's* weather side like a battering ram. Every few seconds rogue waves made themselves felt, checking *Hotspur's* way and pushing her bodily to leeward; *Loire* was encountering exactly similar rogue waves, but with her greater size she was not so susceptible to their influence. They played their part along with the other forces of nature in closing the gap between the two ships.

Supposing he were compelled to fight a close action? No, he had gone through that before. He had a good ship and well-trained crew, but on this tossing sea that advantage would be largely discounted by the fact that the *Loire* provided a steadier gun platform. Odds of four to one in weight of metal were greater than it was advisable to risk. Momentarily Hornblower saw himself appearing in the written history of the future. He might have the distinction of being the first British captain in the present war to fall a victim of the French navy. What a distinction! Then even in the cold gale blowing round him he could feel the blood hot under his skin as he pictured the action. Horrors presented themselves in endless succession to the crack of doom like the kings in *Macbeth*. He thought of death. He thought of being a prisoner of war; he had experienced that already in Spain and only by a miracle he had achieved release. The last war had gone on for ten years; this one might do the same. Ten years in prison! Ten years during which his brother officers would be gaining fame, distinguishing themselves, making fortunes in prize money while he would fret himself to pieces in

prison, emerging at the end a cranky eccentric, forgotten by all his world — forgotten even by Maria, he fancied. He would rather die, just as he would rather die than be mutilated; or so he thought (he told himself brutally) until the choice should be more imminently presented to him. Then he might well flinch, for he did not want to die. He tried to tell himself that he was not afraid of death, that he merely regretted the prospect of missing all the interesting and amusing things that life held in store for him, and then he found himself sneering at himself for not facing the horrid truth that he was afraid.

Then he shook himself out of this black mood. He was in danger, and this was no time for morbid introspection. It was resolution and ingenuity that he demanded of himself. He tried to make his face a mask to hide his recent feelings as he met the gaze of Bush and Prowse.

"Mr Prowse," he said. "Bring your journal. Let's look at the chart."

The rough log recorded every change of course, every hourly measurement of speed, and by its aid they could calculate — or guess at — the present position of the ship starting from her last point of departure at Ar Men.

"We're making fully two points of leeway," said Prowse despondently. His long face seemed to grow longer and longer as he looked down at Hornblower seated at the chart-table. Hornblower shook his head.

"Not more than a point and a half. And the tide's been making in our favour for the last two hours."

"I hope you're right, sir," said Prowse.

"If I'm not," said Hornblower, working the parallel rulers, "we'll have to make fresh plans."

Despondency for the sake of despondency irritated Hornblower when displayed by other people; he knew too much about it.

"In another two hours," said Prowse, "the Frenchman'll have us under his guns."

Hornblower looked fixedly at Prowse, and under that unwavering gaze Prowse was at length reminded of his omission, which he hastily remedied by belatedly adding the word "sir". Hornblower was not going to allow any deviation from discipline, not in any crisis whatever — he knew well enough how these things might develop in the future. Even if there might be no future. Having made his point there was no need to labour it.

"You can see we'll weather Ushant," he said, looking down at the line he had pencilled on the chart.

"Maybe, sir," said Prowse.

"Comfortably," went on Hornblower.

"I wouldn't say exactly comfortably, sir," demurred Prowse.

"The closer the better," said Hornblower. "But we can't dictate that. We daren't make an inch more of leeway."

He had thought more than once about that possibility, of weathering Ushant so close that *Loire* would not be able to hold her course. Then *Hotspur* would free herself from pursuit like a whale scraping off a barnacle against a rock; an amusing and ingenious idea, but not practicable as long as the wind stayed steady.

"But even if we weather Ushant, sir," persisted Prowse, "I don't see how it will help us. We'll be within range by then, sir."

Hornblower put down his pencil. He had been about to say "Perhaps you'd advise saving trouble by hauling down our colours this minute, Mr Prowse," but he remembered in time that such a mention of the possibility of surrender, even with a sarcastic intention, was contrary to the Articles of War. Instead he would penalize Prowse by revealing nothing of the plan he had in mind; and that would be just as well, in case the plan should fail and he should have to fall back on yet another line of defence.

"We'll see when the time comes," he said, curtly, and rose from his chair. "We're wanted on deck. By now it'll be time to go about again."

On deck there was the wind blowing as hard as ever; there was the spray flying; there was the *Loire*, dead to leeward and luffing up to narrow the gap by a further important trifle. The hands were at work on the pumps; in these weather conditions the pumps had to be employed for half an hour every two hours to free the ship from the sea water which made its way on board through the straining seams.

"We'll tack the ship, Mr Poole, as soon as the pumps suck."

"Aye aye, sir."

Some way ahead lay Ushant and his plan to shake off the *Loire*, but before that he had to tack twice more at least, each time with its possibilities of making a mistake, of handing *Hotspur* and himself over to the enemy. He must not stumble over an obstacle at his feet through keeping his eyes on the horizon. He made himself

perform the manoeuvre as neatly as ever, and made himself ignore any feelings of relief when it was completed.

"We gained a full cable's length on him that time, sir," said Bush, after watching *Loire* steady herself on the starboard tack on *Hotspur's* beam.

"We may not always be so lucky," said Hornblower. "But we'll make this leg a short one and see."

On the starboard tack he was heading away from his objective; when they went about on the port tack again he must hold on for a considerably longer time, but he must make it appear as though by inadvertence. If he could deceive Bush it would be an indication that he was deceiving the French captain.

The hands seemed to be actually enjoying this sailing contest. They were light-hearted, revelling in the business of cheating the wind and getting every inch of way out of the *Hotspur*. It must be quite obvious to them that *Loire* was gaining in the race, but they did not care; they were laughing and joking as they looked across at her. They had no conception of the danger of the situation, or, rather, they made light of it. The luck of the British navy would save them, or the unhandiness of the French. Or the skill of their captain — without faith in him they would be far more frightened.

Time to go about again and beat towards Ushant. He resumed charge of the ship and turned her about. It was only after the turn was completed that he noted, with satisfaction, that he had forgotten his nervousness in the interest he was taking in the situation.

"We're closing fast, sir," said Prowse, gloomy as ever. He had his sextant in his hand and had just finished measuring the angle subtended between the *Loire's* masthead and her waterline.

"I can see that for myself, thank you, Mr Prowse," snapped Hornblower. For that matter the eye was as trustworthy as any instrumental observation on that heaving sea.

"My duty, sir," said Prowse.

"I'm glad to see you executing your duty, Mr Prowse," said Hornblower. The tone he used was the equivalent of saying, 'Damn your duty,' which would have also been contrary to the Articles of War.

Northward the *Hotspur* held her steady course. A squall engulfed her, blinding her, while the quartermasters juggled desperately at the wheel, allowing her, perforce, to pay off in the worst of the gusts, and putting down the wheel to keep her to the wind when the wind backed a point. The final gust went by, flapping Hornblower's coat-tails. It whipped the trouser-legs of the quartermasters at the wheel so that a momentary glance would make a stranger believe that, with their swaying arms and wavering legs, they were dancing some strange ritual dance. As ever, when the squall passed on, all eyes not dedicated to present duty turned to leeward to look for the *Loire*.

"Look at that!" yelled Bush. "Look at that, sir! We've fooled him properly!"

Loire had gone about. There she was, just settling down on the starboard tack. The French captain had been too clever. He had decided that *Hotspur* would go about when concealed by the squall, and had moved to anticipate her. Hornblower watched the *Loire*. That French captain must be boiling with rage at having his too-great-cleverness revealed to his ship's company in this fashion. That might cloud his judgement later. It might make him over-anxious. Even so, he showed little sign of it from here. He had been about to haul his bowlines, but he reached a rapid and sensible decision. To tack again would necessitate standing on for some time on his present course while his ship regained speed and manoeuvrability, so that instead he made use of the turning momentum she still possessed, put up his helm and completed the circle, wearing his ship round so that she momentarily presented her stern to the wind before arriving at last on her original tack again. It was a cool-headed piece of work, making the best of a bad job, but the *Loire* had lost a good deal of ground.

"Two full points abaft the beam," said Prowse.

"And he's farther down to looard, too," supplemented Bush.

The greatest gain, Hornblower decided, watching her, was that it made possible, and plausible, the long leg to the northward that his plan demanded. He could make a long beat on the port tack without the French captain seeing anything unusual in that.

"Keep her going, there!" he shouted to the wheel. "Let her fall off a little! Steady as you go!"

The race was resumed, both ships plunging along, battling with the unremitting gale. Hornblower could see the wide angle from the vertical described by the *Loire's* masts as she rolled; he could see her yards dipping towards the sea, and he could be sure that *Hotspur* was acting in the same way, rolling even a trifle more

deeply, perhaps. So this very deck on which he stood was over at that fantastic angle too; he was proud of the fact that he was regaining his sea legs so rapidly. He could stand balance one knee straight and rigid, the other considerably bent, while he leaned over against the heel, and then he could straighten with the roll almost as steadily as Bush could. And his seasickness was better as well — no; a pity he had let that subject return to his mind, for he had to struggle with a qualm the moment it did so.

"Making a long leg like this gives him a chance, sir," grumbled Prowse, juggling with telescope and sextant.

"He's drawing up on us fast."

"We're doing our best," answered Hornblower.

His glass could reveal many details of the *Loire* now, as he concentrated upon her to distract himself from his sea-sickness. Then, as he was about to lower the glass to ease his eye he saw something new. The gun ports along her weather side seemed to change their shape, and as he continued to look he saw, first from one gun-port and then from another and finally from the whole line, the muzzles of her guns come nosing their way out, as the invisible crews strained at the tackles to drag the ponderous weights up against the slope of the deck.

"She's running out her guns, sir," said Bush, a little unnecessarily.

"Yes."

There was no purpose in imitating her example yet. It would be the lee side guns that *Hotspur* would have to run out. They would increase her heel and render her by that much less weatherly. Lying over as she was she would probably take in water over the port-sills at the low point of her roll. Lastly, even at extreme elevation, they would nearly all the time be depressed by the heel below the horizontal, and would be useless, even with good timing on the part of the gun captains, against a target at any distance.

The look-outs at the fore-topmasthead were yelling something, and then one of them launched himself into the rigging and came running aft to the quarter-deck.

"Why don't you use the backstay like a seaman?" demanded Bush, but Hornblower checked him.

"What is it?"

"Land, sir," spluttered the seaman. He was wet to the skin with water streaming from every angle, whisked away by the wind as it dripped.

"Where away?"

"On the lee bow, sir."

"How many points?"

He thought for a moment.

"A good four, sir."

Hornblower looked across at Prowse.

"That'll be Ushant, sir. We ought to weather it with plenty to spare."

"I want to be sure of that. You'd better go aloft, Mr Prowse. Make the best estimate you can."

"Aye aye, sir."

It would not do Prowse any harm to make the tiring and exacting journey to the masthead.

"He'll be opening fire soon, sir," said Bush, referring to the Frenchman and not to Prowse's departing figure.

"Not much chance of replying as yet. On the other tack, maybe, sir."

Bush was ready for a fight against any odds, and he was unaware that Hornblower had no intention of tacking again.

"We'll see when the time comes," said Hornblower.

"He's opening fire now, sir."

Hornblower whipped round, just in time to see a puff of smoke vanishing in the gale, and then others, all down the *Loire*'s side, enduring hardly for a second before the wind overcame the force of the powder that impelled them. That was all. No sound of the broadside reached them against the wind, and there was not a sight of the fall of shot.

"Long range, sir," said Bush.

"A chance for him to exercise his guns' crews," said Hornblower.

His glass showed him the *Loire*'s gun-muzzles disappearing back into the ship as the guns were run in again for reloading. There was a strange unreality about all this, about the silence of that broadside, about the fact that

Hotspur was under fire, about the fact that he himself might be dead at any moment now as the result of a lucky hit.

"He's hoping for a lucky hit, I suppose, sir," said Bush, echoing the very words of Hornblower's thoughts in a manner that made the situation all the more uncanny and unreal.

"Naturally." Hornblower forced himself to say that word, and in this strange mood his voice, pitched against the gale, seemed to come from very far away.

If the Frenchman had no objection to a prodigious waste of powder and shot he might as well open fire at this range, at extreme cannon-shot, in the hope of inflicting enough damage on *Hotspur*'s rigging to slow her down. Hornblower could think clearly enough, but it was as if he was looking on at someone else's adventure. Now Prowse was returning to the quarter-deck.

"We'll weather the land by a good four miles, sir," he said; the spray tossed up by the weather-bow had wetted him just as thoroughly as the seamen. He looked over at the *Loire*. "Not a chance of our paying off, I suppose, sir."

"Of course not," said Hornblower. Long before such a plan could bear fruit he would be engaged in close action were he to drop down to leeward, in the hope of forcing the *Loire* to go about to avoid running ashore.

"How long before we're up to the land?"

"Less than an hour, sir. Maybe half. It ought to be in sight from the deck any minute."

"Yes!" said Bush. "There it is, sir!"

Over the lee bow Hornblower could see the black bold shoreline of Ushant. Now the three points of the triangle, Ushant, *Hotspur* and *Loire*, were all plain to him, and he could time his next move. He would have to hold on to his present course for some considerable time; he would have to brave further broadsides, whether he liked it or not — insane words those last, for no one could like being under fire. He trained his glass on the land, watching his ship's movement relative to it, and then as he looked away he saw something momentarily out of the corner of his eye. It took him a couple of seconds to deduce what it was he had seen; two splashes, separated by a hundred feet in space and by a tenth of a second in time. A cannon-ball had skipped from the top of one wave crest and plunged into the next.

"They're firing very deliberately, sir," said Bush.

Hornblower's attention was directed to the *Loire* in time to see the next brief puff of smoke from her side; they saw nothing of the ball. Then came the next puff.

"I expect they have some marksman on board moving along from gun to gun," said Hornblower.

If that were the case the marksman must wait each time for the right conditions of roll — a slow rate of firing, but, allowing for the length of time to reload and run up, not impossibly slower than firing broadsides.

"You can hear the guns now, sir. The sound's carried by the water."

It was an ugly, flat, brief clap, following just after each puff of smoke

"Mr Bush," said Hornblower speaking slowly as he felt the excitement of the approaching crisis boiling up within him. "You know your watch — and quarter-bills off by heart, I'm sure."

"Yes, sir," replied Bush, simply.

"I want —" Hornblower checked the position of *Loire* again. "I want sufficient hands at the braces and bowlines to handle the ship properly. But I want crews sufficient for the guns of one side too."

"Not very easy, sir."

"Impossible?"

"Nearly, sir. I can do it, though."

"Then I want you to arrange it. Station crews at the port-side guns, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir. Port side."

The repetition was in the usual navy style to ensure against misunderstanding; there was only the faintest questioning note in Bush's voice, for the port side was that turned away from the enemy.

"I want —" went on Hornblower, still slowly. "I want the portside guns run out when we go about, Mr Bush. I'll give the order. Then I want them run in again like lightning and the ports closed. I'll give the order for that, too."

"Aye aye, sir. Run 'em in again."

"Then they're to cross to the starboard side and run those guns out ready to open fire. You understand, Mr Bush?"

"Y-yes, sir."

Hornblower looked round at the *Loire* and at Ushant again.

"Very well, Mr Bush. Mr Cargill will need four hands for a special duty, but you can start stationing the rest." Now he was committed. If his calculations were incorrect he would appear a fool in the eyes of the whole ship's company. He would also be dead or a prisoner. But now he was keyed up, the fighting spirit boiling within him as it had done once when he boarded *Renown* to effect her recapture. There was a sudden shriek overhead, so startling that even Bush stopped short as he was moving forward. A line mysteriously parted in mid-air, the upper end blowing out horizontal in the wind, the lower end flying out to trail overside. A luckier shot than any so far had passed over the *Hotspur* twenty feet above her deck.

"Mr Wise!" yelled Hornblower into the speaking-trumpet. "Get that halliard re-rove."

"Aye aye, sir."

The spirit of mischief asserted itself in Hornblower's mind along with his excitement, and he raised the trumpet again.

"And Mr Wise! If you think proper you can tell the hands we're at war!"

That raised the laugh that Hornblower anticipated, all over the ship, but there was no more time for frivolity.

"Pass the word for Mr Cargill."

Cargill presented himself with a faint look of anxiety on his round face.

"You're not in trouble, Mr Cargill. I've selected you for a responsible duty."

"Yes, sir?"

"Arrange with Mr Bush to give you four steady hands and take your station on the fo'c'sle at the jib halliard and jib sheets. I shall be going about very shortly, and then I shall change my mind and come back on my original tack. So now you can see what you have to do. The moment you get my signal run the jib up the stay and then flat it out to port. I want to be quite sure you understand?"

Several seconds went by while Cargill digested the plan before he answered "Yes, sir."

"I'm relying on you to keep us from being laid flat a-back, Mr Cargill. You'll have to use your own judgement after that. The moment the ship's turning and under command again run the jib down. You can do that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, carry on."

Prowse was standing close by, straining to hear all this. His long face was longer than ever, it seemed.

"Is it the gale that's making your ears flap, Mr Prowse?" snapped Hornblower, in no mood to spare anyone; he regretted the words as soon as they were said, but now there was no time to compensate for them.

Loire was dead to leeward, and beyond her was Ushant. They had opened up the Bay of Lampoul on Ushant's seaward side, and now were beginning to close it again. The moment had come; no, better to wait another minute. The scream of a cannon-ball and a simultaneous crash. There was a gaping hole in the weather side bulwark; the shot had crossed the heeling deck and smashed its way through from within outwards. A seaman at the gun there was looking stupidly at his left arm where the blood was beginning to flow from a splinter wound.

"Stand by to go about!" yelled Hornblower.

Now for it. He had to fool the French captain, who had already proved he was no fool.

"Keep your glass on the Frenchman, Mr Prowse. Tell me just what he's doing. Quartermaster, a little lee helm. Just a little. Handsomely. Helm's alee!"

The fore-topsail shivered. Now every moment was precious, and yet he must delay so as to induce the Frenchman to commit himself.

"His helm's alee, sir! He's coming round."

This would be the moment — actually it was just past the moment — when the Frenchman would expect him to tack to avoid the gunfire, and the Frenchman would try to tack as nearly simultaneously as possible.

"Now, quartermaster. Hard down. Tacks and sheets!"

Hotspur was coming to the wind. Despite the brief delay she was still well under command.

"Mr Bush!"

On the weather side they opened the gun-ports, and the straining gun crews dragged the guns up the slope. A rogue wave slapping against the side came in through the ports and flooded the deck knee deep in water; but the Frenchman must see those gun muzzles run out on the port side.

"He's coming about, sir!" reported Prowse. "He's casting off the braces!"

He must make quite sure.

"Mainsail haul!"

This was the danger point.

"He's past the wind's eye, sir. His foretops'ls coming round."

"Ava-a-ast!"

The surprised crew stopped dead as Hornblower screamed into the speaking-trumpet.

"Brace all back again! Jump to it! Quartermaster! Hard-a-port! Mr Cargill!"

Hornblower waved his hand, and the jib rushed up the stay. With its tremendous leverage on the bowsprit the jib, given a chance, would turn the ship back irresistibly. Cargill and his men were hauling it out to port by main force. There was just enough of an angle for the wind to act upon it in the right direction. Was there? Yes! *Hotspur* was swinging back again, gallantly ignoring her apparent mistreatment and the wave that she met bows-on which burst over her forecastle. She was swinging, more and more rapidly, Cargill and his men hauling down the jib that had played so great a part in the operation.

"Braces, there! She's coming before the wind. Stand by! Quartermaster, meet her as she swings. Mr Bush!"

The guns' crews flung themselves on the tackles and ran the guns in again. It was a pleasure to see Bush restraining their excitement and making certain that they were secure. The ports slammed shut and the crews raced over to the starboard side. He could see the *Loire* now that *Hotspur* had completed her turn, but Prowse was still reporting, as his order dictated.

"She's in irons, sir. She's all a-back."

That was the very thing Hornblower had hoped for. He had believed it likely that he would be able to effect his escape to leeward, perhaps after an exchange of broadsides; this present situation had appeared possible but too good to materialize. The *Loire* was hanging helpless in the wind. Her captain had noted *Hotspur's* manoeuvre just too late. Instead of going round on the other tack, getting his ship under command, and then tacking once more in pursuit, he had tried to follow *Hotspur's* example and revert to his previous course. But with an unskilled crew and without a carefully prepared plan the improvisation had failed disastrously. While Hornblower watched he saw *Loire* yaw off the wind and then swing back again, refusing obstinately, like a frightened horse, to do the sensible thing. And *Hotspur*, dead before the wind, was rushing down upon her. Hornblower measured the dwindling gap with a calculating eye all the keener for his excited condition.

"We'll render passing honours, Mr Bush!" he yelled — no trumpet needed with the wind behind him. "You gunners! Hold your fire until her mainmast comes into your sights. Quartermaster! Starboard a little. We'll pass her close."

'Pistol shot' was the ideal range for firing a broadside according to old tradition, or even 'half pistol shot', twenty yards or ten yards. *Hotspur* was passing *Loire* starboard side to starboard side, but on the starboard side *Hotspur* had her guns run out, manned, and ready, while *Loire* presented to his gaze a line of blank ports — no wonder, with the ship in her present state of confusion.

They were level with her. No. 1 gun went off with a crash; Bush was standing beside it and gave the word, and apparently he intended to walk along the battery firing each gun in turn but *Hotspur* with the wind behind her was going far too fast for him. The other guns went off in a straggling roll. Hornblower saw the splinters fly from the Frenchman's side, saw the holes battered in it. With the wind behind her *Hotspur* was hardly rolling at all; she was pitching, but any cool-headed gun captain could make sure of hitting his mark at fifteen yards. Hornblower saw a single gun-port open in *Loire's* side — they were trying to man the guns, minutes too late. Then he was level with the *Loire's* quarter-deck. He could see the bustling crowd there; for a moment he thought he distinguished the figure of the French captain, but at that moment the carronade beside him went off with a crash that took him by surprise so that he almost leaped from the deck.

"Canister on top of the round-shot, sir," said the gun captain turning to him with a grin. "That'll learn 'em."

A hundred and fifty musket bullets in a round of canister would sweep the *Loire's* quarter-deck like a broom. The marines posted on the deck were all biting fresh cartridges and plying their ramrods — they must have been firing too, without Hornblower perceiving it. Bush was back beside him.

"Every shot told!" he spluttered. "Every single shot, sir!"

It was amazing and interesting to see Bush so excited, but there was still no time for trifles. Hornblower looked back at the *Loire*; she was still in irons — that broadside must have thrown her crew into complete disorder again. And over there was Ushant, grim and black.

"Port two points," he said to the men at the wheel. A sensible man would conserve all the sea room available.

"Shall we come to the wind and finish her off, sir?" asked Bush.

"No."

That was the sensible decision, reached in spite of his fighting madness. Despite the advantage gained by firing an unanswered broadside *Hotspur* was far too weak to enter voluntarily into a duel with *Loire*. If *Loire* had lost a mast, if she had been disabled, he would have tried it. The ships were already a mile apart; in the time necessary to beat back to his enemy she would recover and be ready to receive him. There she was; now she had swung, she had come under control again. It simply would not do.

The crew were chattering like monkeys, and like monkeys they were dancing about the deck in their excitement. Hornblower took the speaking-trumpet to magnify his order.

"Silence!"

At his bellow the ship instantly fell silent, with every eye turned towards him. He was impervious to that, strangely. He paced across the quarter-deck and back again, judging the distance of Ushant, now receding over the starboard quarter, and of the *Loire*, now before the wind. He waited, almost reached his decision, and then waited again, before he gave his orders.

"Helm a-weather! Mr Prowse, back the maintops'l, if you please."

They were in the very mouth of the English Channel now, with *Loire* to windward and with an infinite avenue of escape available to leeward. If *Loire* came down upon him he would lure her up-channel. In a stern chase and with night coming on he would be in little enough danger, and the *Loire* would be cutting herself off from safety with every prospect of encountering powerful units of the British Navy. So he waited, hove-to, on the faint chance that the Frenchman might not resist temptation. Then he saw her yards swing, saw her come about, on to the starboard tack. She was heading for home, heading to keep Brest under her lee. She was acting conservatively and sensibly. But to the world, to everyone in *Hotspur* — and to everyone in the *Loire*, for that matter — *Hotspur* was challenging her to action and she was running for safety with her tail between her legs. At the sight of her in flight the *Hotspur's* crew raised an undisciplined cheer; Hornblower took the speaking-trumpet again.

"Silence!"

The rasp in his voice came from fatigue and strain, for reaction was closing in upon him in the moment of victory. He had to stop and think, he had to prod his mind into activity before he could give his next orders. He hung the speaking-trumpet on its becket and turned to Bush; the two unplanned gestures took on a highly dramatic quality in the eyes of the ship's company, who were standing watching him and expecting some further speech.

"Mr Bush! You can dismiss the watch below, if you would be so kind." Those last words were the result of a considerable effort.

"Aye aye, sir."

"Secure the guns, and dismiss the men from quarters."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Mr Prowse!" Hornblower gauged by a glance at Ushant the precious distance they had lost to leeward. "Put the ship on the port tack close-hauled, if you please."

"Close-hauled on the port tack. Aye aye, sir."

Strictly speaking, that was the last order he need give at this moment. He could abandon himself to his fatigue now, this very second. But a few words of explanation were at least desirable, if not quite necessary.

"We shall have to beat back. Call me when the watch is changed." As he said those words he could form a mental picture of what they implied. He would be able to fall across his cot, take the weight off his weary legs,

let the tensions drain out of him, abandon himself to his fatigue, close his aching eyes, revel in the thought that no further decisions would be demanded of him for an hour or two. Then he recalled himself in momentary surprise. Despite those visions he was still on the quarter-deck with all eyes on him. He knew what he had to say; he knew what was necessary — he had to make an exit, like some wretched actor leaving the stage as the curtain fell. On these simple seamen it would have an effect that would compensate them for their fatigue, that would be remembered and quoted months later, and would — this was the only reason for saying it — help to reconcile them to the endless discomforts of the blockade of Brest. He set his tired legs in motion towards his cabin, and paused at the spot where the greatest number of people could hear his words to repeat them later.

"We are going back to watch Brest again." The melodramatic pause. "*Loire* or no *Loire*."

Chapter 7

Hornblower was seated in the cramped chart-room eating his dinner. This salt beef must have come from the new cask, for there was an entirely different tang about it, not unpleasant. Presumably it had been pickled at some other victualling yard, with a different quality of salt. He dipped the tip of his knife into the mustard pot; that mustard was borrowed — begged — from the wardroom, and he felt guilty about it. The wardroom stores must be running short by now — but on the other hand he himself had sailed with no mustard at all, thanks to the distractions of getting married while commissioning his ship.

"Come in!" he growled in response to a knock.

It was Cummings, one of the 'young gentlemen', First Class Volunteers, King's Letter Boys, with whom the ship was plagued in place of experienced midshipmen, thanks again to the haste with which she had been commissioned.

"Mr Poole sent me, sir. There's a new ship joining the Inshore Squadron."

"Very well. I'll come."

It was a lovely summer day. A few cumulus clouds supplied relief to the blue sky. *Hotspur* was hardly rocking at all as she lay hove-to, her mizzen topsail to the mast, for she was so far up in the approaches to Brest that the moderate easterly wind had little opportunity, since leaving the land, to raise a lop on the water. Hornblower swept his eye round as he emerged on the quarter-deck, landward at first, naturally. They lay right in the mouth of the Goulet, with a view straight up into the Outer Roads. On one side, was the Capuchins, on the other the Petit Minou, with *Hotspur* carefully stationed — as in the days of peace but for a more forceful reason — so that she was just out of cannon-shot of the batteries on those two points. Up the Goulet lay the reefs of the Little Girls, with their outlier, Pollux Reef, and beyond the Little Girls, in the outer roadstead, lay the French navy at anchor, forced to tolerate this constant invigilation because of the superior might of the Channel Fleet waiting outside, just over the horizon.

Hornblower naturally turned his gaze in that direction next. The main body was out of sight, so as to conceal its strength; even Hornblower did not know its present numbers correctly — some twelve ships of the line or so. But well in sight, only three miles out to sea, lay the Inshore Squadron, burly two-deckers lying placidly hove-to, ready at any minute to support *Hotspur* and the two frigates, *Doris* and *Naiad*, should the French decide to come out and drive off these insolent sentries. There had been three of these ships of the line; now, as Hornblower looked, a fourth was creeping in close-hauled to join them. Automatically Hornblower looked over again at the Petit Minou. As he expected, the semaphore arms of the telegraph on the cliffs at the point there were swinging jerkily, from vertical to horizontal and back again. The watchers there were signalling to the French fleet the news of the arrival of this fourth ship to join the inshore squadron; even the smallest activity was noted and reported, so that in clear weather the French admiral was informed within minutes. It was an intolerable nuisance — it helped to smooth the path of the coasters perennially trying to sneak into Brest through the passage of the Raz. Some action should be taken about that semaphore station.

Bush was rating Foreman, whom he was patiently — impatiently — training to be the signal officer of the *Hotspur*.

"Can't you get that number yet?" he demanded.

Foreman was training his telescope; he had not acquired the trick of keeping the other eye open, yet idle. In any case it was not easy to read the flags, with the wind blowing almost directly from one ship to the other.

"Seventy-nine, sir," said Foreman at length.

"You've read it right for once," marvelled Bush. "Now let's see what you do next."

Foreman snapped his fingers as he recalled his duties, and hastened to the signal book on the binnacle. The telescope slipped with a crash to the deck from under his arm as he tried to turn the pages, but he picked it up and managed to find the reference. He turned back to Bush, but a jerk of Bush's thumb diverted him to Hornblower.

"*Tonnant*, sir," he said.

"Now, Mr Foreman, you know better than that. Make your report in proper form and as fully as you can."

"*Tonnant*, sir. Eighty-four guns. Captain Pellew." Hornblower's stony face and steady silence spurred Foreman into remembering the rest of what he should say. "Joining the Inshore Squadron."

"Thank you, Mr Foreman," said Hornblower with the utmost formality, but Bush was already addressing Foreman again, his voice pitched as loudly as if Foreman were on the forecastle instead of three yards away.

"Mr Foreman! The *Tonnant*'s signalling! Hurry up, now."

Foreman scuttled back and raised his telescope.

"That's our number!" he said.

"So I saw five minutes ago. Read the signal."

Foreman peered through the telescope, referring to the book, and checked his reference before looking up at the raging Bush.

"'Send boat'," it says, sir.

"Of course it does. You ought to know all routine signals by heart, Mr Foreman. You've had long enough. Sir, *Tonnant* signals us to send a boat."

"Thank you, Mr Bush. Acknowledge, and clear away the quarter boat."

"Aye aye, sir. Acknowledge!" A second later Bush was blaring again. "Not that halliard, you careless — you careless young gentleman. *Tonnant* can't see the signal through the mizzen tops'l. Send it up to the main tops'l yardarm."

Bush looked over at Hornblower and spread his hands in resignation. Partly he was indicating that he was resigned to this duty of training ignorant young subordinates, but partly the dumb show conveyed some of the feelings aroused by having, in view of Hornblower's known preferences, to call Foreman a 'young gentleman' instead of using some much more forcible expression. Then he turned away to supervise Cummings as he hoisted out the quarter boat. There was everything to be said in favour of these young men being harassed and bullied as they went about their duties, although Hornblower did not subscribe to the popular notion that young men were actually the better for harassment and bullying. They would learn their duties all the quicker; and one of these days Foreman might easily find himself having to read and transmit signals amid the smoke and confusion and slaughter of a fleet action, while Cummings might be launching and manning a boat in desperate haste for a cutting out expedition.

Hornblower remembered his unfinished dinner.

"Call me when the boat returns, if you please, Mr Bush."

This was the last of the blackcurrant jam; Hornblower, ruefully contemplating the sinking level in the final pot, admitted to himself that compulsorily he had actually acquired a taste for blackcurrant. The butter was all gone, the eggs used up, after forty days at sea. For the next seventy-one days, until the ship's provisions were all consumed he was likely to be living on seaman's fare, unrelieved salt beef and pork, dried peas, biscuits. Cheese twice a week and suet pudding on Sundays.

At any rate there was time for a nap before the boat returned. He could go to sleep peacefully — a precaution in case the exigencies of the service disturbed his night — thanks to the naval might of Britain, although five miles away there were twenty thousand enemies any one of whom would kill him on sight.

"Boat coming alongside, sir."

"Very well," answered Hornblower sleepily.

The boat was deeply laden, right down to her gunwales. The hands must have had a long stiff pull back to the *Hotspur*; it was the purest bad luck on them that they could run under sail to the *Tonnant* when lightly laden and then have to row all the way back deeply laden in the teeth of the gentle wind. From the boat as she approached there came a strange roaring noise, a kind of bellow.

"What the devil's that?" asked Bush of himself as he stood beside Hornblower on the gangway.

The boat was heaped high with sacks.

"There's fresh food, anyway," said Hornblower.

"Reeve a whip at the main yardarm!" bellowed Bush — odd how his bellow was echoed from the boat.

Foreman came up the side to report.

"Cabbages, potatoes, cheese, sir. And a bullock."

"Fresh meat, by God!" said Bush.

With half a dozen hands tailing on to the whip at the yardarm the sacks came rapidly up to the deck; as the boat was cleared there lay revealed in the bottom a formless mass of rope netting; still bellowing. Slings were passed beneath it and soon it lay on deck; a miserable undersized bullock, lowing faintly. A terrified eye rolled at them through the netting that swathed it. Bush turned to Hornblower as Foreman completed his report.

"*Tonnant* brought twenty-four cattle out for the fleet from Plymouth, sir. This one's our share. If we butcher it tomorrow, sir, and let it hang for a day, you can have steak on Sunday, sir."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"We can swab the blood off the deck while it's still fresh, sir. No need to worry about that. An' there'll be tripe, sir! Ox tongue!"

"Yes," said Hornblower.

He could still see that terrified eye. He could wish that Bush was not so enthusiastic, because he felt quite the reverse. As his vivid imagination pictured the butchering he felt no desire at all for meat provided by such a process. He had to change the subject.

"Mr Foreman! Were there no messages from the fleet?"

Foreman started guiltily and plunged his hand into his side pocket to produce a bulky packet. He blanched as he saw the fury on Hornblower's face.

"Don't you ever do that again, Mr Foreman! Despatches before everything! You need a lesson and this is the time for it."

"Shall I pass the word for Mr Wise, sir?" asked Bush.

The boatswain's rattan could make vigorous play over Foreman's recumbent form bent over the breech of a gun. Hornblower saw the sick fright in Foreman's face. The boy was as terrified as the bullock; he must have the horror of corporal punishment that occasionally was evident in the navy. It was a horror that Hornblower himself shared. He looked into the pleading desperate eyes for five long seconds to let the lesson sink in.

"No," he said, at length. "Mr Foreman would only remember that for a day. I'll see he gets reminded every day for a week. No spirits for Mr Foreman for seven days; And anyone in the midshipman's berth who tries to help him out will lose his ration for fourteen days. See to that, if you please, Mr Bush."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower snatched the packet from Foreman's lifeless hand, and turned away with contempt in the gesture. No child of fifteen would be any the worse for being deprived of ardent spirits.

In the cabin he had to use his penknife to open the tarred canvas packet. The first thing to tumble out was a grape-shot; the navy had developed through the centuries a routine in these matters — the tarred canvas preserved the contents from salt water if it had to be transported by boat in stormy weather, and the grape-shot would sink it if there were danger of its falling into the hands of the enemy. There were three official letters and a mass of private ones; Hornblower opened the official ones in haste. The first was signed 'Wm Cornwallis, Vice Ad.' It was in the usual form, beginning with the statement of the new situation. Captain Sir Edward Pellew, K.B., in the *Tonnant*, had, as senior officer, received the command of the Inshore Squadron. 'You are therefore requested and required' to obey the orders of the said Captain Sir Edward Pellew, and to pay him the strictest attention, as issued with the authority of the Commander in Chief. The next was signed 'Ed Pellew, Capt.', and was drily official in three lines, confirming the fact that Pellew now considered Hornblower and *Hotspur* as under his command. The third abandoned the formal 'Sir' which began the others.

My dear Hornblower,

It is with the greatest of pleasure that I hear that you are serving under me, and what I have been told of your actions already in the present war confirms the opinion I formed when you were my best midshipman in the old *Indefatigable*. Please consider yourself at liberty to make any suggestions that may occur to you for the confounding of the French and the confusion of Bonaparte.

Your sincere friend,

Edward Pellew.

Now that was a really flattering letter, warming and comforting. Warming, indeed; as Hornblower sat with the letter in his hand he could feel the blood running faster through his veins. For that matter he could almost feel a stirring within his skull as the ideas began to form, as he thought about the signal station on Petit Minou, as the germs of plans began to sprout. They were taking shape; they were growing fast in the hothouse temperature of his mind. Quite unconsciously he began to rise from his chair; only by pacing briskly up and down the quarter-deck could he bring those plans to fruition and create an outlet for the pressure building up inside him. But he remembered the other letters in the packet; he must not fall into the same fault as Foreman. There were letters for him — one, two, six letters all in the same handwriting. It dawned upon him that they must be from Maria — odd that he did not recognize his own wife's handwriting. He was about to open them when he checked himself again. Not one of the other letters was addressed to him, but people in the ship were probably anxiously waiting for them.

"Pass the word for Mr Bush," he bellowed; Bush, when he arrived, was handed the other letters without a word, nor did he stay for one, seeing that his captain was so deeply engaged in reading that he did not even look up.

Hornblower read, several times, that he was Maria's Dearest Husband. The first two letters told him how much she missed her Angel, how happy she had been during their two days of marriage, and how anxious she was that her Hero was not running into danger, and how necessary it was to change his socks if they should get wet. The third letter was dated from Plymouth. Maria had ascertained that the Channel Fleet was based there, and she had decided to move so as to be on the spot should the necessities of the Service send *Hotspur* back into port; also, as she admitted sentimentally, she would be nearer her Beloved. She had made the journey in the coasting troy, committing herself (with many thoughts of her Precious) to the Briny Deep for the first time, and as she gazed at the distant land she had reached a better understanding of the feelings of her Valiant Sailor Husband. Now she was comfortably established in lodgings kept by a most respectable woman, widow of a boatswain.

The fourth letter began precipitately with the most delightful, the most momentous news for her Darling. Maria hardly knew how to express this to her most Loved, her most Adored Idol. Their marriage, already so Blissful, was now to be further Blessed, or at least she fancied so. Hornblower opened the fifth letter in haste, passing over the hurried postscript which said that Maria had just learned the news of her Intrepid Warrior adding to his Laurels by engaging with the *Loire*, and that she hoped he had not exposed himself more than was necessary to his Glory. He found the news confirmed. Maria was more sure than ever that she was destined to be so vastly fortunate in the future as to be the Mother of the Child of her Ideal. And the sixth letter repeated the confirmation. There might be a Christmas Baby, or a New Year's Child; Hornblower noted wryly that much more space in these later letters was devoted to the Blessed Increase than to her Longed-for but Distant Jewel. In any case Maria was consumed with hope that the Little Cherub, if a Boy, would be the Image of his Famous Father, or, if a Girl, that she should display his Sweetness of Disposition.

So that was the news. Hornblower sat with the six letters littered before him, his mind in just as much disorder. Perhaps to postpone realization he dwelt at first on the thought of the two letters he had written — addressed to Southsea they would be a long time before they caught up with Maria — and their comparatively formal and perhaps chilling content. He would have to remedy that. He would have to write a letter full of affection and full of delight at the news, whether he were delighted or not — and at that point he could reach no decision. Plunged as he was into professional problems the episode of his marriage was suffused in his memory with unreal quality. The affair was so brief, and even at the time it had been so overlain by the

business of getting to sea, that it had seemed strange to him that it should involve the lasting effects of marriage; and this news was an indication of more lasting and permanent effects still. He was going to be a father. For the life of him he could not tell if he were pleased or not. Certainly he was sorry for the child if he — or she — were destined to inherit his accursed unhappy temperament. The more the child should prove to be like him, — whether in looks or in morals, the sorrier he would be. Yet was that quite true? Was there not something flattering, something gratifying, in the thought that his own characteristics might be perpetuated? It was hard to be honest with himself.

He could remember, with his mind now diverted from his present life, more clearly the details of his honeymoon. He could conjure up more exactly his memories of Maria's doting affection, of the wholehearted way in which she gave herself to believe, that she could not give so much love without its being as hotly reciprocated. He must never let her guess at the quality of his feelings for her, because that would be a cruelty that he could not contemplate. He reached for pen and paper, returning to the commonplace world with his routine annoyance at having a left wing pen. Pens from the left wing of the goose were cheaper than right wing ones, because when held in position for writing they pointed towards the writer's eye and not conveniently out over his elbow as right wing ones did. But at least he had cut a good point and the ink had not yet grown muddy. Grimly he applied himself to his task. Partly it was a literary exercise, an Essay on Unbounded Affection, and yet — and yet — he found himself smiling as he wrote; he felt tenderness within him, welling out perhaps along his arm and down his pen. He was even on the verge of admitting to himself that he was not entirely the cold-hearted and unscrupulous individual he believed himself to be.

Towards the close of the letter, as he searched for synonyms for 'wife' and 'child', his glance strayed back to the letters from Pellew, and he actually caught his breath, his thoughts reverting to his duty, to his plans for slaughter, to the harsh realities of the world he was living in. *Hotspur* was riding easily over the placid sea, but the very fact that she was lying hove-to meant that there was a fair wind out of Brest and that at any moment a shout from the topmast-head would announce that the French Navy was on its way out to contest in thunder and smoke the mastery of the sea. And he had plans; even as he re-read the latest lines of his letter to Maria his vision was blurred by the insistence on his attention of his visualization of the chart of the entrance to Brest. He had to take tight hold of himself to compel himself to finish the letter to Maria in the same strain as he had begun it. He made himself finish it, he made himself re-read it, he made himself fold it; a shout to the sentry brought in Grimes with a lighted dip with which to seal it, and when he had completed the tiresome process it was with eager relief that he laid the letter aside and reached for a fresh sheet of paper.

H.M. Sloop *Hotspur*, at sea, the *Petit Minou* bearing north one league.

May 14th, 1803

Sir —

This was an end of mellifluous phrasing, of blundering attempts to deal with a totally unfamiliar situation; no longer was he addressing (as if in a dream) the Dear Companion of our Lives Together in Happy Years to Come. Now he was applying himself to a task that he felt competent and eager to do, and for phrasing he had only to draw upon the harsh and unrelieved wording of a myriad official letters before this one. He wrote rapidly and with little pause for consideration, because fantastically his plans had reached complete maturity during his preoccupation with Maria. The sheet was covered, turned and half covered again, and the plan was sketched out in full detail. He wrote the conclusion:

Respectfully submitted by

Your ob'd't servant

Horatio Hornblower.

He wrote the address:

Captain Sir E. Pellew, K. B.

H.M.S. *Tonnant*.

When the second letter was sealed he held the two of them in his hand; new life in the one, and death and misery in the other. That was a fanciful thought — of far more importance was the question as to whether Pellew would approve of his suggestions.

Chapter 8

Hornblower lay stretched out on his cot waiting for the time to pass. He would have preferred to be asleep, but during the afternoon sleep had refused to come to him. It was better to go on lying here in any case, for he would need all his strength during the night to come, and if he followed his inclinations and went on deck he would not only tire himself but he would reveal his anxieties and tensions to his subordinates. So he lay as relaxed as he could manage, flat on his back with his hands behind his head; the sounds that he heard on deck told him of the progress of the ship's routine. Just over his head the telltale compass which he had had fitted to the deckbeams was literally carrying out its functions and telling the tale of *Hotspur's* small alterations of heading as she lay hove-to, and these could be correlated with the play of the beams of sunshine that came in through the stern windows. Those were now curtained, and the sunbeams came in around the curtains as they swayed gently with the ship's motion. Most captains curtained — and furnished — their cabins with gay chintz, or even, if wealthy, with damask, but these curtains were of canvas. They were of the finest, No. 8, sailcloth to be found in the ship and had only hung there for the last two days. Hornblower thought about this pleasantly, for they had been a present to him from the wardroom; Bush and Prowse, and the surgeon, Wallis, and the purser, Hufnell, had made the presentation after a mysterious request from Bush that they should be allowed to enter his cabin for a moment in his absence. Hornblower had returned to the cabin to find the deputation there and the cabin transformed. There were curtains and cushions — stuffed with oakum — and a coverlet, all gay with red and blue roses and green leaves painted on with ship's paint by some unknown artist in the ship's company. Hornblower had looked round in astonishment that made it impossible to conceal his pleasure. There was no time to glower or look stern, as nine captains out of ten would have done at such an unwarrantable liberty on the part of the wardroom. He could do no more than thank them in halting phrases; and the greatest pleasure only came after later consideration, when he faced the situation realistically. They had not done this as a joke, or in a silly attempt to win his favour. He had to believe the unbelievable, and accept the fact that they had done it because they liked him. That showed their poor judgement; gratification warred with guilt in his mind, yet the fact that they had dared to do such a thing was a strange but undeniable confirmation that the *Hotspur* was welding herself into a fighting entity.

Grimes knocked at the door and entered. "They're calling the watch, sir," he said.

"Thank you. I'll come." The squeals of the pipes and the bellowings of the petty officers echoing through the ship made Grimes' words a little superfluous, but Hornblower had to act the part of a newly awakened man. He retied his neckcloth and pulled on his coat, slipped on his shoes and walked out on deck. Bush was there with paper and pencil in his hand.

"The semaphore's been signalling, sir," he reported. "Two long messages at fifteen minutes past four and four-thirty. Two short ones at — there they go again, sir."

The long gaunt arms of the semaphore were jerkily swinging out and up and back again.

"Thank you, Mr Bush." It was sufficient to know that the semaphore had been busy. Hornblower took the glass and trained it out to seaward. The Inshore Squadron was sharply silhouetted against the clear sky; the sun, just down on the horizon, was still so bright that he could not look towards it at all, but the squadron was well to the northward of it.

"*Tonnant's* signalling again, sir, but it's a ninety-one signal," reported Foreman.

"Thank you."

It had been agreed that all flag-signals from *Tonnant* preceded by the numerals ninety-one should be disregarded; *Tonnant* was only making them to deceive the French on Petit Minou into thinking some violent action was being planned by the inshore squadron.

"There goes *Naiad*, sir," said Bush.

Under easy sail the frigate was creeping northward from her station to the south where she had been watching over Carnarot Bay, heading to join the big ships and the *Doris*. The sun was now touching the sea; small variations in the water content of the nearly clear air were causing strange freaks of refraction, so that the reddening disc was lightly out of shape as it sank.

"They're heaving the long boat up out of its chocks, sir," commented Bush.

"Yes."

The sun was half-way down in the sea, the remaining half pulled by refraction into twice its normal length. There was still plenty of light for an observer with a good glass on *Petit Minou* — and undoubtedly there was one — to pick out the preparations going on on the *Doris*'s deck and in the big ships. The sun had gone. Above where it had sunk a small sliver of cloud shone brilliantly gold and then turned to pink as he looked. Twilight was closing in on them.

"Send the hands to the braces, if you please, Mr Bush. Fill the main-tops'l and lay her on the starboard tack."

"Starboard tack. Aye aye, sir."

Hotspur crept northward through the growing night, following after *Doris*, heading towards the big ships and Point Matthew.

"There goes the semaphore again, sir."

"Thank you."

There was just light enough in the darkening sky to see the telegraphic arms silhouetted against it, as they spun round, signalling the latest move on the part of the British, this concentration towards the north — this relaxing of the hold of the British navy on the passages of the south.

"Only just keep her going," said Hornblower to the quartermasters at the helm. "Don't let the Frogs see what we're up to."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower was feeling nervous; he did not want to leave the Toulinguet Passage too far behind him. He turned his glass towards the inshore squadron. Now there was a strip of red sky along the horizon behind it — the last light of day — and against it the sails of the ships of the line stood out in startling black. The red was fading rapidly, and above it Venus could be seen; Pellew over there was holding on to the last possible moment. Pellew was not only a man of iron nerve; he was a man who never underestimated his enemy. At last; the rectangles of the silhouetted topsails shortened, hesitated, and lengthened again.

"Inshore Squadron's hauled its wind, sir."

"Thank you."

Already the topsails were out of sight with the complete fading of the sky. Pellew had timed the move perfectly. A Frenchman on *Petit Minou* could not help but think that Pellew, looking towards the night-covered east, had thought that his ships were now invisible, and had come to the wind without realizing that the move could still be seen by an observer looking towards the west. Hornblower stared round him. His eyes were aching, so that with his hands on the hammock netting he closed his eyes to rest them. Never had a minute seemed so long as that one. Then he opened them again. The light was all gone. Venus was shining where once the sun had shone. The figures about him were almost invisible. Now one or two of the brighter stars could be seen, and *Hotspur* must be lost to sight, to that unknown observer on *Petit Minou*. He gulped, braced himself, and plunged into action.

"Take in the tops'ls and topgallants!"

Hands rushed aloft. In the gentle night the vibration of the shrouds as fifty men ran up the ratlines could be distinctly heard.

"Now, Mr Bush, wear the ship, if you please. Course sou' by west."

"Sou' by west, sir."

Soon it was time for the next order.

"Send the topgallant masts down!"

This was the time when drill and practice revealed their value. In the dark night what had once been a mere toilsome exercise was performed without a hitch.

"Set the fore and main topmast stays'ls. Get the fores'l in."

Hornblower walked over to the binnacle.

"How does she handle under this sail?"

There was a pause while the almost invisible figure at the wheel spun it tentatively this way and that. "Well enough, sir."

"Very well."

Hornblower had altered the silhouette of the *Hotspur* as entirely as he could. With only her fore and aft sails and her main course set, and her topgallant masts sent down, even an experienced seaman on this dark night would have to look twice or thrice to recognize what he saw. Hornblower peered at the chart in the faint light of the binnacle. He concentrated on it, to find the effort unnecessary. For two days now he had been studying it and memorizing this particular section; it was fixed in his mind and it seemed as if he would be able to visualize it to his dying day — which might be today. He looked up, to find, as he expected, that exposure to that faint light had temporarily made his eyes quite blind in the darkness. He would not do it again.

"Mr Prowse! You can keep your eye on the chart from now on when you think it necessary. Mr Bush! Choose the best two hands you know with the lead and send them aft to me." When the two dark figures reported Hornblower gave them curt orders. "Get into the main chains on each side. I don't want you to make a sound more than you can help. Don't make a cast unless I order it. Haul your lines in and then let 'em out to four fathoms. We're making three knots through the water, and when the flood starts we'll be making next to nothing over the ground. Keep your fingers on your lines and pass the word quietly about what you feel. I'll station hands to pass the word. Understand?"

"Aye aye, sir."

Four bells struck to mark the end of the second dog watch.

"Mr Bush, that's the last time I want the bell to strike. Now you may clear for action. No, wait a moment, if you please. I want the guns loaded with two rounds of shot each and run out. Have the coigns in and the guns at extreme depression. And as soon as the men are at their quarters I don't want to hear another sound. Not a word, not a whisper. The man who drops a hand-spike on the deck will get two dozen. Not the slightest sound."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Very well, Mr Bush. Carry on."

There was a roar and a rattle as the hands went to their quarters, as the gun-ports opened and the guns were run out. Then silence closed in upon the ship. Everything was ready, from the gunner down in the magazine to the look-out in the foretop, as the *Hotspur* reached silently down to the southward with the wind one point abaft the beam.

"One bell in the first watch, sir," whispered Prowse, turning the sand-glass by the binnacle. An hour ago the flood tide had started to make. In another half-hour the clustered coasters to the southward, huddled under the shelter of the batteries at Camaret, would be casting off; no, they would be doing that at this moment, for there should be just enough water for them. They would be sweeping and hedging out, to run with the flood up the dangerous Toulinguet Passage, round the point and up the Goulet. They would hope to reach the Little Girls and safety, as the tide carried them into Brest Roads where the provisions and the cordage and the canvas with which they were laden were so eagerly awaited by the French fleet. To the north, back at the Petit Minou, Hornblower could imagine the bustle and the excitement. The movements of the Inshore Squadron must have been noted. Sharp eyes on the French shore had told anxious minds of the insufficiently concealed preparations for a concentration of force and a heavy blow. Four ships of the line and two big frigates could muster a landing force — even without drawing on the main fleet — of a thousand men or more. There were probably twice as many French infantry and artillery-men along the coast there, but, spread out along five miles, they were vulnerable to a sharp attack launched at an unexpected point on a dark night. There was a large accumulation of coasting vessels there as well, sheltering under the batteries on the far side of Cape Matthew. They had crept from battery to battery for hundreds of miles — spending weeks in doing so — and now were huddled in the little creeks and bays waiting for a chance to complete the last and most dangerous run into Brest. The menacing approach of the inshore squadron would make them nervous in case the British meditated some new attack, a cutting-out expedition, or fireships, or bombvessels, or even these newfangled rockets. But at least this concentration of the British strength to the north left the south unwatched, as the signal station of Petit Minou would report. The coasters round Camaret — chasse-marees, tide-chasers —

would be able to take advantage of the tide run through the horribly dangerous Toulinguet Passage up into the Goulet. Hornblower was hoping, in fact he was confident, that *Hotspur* had not been seen to turn back to stop this bolt hole. She drew six feet of water less than any frigate, hardly more than the big chasse-marees, and were she boldly handled her arrival among the rocks and shoals of Toulinguet would be totally unexpected.

"Two bells, sir," whispered Prowse. This was the moment when the tide would be running at its fastest, a four knot tide, rising a full thirty feet, racing up through Toulinguet Passage and round the Council Rocks into the Goulet. The hands were behaving well; only twice had restless individuals started skylarking in the darkness, to be instantly suppressed by stern mutterings from the petty officers.

"Touching bottom to starboard, sir," came a whisper from the gangway, and instantly afterwards, "Touching bottom to port."

The hands at the leads had twenty-four feet of line out between the leads and the surface of the water, but with the ship moving gently in this fashion even the heavy leads trailed behind to some extent. There must be some sixteen feet only — five feet to spare.

"Pass the word. What bottom do you feel?"

In ten seconds the answer came back. "Sandy bottom, sir."

"That must be well off Council Rocks, sir," whispered Prowse.

"Yes. Quartermaster, one point to starboard."

Hornblower stared through the night-glass. There was the shadowy shore-line just visible. Yes, and there was a gleam of white, the gentlest of surfs breaking on Council Rocks. A whisper from the gangway.

"Rocky bottom now, sir, shoaling a little."

"Very well."

On the starboard bow he could see faint whiteness too. That was the surf on all the wild tangle of rocks and shoals outside the Passage — Corbin, Trepieds, and so on. The tiny night breeze was still holding steady.

"Pass the word. What bottom?"

The question awaited an answer for some time, as the chain of communication broke down and the answer had to be repeated. At last it came.

"Rocky bottom, sir. But we're hardly moving over the ground."

So *Hotspur* was now stemming the rising tide, hanging suspended in the darkness, less than a yard of water under her keel, the tide rushing past her, the wind thrusting her into it. Hornblower worked out problems in his head.

"Quartermaster, two points to port."

It called for nice calculation, for now *Hotspur* was braced sharp up — twice the staysails had flapped in warning — and there was leeway to be allowed for as *Hotspur* crept crabwise across the tide.

"Mr Bush, go for'ard to the port side main chains and come back to report."

What a lovely night it was, with this balmy air sighing through the rigging, the stars shining and the gentle sound of the surf.

"We're moving over the ground, sir," whispered Bush. "Rocky bottom, and the port side lead's under the ship." *Hotspur's* crabwise motion would produce that effect.

"Three bells, sir," reported Prowse.

There would be water enough now for the coasters to negotiate the shoals off Rougaste and to have entered into the channel. It could not be long now, for the tide flowed for no more than four and a half hours and the coasters could not afford to waste time — or so he had calculated when he had made his suggestion to Pellew, for this moonless night with the tide making at this particular moment. But it might of course all end in a ridiculous fiasco, even if *Hotspur* did not touch on one of the menacing rocks that beset her course.

"Look, sir! Look!" whispered Bush urgently. "One point before the beam!"

Yes. A shadowy shape, a darker nucleus on the dark surface. More than that; the splash of a sweep at work. More than that; other dark shapes beyond. There had been fifty coasters, by the last intelligence, at Camaret, and the chances were they would try the run all together.

"Get down to the starboard battery, Mr Bush. Warn the guns' crews. Wait for my order, and then make every shot tell."

"Aye aye, sir."

Despite the precautions he had taken, *Hotspur* would be far more visible than the coasters; she should have been observed from them by now; except that the Frenchmen would be preoccupied with their problems of navigation. Ah! There was a yell from the nearest coaster, a whole series of hails and shouts and warnings.

"Open fire, Mr Bush!"

A red glare in the darkness, an ear-splitting bang, the smell of powder smoke. Another glare, another bang. Hornblower fumbled for the speaking-trumpet, ready to make himself heard through the firing. But Bush was behaving admirably, and the gunners were keeping their heads, with the guns going off singly as the captains made sure of their targets. With the guns depressed the two round-shot hurtling from each would sweep the smooth surface of the sea. Hornblower thought he could hear shrieks from the stricken coasters, but the guns were firing at only the briefest intervals. The gentle wind swept the smoke along the ship, clouds of it billowing in dark waves round Hornblower. He leaned out to keep clear of it. The din was continuous now, as guns fired, as the carriage-trucks rumbled over the deck, as gun-captains bellowed orders. The flash of a gun illuminated something close overside — a sinking coaster, deck level with the water. Her frail side must have been beaten in by half a dozen round-shot. A yell from the main chains cut through the din.

"Here's one of 'em coming aboard!"

Some desperate swimmer had reached the *Hotspur*; Hornblower could leave Bush to deal with prisoners of that sort. There were more dark shapes to starboard, more targets presenting themselves. The mass of the coasters was being hurried along by the three-knot tide which *Hotspur* was stemming by the aid of the wind. Tug at their sweeps as they might, the French crews could not possibly counter the tide. They could not turn back; to turn aside was possible — but on one side were the Council Rocks, on the other were Corbin and Trepieds and the whole tangle of reefs roundabout them. *Hotspur* was having experiences like those of Gulliver; she was a giant compared with these Lilliputian coasters after having been a dwarf in her encounter with the Brobdingnagian *Loire*.

Fine on the port bow Hornblower caught sight of half a dozen pin-points of fire. That would be the battery on Toulinguet, two thousand yards away. At that range they were welcome to try their luck, firing at *Hotspur*'s gun flashes. *Hotspur*, still travelling slowly over the ground, was a moving target, and the French would be disturbed in their aim through fear of hitting the coasters. Night-firing in those conditions was a waste of powder and shot. Foreman was yelling, wild with excitement, to the crew of the quarter-deck carronade.

"She's aground! Drop it — dead 'un!"

Hornblower swung round to look; the coaster there was undoubtedly on the rocks and consequently not worth firing at. He mentally gave a mark of approval to Foreman, who despite his youth and his excitement was keeping his head, even though he made use of the vocabulary of the rat-killing pit.

"Four bells, sir," reported Prowse amid the wild din. That was an abrupt reminder to Hornblower that he must keep his head, too. It was hard to think and to calculate, harder still to recall his visualization of the chart, and yet he had to do so. He realized that *Hotspur* could have nothing to spare over on the landward side.

"Wear the ship — Mr Prowse," he said; he remembered just too late to use the formal address completely naturally. "Get her over on the port tack."

"Aye aye, sir."

Prowse seized the speaking-trumpet and somewhere in the darkness disciplined men hurried to sheets and braces. As *Hotspur* swung about another dark shape came down at her from the channel.

"*Je me rends! Je me rends!*" a voice was shouting from it.

Someone in that coaster was trying to surrender before *Hotspur*'s broadside could blow her out of the water. She actually bumped against the side as the current took her round, and then she was free — her surrender had been premature, for now she was past *Hotspur* and vanishing in the farther darkness.

"Main chains, there," yelled Hornblower. "Take a cast of the lead."

"Two fathoms!" came the answering cry. There was only six inches under *Hotspur*'s keel, but now she was drawing away from the perils on one side and approaching those on the other.

"Man the port-side guns! Keep the lead going on the starboard!"

Hotspur was steady on her new course as another unhappy coaster loomed up. In the momentary stillness Hornblower could hear Bush's voice as he called the port-side guns' crews to attention, and then came the crash of the firing. The smoke billowed round, and through the clouds came the cry of the leadsman.

"By the mark three!"

The smoke and the lead told conflicting stories.

"And a half three!"

"Wind must be backing, Mr Prowse. Keep your eye on the binnacle."

"Aye aye, sir. And it's five bells, sir."

The tide was almost at its height; another factor to be remembered. At the port-side quarter-deck carronade the crew were slewing their weapon round to the limit of its arc, and Hornblower, looking over the quarter, could see a coaster escaping past *Hotspur's* stern. Two flashes from the dark shape, and a simultaneous crash under Hornblower's feet. That coaster had guns mounted, and was firing her pop-gun broadside, and at least one shot had told. A pop-gun broadside perhaps, but even a four-pounder could smash a hole in *Hotspur's* frail side. The carronade roared out in reply.

"Luff a little," said Hornblower to the quartermasters; his mind was simultaneously recording the cries of the men at the leads. "Mr Bush! Stand by with the port-side guns as we luff."

Hotspur came to the wind; on the main-deck there were creakings and groanings as the guns' crews laboured with handspike and crowbar to train their weapons round.

"Take your aim!" shouted Bush, and after some pregnant seconds, "Fire!"

The guns went off almost together, and Hornblower thought — although he was sure he was wrong — that he could hear instantly afterwards the crash of the shot upon the coasters' hulls. Certainly after that he heard shouts and cries from that direction while the smoke blinded him, but he had no time to spare for that. There was only half an hour of floodtide left. No more coasters could be coming along the channel, for if they did they would not be able to round the Council Rocks before the ebb set in. And it was full time to extricate *Hotspur* from the reefs and shoals that surrounded her. She needed what was left of the flood to carry her out, and even at half-tide she was likely to touch bottom and be left ignominiously stranded, helpless in daylight under the fire of the Toulinguet battery.

"Time to say good-bye," he said to Prowse. He realized with a shock that he was on the edge of being lightheaded with strain and excitement, for otherwise he would not have said such a ridiculous thing. He must keep himself under control for a long while to come. It would be far more dangerous to touch bottom on a falling tide than on a rising one. He gulped and steadied himself, regaining his self-command at the cost of one more fierce effort.

"I'll handle the ship, Mr Prowse." He raised the trumpet.

"Hands to the braces! Hands wear ship."

A further order to the wheel brought the ship round on the other tack, with Prowse at the binnacle calling her heading. Now he had to thread his way out through the perils that encompassed her. The hands, completely carefree, were inclined to show their elation by noisy skylarking, but one single savage reproof from Bush silenced them, and *Hotspur* fell as quiet as a church as she crept out.

"Wind's backed three points since sunset, sir," reported Prowse.

"Thank you."

With the wind just abaft the beam *Hotspur* handled easily, but by this time instinct had to take the place of calculation. Hornblower had come in to the very limit of safety at high water over shallows hardly covered at high tide. He had to feel his way out, by the aid of the lead, by what could be seen of the shore and the shoals. The wheel spun over and back again as the ship nosed her way out. For a few perilous seconds she was sailing by the lee, but Hornblower was able to order the helm over again in the nick of time.

"Slack water now, sir," reported Prowse.

"Thank you."

Slack water, if any of the incalculable factors had not intervened. The wind had been slight but steady for several days from the southeastward. He had to bear that in mind along with all the other factors.

"By the mark five!" called the leadsman.

"Thank God!" mustered Prowse.

For the first time *Hotspur* had nearly twenty feet of water under her keel, but there were still some outlying pinnacles of rock to menace her.

"Starboard a point," ordered Hornblower.

"Deep six!"

"Mr Bush!" Hornblower must stay steady and calm. He must betray no relief, no human feelings, although within him the desire to laugh like an idiot welled up in combat with the frightful exhaustion he felt. "Kindly secure the guns. Then you may dismiss the hands from general quarters."

"Aye aye, sir."

"I must thank you, Mr Prowse, for your very able assistance."

"Me, sir?" Prowse went on in incoherent self-depreciation. Hornblower could imagine the lantern-jaws working in surprise, and he ignored the mumblings.

"You may heave the ship to, Mr Prowse. We don't want dawn to find us under the guns of Petit Minou."

"No, sir, of course not, sir."

All was well. *Hotspur* had gone in and come out again. The coasters from the south had received a lesson they would not forget for a long time. And now it was apparent that the night was not so dark; it was not a question of eyes becoming habituated to the darkness, but something more definite than that. Faces were now a blur of white, visible across the deck. Looking aft Hornblower could see the low hills of Quelern standing out in dark relief against a lighter sky, and while he watched a grain of silver became visible over their summits. He had actually forgotten until this moment that the moon was due to rise now; that had been one of the factors he had pointed out in his letter to Pellew. The gibbous moon rose above the hilltops and shone serenely down upon the Gulf. The topgallant masts were being sent up, topsails were being set, staysails got in.

"What's that noise?" asked Hornblower, referring to a dull thumping somewhere forward.

"Carpenter plugging a shot hole, sir," explained Bush. "That last coaster holed us just above the waterline on the starboard side right forward."

"Anyone hurt?"

"No, sir."

"Very well."

His questions and his formal termination of the conversation were the result of one more effort of will.

"I can trust you not to lose your way now, Mr Bush," he said. He could not help being jocular, although he knew it sounded a false note. The hands at the braces were backing the main-topsail, and *Hotspur* could lie hove-to in peace and quiet. "You may set the ordinary watches, Mr Bush. And see that I am called at eight bells in the middle watch."

"Aye aye, sir."

There were four and a half hours of peace and quiet ahead of him. He yearned with all his weary mind and body for rest — for oblivion, rather than rest. An hour after dawn, at the latest, Pellew could expect him to send in his report on the events of the evening, and it would take an hour to compose it. And he must take the opportunity to write to Maria so that the letter could be sent to *Tonnant* along with the report and so have a chance to reach the outside world. It would take him longer to write to Maria than to Pellew. That reminded him of something else. He had to make one more effort.

"Oh, Mr Bush!"

"Sir?"

'I'll be sending a boat to *Tonnant* during the morning watch. If any officer — or if any of the men — wish to send letters that will be their opportunity.'

"Aye aye, sir. Thank you, sir."

In his cabin he faced one further effort to pull off his shoes, but the arrival of Grimes saved him the trouble. Grimes took off his shoes, eased him out of his coat, unfastened his neckcloth. Hornblower allowed him to do it; he was too weary even to be self-conscious. For one moment he luxuriated in allowing his weary feet free play in his stockings, but then he fell spreadeagled on to his cot, half-prone, half on his side, his head on his arms, and Grimes covered him up and left him.

That was not the most sensible attitude to adopt, as he discovered when Grimes shook him awake. He ached in every joint, it seemed, while to dash cold sea water on his face did little enough to clear his head. He had to

struggle out of the after-effects of a long period of strain as other men had to struggle out of the after-effects of a drinking bout. But he had recovered sufficiently to move his left-handed pen when he sat down and began his report.

'Sir,

In obedience to your instructions, dated the 16th instant, I proceeded on the afternoon of the 18th . . .'

He had to leave the last paragraph until the coming of daylight should reveal what he should write in it, and he laid the letter aside and took another sheet. He had to bite the end of his pen before he could even write the salutation in this second letter, and when he had written 'My dear Wife' he had to bite it again before he could continue. It was something of a relief to have Grimes enter at last.

"Mr Bush's compliments, sir, and it's not far off daylight."

That made it possible to conclude the letter.

'And now, my dearest —' Hornblower glanced at Maria's letter to select an endearment — 'Angel, my duty calls me once more on deck, so that I must end this letter with —' another reference — 'fondest love to my dear Wife, the loved Mother of the Child to be.

Your affectionate Husband,
Horatio.'

Daylight was coming up fast when he arrived on deck.

"Brace the maintops! round, if you please, Mr Young. We'll stand to the s'uth'ard a little. Good morning, Mr Bush."

"Good morning, sir."

Bush was already trying to see to the southward through his telescope. Increasing light and diminishing distance brought rapid results.

"There they are, sir! God, sir — one, two, three — and there are two others over on the Council Rocks. And that looks like a wreck right in the fairway — that's one we sunk, I'll wager, sir."

In the glittering dawn the half-tide revealed wrecks littering the shoals and the shore, black against the crystal light, the coasters which had paid the penalty of trying to run the blockade.

"They're all holed and waterlogged, sir," said Bush. "Not a hope of salvage."

Hornblower was already composing in his mind the final paragraph of his report.

"I have reason to believe that not less than ten sail of coasters were sunk or forced to run aground during this encounter. This happy result . . ."

"That's a fortune lost, sir," grumbled Bush. "That's a tidy sum in prize money over on those rocks."

No doubt, but in those decisive moments last night there could have been no question of capture. *Hotspur's* duty had been to destroy everything possible, and not to fill her captain's empty purse by sending boats to take possession, at the cost of allowing half the quarry to escape. Hornblower's reply was cut off short, as the smooth water on the starboard beam suddenly erupted in three successive jets of water. A cannon-ball had come skipping towards them over the surface, to make its final plunge a cable's length away. The sound of gunfire reached their ears at the same moment, and their instantly elevated telescopes revealed a cloud of smoke engulfing the Toulinguet battery.

"Fire away, Monseer le Frog," said Bush. "The damage is done."

"We may as well make sure we're out of range," said Hornblower. "Put the ship about, if you please."

He was trying as best he could to reproduce Bush's complete indifference under fire. He told himself that he was only being sensible, and not cowardly, in making certain that there was no chance of *Hotspur's* being hit by a salvo of twenty-four-pounders, but he was inclined to sneer at himself, all the same.

Yet there was one source of self-congratulation. He had held his tongue when the subject of prize money had come up in the conversation. He had been about to burst out condemning the whole system as pernicious, but he had managed to refrain. Bush thought him a queer character in any case, and if he had divulged his opinion of prize money — of the system by which it was earned and paid — Bush would have thought him more than merely eccentric. Bush would think him actually insane, and liberal-minded, revolutionary, subversive and dangerous as well.

Chapter 9

Hornblower stood ready to go down the side into the waiting boat. He made the formal, legal speech.

"Mr Bush, you will take command."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower remembered to look about him as he prepared to make the descent. He glowered round at the sideboys in the white gloves that Bush had had made for this ceremonial purpose out of white twine by some seaman adept with a hook — 'crochet' was the French name for this process. He ran his eyes up and down the bos'n's mates as they piped his departing salute. Then he went over the side. The piping stopped at the same moment as his foot reached for the thwart — that was a measure of the height of *Hotspur's* free-board, for by the rules of ceremonial the honours ceased the moment the departing officer's head was at the level of the deck. Hornblower scrambled into the stern sheets, embarrassed by hat and gloves and sword and boat cloak, and he barked an order to Hewitt. The boat-hook released its hold and there was a moment of apparent disorder as the boat left the ship's side and four brawny arms at the halliards sent the balance-lug up the mast. There was a decided strangeness at sitting here on a level with the water, with the green waves close at hand; it was over eight weeks since Hornblower had last set foot outside the ship.

The boat settled on her course, running free because the wind had backed southerly several points, and Hornblower looked back at *Hotspur* lying hove-to. He ran a professional eye over her lines, noting, as an observer from the outside again, the relative heights of her masts, the distances at which they were stepped, the rake of the bowsprit. He knew a great deal now about the behaviour of the ship under sail, but there was always more to learn. Not at this moment, though, for a stronger puff of wind laid the boat over and Hornblower felt suddenly uncertain both of his surroundings and himself. The little waves of which *Hotspur* took no notice were monstrous when encountered in a small boat, which, besides lying over, was now rising and swooping in a most unpleasant fashion. After the reassuring solidity of *Hotspur's* deck — after painfully accustoming himself to her motion — these new surroundings and these new antics were most unsettling, especially as Hornblower was excited and tense at the prospect before him. He swallowed hard, battling against the sea-sickness which had leaped out of ambush for him; to divert his mind he concentrated his attention upon the *Tonnant*, growing slowly nearer — much too slowly.

At her main topgallant masthead she sported the coveted broad pendant in place of the narrow one worn by other ships in commission. It was the sign of a captain with executive powers over other ships besides his own. Pellew was not only high up in the captains' list but clearly destined for important command as soon as he reached flag rank; there must be rear admirals in the Channel Fleet bitterly jealous of Pellew's tenure of the Inshore Command. A boat came along her starboard side, painted white picked out with red, and of a design unlike that of the workaday boats supplied by the Navy Office. Hornblower could see the matching red and white uniforms of the boat's crew; this must be some very dandy captain at least, paying a call — or more likely a flag officer. Hornblower saw a ribboned and epauletted figure go up the side, and across the water came the sound of the squealing of the pipes and the boomp-bump noise that to his ears indicated a band playing. Next moment the White Ensign broke out at the fore-topmasthead. A vice admiral of the White! That could be no other than Cornwallis himself.

Hornblower realized that this meeting to which he had been summoned by the curt signal 'All captains', was something more than a sociable gathering. He looked down in distress at his shabby clothing, reminded as he did so to open his boat cloak and reveal the epaulette on his left shoulder — a shabby brassy thing, dating back to the time of his earlier, disallowed appointment as commander, two years ago. Hornblower distinctly saw the officer of the watch, in attendance at the gangway, turn from his telescope and give an order which sent four of the eight white-gloved sideboys there scurrying out of sight, so that a mere commander should not share the honours given a vice admiral. The admiral's barge had sheered off and the *Hotspur's* boat took its place, with Hornblower not too seasick and nervous to worry about the way it was handled, in case it did not reflect credit on his ship. The worry, however, was instantly overlaid by the necessity for concentration on

the process of going up the side. This was a lofty two-decker, and although the considerable 'tumble-home' was of help it was a tricky business for the gangling Hornblower to mount with dignity encumbered as he was. Somehow he reached the deck, and somehow, despite his shyness and embarrassment, he remembered to touch his hat in salute to the guard that presented arms to him.

"Captain Hornblower?" inquired the officer of the watch. He knew him by the single epaulette on his left shoulder, the only commander in the Inshore Squadron, perhaps the only one in the Channel Fleet. "This young gentleman will act as your guide."

The deck of the *Tonnant* seemed incredibly spacious after the cramped deck of the *Hotspur*, for the *Tonnant* was no mere seventy-four. She was an eighty-four, with dimensions and scantlings worthy of a three-decker. She was a reminder of the era when the French built big ships in the hope of overpowering the British seventy-fours by brute force instead of by skill and discipline. How the venture had turned out was proved by the fact that *Tonnant* now flew the flag of England.

The great poop-cabins had been thrown into a single suite for Pellew, in the absence of a flag-officer permanently on board. It was incredibly luxurious. Once past the sentry the decks were actually carpeted — Wilton carpets in which the foot sank noiselessly. There was an anteroom with a steward in dazzling white ducks to take Hornblower's hat and gloves and cloak.

"Captain Hornblower, sir," announced the young gentleman, throwing open the door.

The deck-beams above were six feet clear, over the carpet, and Pellew had grown so used to this that he advanced to shake hands with no stoop at all, in contrast with Hornblower, who instinctively crouched with his five-foot-eleven.

"Delighted to see you, Hornblower," said Pellew. "Genuinely delighted. There is much to say to you, for letters are always inadequate. But I must make the introductions. The Admiral has already made your acquaintance, I think?"

Hornblower shook hands with Cornwallis, mumbling the same politenesses as he had already addressed to Pellew. Other introductions followed, names known to everyone who had read in the *Gazette* the accounts of naval victories; Grindall of the *Prince*, Marsfield of the *Minotaur*, Lord Henry Paulet of the *Terrible*, and half a dozen others. Hornblower felt dazzled, although he had just come in from the bright outer world. In all this array there was one other officer with a single epaulette, but he wore it on his right shoulder, proof that he, too, had attained the glorious rank of post captain, and had only to go on living to mount a second epaulette on attaining three years' seniority, and — if long life was granted him — eventually to attain the unspeakable heights of flag rank. He was far higher above a commander than a commander was above a lowly lieutenant. Hornblower sat in the chair offered him, instinctively edging it backward so as to make himself, the most junior, the infinitely junior officer, as inconspicuous as possible. The cabin was finished in some rich material — damask, Hornblower guessed — with a colour scheme of nutmeg and blue unobtrusive and yet incredibly satisfying to the eye. Daylight poured in through a vast stern window, to glint upon the swaying silver lamps. There was a shelf of books, some in good leather bindings, but Hornblower's sharp eye detected tattered copies of the *Mariners' Guide* and the Admiralty publications for the coasts of France. On the far side were two large masses so draped as to be shapely and in keeping so that no uninitiated person could guess that inside were two eighteen-pounder carronades.

"This must take you a full five minutes to clear for action, Sir Edward," said Cornwallis.

"Four minutes and ten seconds by stop-watch, sir," answered Pellew, "to strike everything below, including the bulkheads."

Another steward, also in dazzling white ducks, entered at this moment and spoke a few words in a low tone to Pellew, like a well-trained butler in a ducal house, and Pellew rose to his feet.

"Dinner, gentlemen," he announced. "Permit me to lead the way."

A door, thrown open in the midships bulkhead, revealed a dining-room, an oblong table with white damask, glittering silver, sparkling glasses, while more stewards in white ducks were ranged against the bulkhead.

There could be little doubt about precedence, when every captain in the Royal Navy had, naturally, studied his place in the captains' list ever since his promotion; Hornblower and the single-epauletted captain were headed for the foot of the table when Pellew halted the general sorting-out.

"At the Admiral's suggestion," he announced, "we are dispensing with precedence today. You will find your names on cards at your places."

So now every one began a feverish hunt for their names; Hornblower found himself seated between Lord Henry Paulet and Hosier of the *Fame*, and opposite him was Cornwallis himself.

"I made the suggestion to Sir Edward," Cornwallis was saying as he leisurely took his seat, "because otherwise we always find ourselves sitting next to our neighbours in the captains' list. In blockade service especially, variety is much to be sought after."

He lowered himself into his chair, and when he had done so his juniors followed his example. Hornblower, cautiously on guard about his manners, still could not restrain his mischievous inner self from mentally adding a passage to the rules of naval ceremonial, to the lines of the rule about the officer's head reaching the level of the main-deck — 'when the Admiral's backside shall touch the seat of his chair —'.

"Pellew provides good dinners," said Lord Henry, eagerly, scanning the dishes with which the stewards were now crowding the table. The largest dish was placed in front of him, and when the immense silver dish cover was whipped away a magnificent pie was revealed. The pastry top was built up into a castle, from the turret of which flew a paper Union Jack.

"Prodigious!" exclaimed Cornwallis. "Sir Edward, what lies below the dungeons here?"

Pellew shook his head sadly. "Only beef and kidneys, sir. Beef stewed to rags. Our ship's bullock this time, as ever, was too tough for ordinary mortals, and only stewing would reduce his steaks to digestibility. So I called in the aid of his kidneys for a beefsteak and kidney pie."

"But what about the flour?"

"The Victualling Officer sent me a sack, sir. Unfortunately it had rested in bilge water, as could only be expected, but there was just enough at the top unspoiled for the pie-crust." Pellew's gesture, indicating the silver bread barges filled with ship's biscuit, hinted that in more fortunate circumstances they might have been filled with fresh rolls.

"I'm sure it's delicious," said Cornwallis. "Lord Henry, might I trouble you to serve me, if you can find it in your heart to destroy those magnificent battlements?"

Paulet set to work with carving knife and fork on the pie, while Hornblower pondered the phenomenon of the son of a Marquis helping the son of an Earl to a steak and kidney pie made from a ration bullock and spoiled flour.

"That's a ragout of pork beside you, Captain Hosier," said Pellew. "Or so my chef would call it. You may find it even saltier than usual, because of the bitter tears he shed into it. Captain Durham has the only live pig left in the Channel Fleet, and no gold of mine would coax it from him, so that my poor fellow had to make do with the contents of the brine tub."

"He has succeeded perfectly with the pie, at least," commented Cornwallis. "He must be an artist."

"I engaged him during the Peace," said Pellew, "and brought him with me on the outbreak of war. At quarters he points a gun on the starboard side lower-deck."

"If his aim is as good as his cooking," said Cornwallis, reaching for his glass which a steward had filled, "then — confusion to the French!"

The toast was drunk with murmured acclaim.

"Fresh vegetables!" said Lord Henry ecstatically. "Cauliflower!"

"Your quota is on the way to your ship at this moment, Hornblower," said Cornwallis. "We try not to forget you."

"*Hotspur's* like Uriah the Hittite," said a saturnine captain at the end of the table whose name appeared to be Collins. "In the forefront of the battle."

Hornblower was grateful to Collins for that speech, because it brought home to him a truth, like a bright light, that he had not realized before; he would rather be on short commons in the forefront of the battle than back in the main body with plenty of vegetables.

"Young carrots!" went on Lord Henry, peering into each vegetable dish in turn. "And what's this? I can't believe it!"

"Spring greens, Lord Henry," said Pellew. "We still have to wait for peas and beans."

"Wonderful!"

"How do you get these chickens so fat, Sir Edward?" asked Grindall.

"A matter of feeding, merely. Another secret of my chef."

"In the public interest you should disclose it," said Cornwallis. "The life of a sea-sick chicken rarely conduces to putting on flesh."

"Well, sir, since you ask. This ship has a complement of six hundred and fifty men. Every day thirteen fifty-pound bread bags are emptied. The secret lies in the treatment of those bags."

"But how?" asked several voices.

"Tap them, shake them, before emptying. Not enough to make wasteful crumbs, but sharply enough. Then take out the biscuits quickly, and behold! At the bottom of each bag is a mass of weevils and maggots, scared out of their natural habitat and with no time allowed to seek shelter again. Believe me, gentlemen, there is nothing that fattens a chicken so well as a diet of rich biscuit-fed weevils. Hornblower, your plate's still empty. Help yourself, man."

Hornblower had thought of helping himself to chicken, but somehow — and he grinned at himself internally — this last speech diverted him from doing so. The beefsteak pie was in great demand and had almost disappeared, and as a junior officer he knew better than to anticipate his seniors' second helpings. The ragout of pork, rich in onions, was at the far end of the table.

"I'll make a start on this, sir," he said, indicating an untouched dish before him.

"Hornblower has a judgement that puts us all to shame," said Pellew. "That's a kickshaw in which my chef takes particular pride. To go with it you'll need these purée potatoes, Hornblower."

It was a dish of brawn, from which Hornblower cut himself moderately generous slices, and it had dark flakes in it. There was no doubt that it was utterly delicious; Hornblower diving down into his general knowledge, came up with the conclusion that the black flakes must be truffle, of which he had heard but which he had never tasted. The purée potatoes, which he would have called mashed, were like no mashed potatoes he had ever sampled either on shipboard or in a sixpenny ordinary in England. They were seasoned subtly and yet to perfection — if angels ever ate mashed potatoes they would call on Pellew's chef to prepare them. With spring greens and carrots — for both of which he hungered inexpressibly — they made a plateful, along with the brawn, of sheer delight. He found himself eating like a wolf and pulled himself up short, but the glance that he stole round the table reassured him, for the others were eating like wolves too, to the detriment of conversation, with only a few murmured words to mingle with the clash of cutlery.

"Wine with you, sir." "Your health, Admiral." "Would you give the onions a fair wind, Grindall?" and so on.

"Won't you try the galantine, Lord Henry?" asked Pellew. "Steward, a fresh plate for Lord Henry."

That was how Hornblower learned the real name of the brawn he was eating. The ragout of pork drifted his way and he helped himself generously; the steward behind him changed his plate in the nick of time. He savoured the exquisite boiled onions that wallowed in the beatific sauce. Then like magic the table was cleared and fresh dishes made their appearance, a pudding rich with raisins and currants, jellies of two colours; much labour must have gone into boiling down the bullock's feet and into subsequent straining to make that brilliant gelatine.

"No flour for that duff," said Pellew apologetically. "The galley staff has done its best with biscuit crumbs."

That best was as near perfection as mind could conceive; there was a sweet sauce with it, hinting of ginger, that made the most of the richness of the fruit. Hornblower found himself thinking that if ever he became a post captain, wealthy with prize money, he would have to devote endless thought to the organization of his cabin stores. And Maria would not be of much help he thought ruefully. He was still drifting along with thoughts of Maria when the table was swept clear again.

"Caerphilly, sir?" murmured a steward in his ear. "Wensleydale? Red Cheshire?"

These were cheeses that were being offered him. He helped himself at random — one name meant no more to him than mother — and went on to make an epoch-making discovery, that Wensleydale cheese and vintage port were a pair of heavenly twins, Castor and Pollux riding triumphantly as the climax of a glorious procession. Full of food and with two glasses of wine inside him — all he allowed himself — he felt vastly pleased with the discovery, rivalling those of Columbus and Cook. Almost simultaneously he made another discovery which amused him. The chased silver fingerbowls which were put on the table were very elegant; the last time he had seen anything like them was as a midshipman at a dinner at Government House in

Gibraltar. In each floated a fragment of lemon peel, but the water in which the peel floated — as Hornblower discovered by a furtive taste as he dabbed his lips — was plain sea water. There was something comforting in that fact.

Cornwallis's blue eyes were fixed on him.

"Mr Vice, the King," said Cornwallis.

Hornblower came back from pink hazes of beatitude. He had to take a grip of himself, as when he had tacked *Hotspur* with the *Loire* in pursuit; he had to await the right moment for the attention of the company. Then he rose to his feet and lifted his glass, carrying out the ages old ritual of the junior officer present.

"Gentlemen, the King," he said.

"The King!" echoed everyone present, and some added phrases like "God Bless him" and "Long may he reign" before they sat down again.

"His Royal Highness the Duke of Clarence," said Lord Henry in conversational tone, "told me that during his time at sea he had knocked his head — he's a tall man, as you know — so often on so many deck beams while drinking his father's health that he seriously was considering requesting His Majesty's permission, as a special privilege, for the Royal Navy to drink the royal health while sitting down."

At the other corner of the table Andrews, captain of the *Flora*, was going on with an interrupted conversation. "Fifteen pounds a man," he was saying. "That's what my Jacks were paid on account of prize money, and we were in Cawsand Bay ready to sail. The women had left the ship, not a bumboat within call, and so my men — the ordinary seamen, mind you — still have fifteen pounds apiece in their pockets."

"All the better when they get a chance to spend it," said Marsfield.

Hornblower was making a rapid calculation. The *Flora* would have a crew of some three hundred men, who divided a quarter of the prize money between them. The captain had one quarter to himself, so that Andrews would have been paid — on account, not necessarily in full — some four thousand five hundred pounds as a result of some lucky cruise, probably without risk, probably without a life being lost, money for seizing French merchant ships intercepted at sea. Hornblower thought ruefully about Maria's latest letter, and about the uses to which he could put four thousand five hundred pounds.

"There'll be lively times in Plymouth when the Channel Fleet comes in," said Andrews.

"That is something which I wish to explain to you gentlemen," said Cornwallis, breaking in on the conversation. There was something flat and expressionless about his voice, and there was a kind of mask-like expression on his good-tempered face, so that all eyes turned on him.

"The Channel Fleet will not be coming in to Plymouth," said Cornwallis. "This is the time to make that plain."

A silence ensued, during which Cornwallis was clearly waiting for a cue. The saturnine Collins supplied it.

"What about water, sir? Provisions?"

"They are going to be sent out to us."

"Water, sir?"

"Yes. I have had four water-hoys constructed. They will bring us water. Victualling ships will bring us our food. Each new ship which joins us will bring us fresh food, vegetables and live cattle, all they can carry on deck. That will help against scurvy. I'm sending no ship back to replenish."

"So we'll have to wait for the winter gales before we see Plymouth again, sir?"

"Nor even then," said Cornwallis. "No ship, no captain, is to enter Plymouth without my express orders. Do I have to explain why, to experienced officers like you?"

The reasons were as obvious to Hornblower as to the others. The Channel Fleet might well have to run for shelter when southwesterly gales blew, and with a gale at southwest the French fleet could not escape from Brest. But Plymouth Sound was difficult; a wind from the eastward would delay the British fleet's exits, prolong it over several days, perhaps, during which time the wind would be fair for the French fleet to escape. There were plenty of other reasons, too. There was disease; every captain knew that ships grew healthier the longer they were at sea. There was desertion. There was the fact that discipline could be badly shaken by debauches on shore.

"But in a gale, sir?" asked someone. "We could get blown right up-Channel."

"No," answered Cornwallis decisively. "If we're blown off this station our rendezvous is Tor Bay. There we anchor."

Confused murmurings showed how this information was being digested. Tor Bay was an exposed uncomfortable anchorage, barely sheltered from the west, but it had the obvious advantage that at the first shift of wind the fleet could put to sea, could be off Ushant again before the unwieldy French fleet could file out down the Goulet.

"So none of us will set foot on English soil again until the end of the war, sir?" said Collins.

Cornwallis's face was transfigured by a smile. "We need never say that. All of you, any one of you, can go ashore . . ." the smile broadened as he paused, "the moment I set foot ashore myself."

That caused a laugh, perhaps a grudging laugh, but with an admiring echo. Hornblower, watching the scene keenly, suddenly came to a fresh realization. Collins's questions and remarks had been very apt, very much to the point. Hornblower suspected that he had been listening to a prepared piece of dialogue, and his suspicions were strengthened by the recollection that Collins was First Captain under Cornwallis, somebody whom the French would call a Chief of Staff. Hornblower looked about him again. He could not help feeling admiration for Cornwallis, whose guileless behaviour concealed such unsuspected depths of subtlety. And it was a matter for self-congratulation that he had guessed the secret, he, the junior officer present, surrounded by all these captains of vast seniority, of distinguished records and of noble descent. He felt positively smug, a most unusual and gratifying feeling.

Smugness and vintage port combined to dull his awareness of all the implications at first, and then suddenly everything changed. The new thought sent him sliding down an Avernus of depression. It brought about an actual physical sensation in the pit of his stomach, like the one he felt when *Hotspur*, close hauled, topped a wave and went slithering and rolling down the farther side. Maria! He had written so cheerfully saying he would be seeing her soon. There were only fifty days' provisions and water left in *Hotspur*; fresh food would eke out the provisions, but little enough could be done (he had thought) regarding water. He had been confident that *Hotspur* would be making periodic calls at Plymouth for food and water and firewood. Now Maria would never have the comfort of his presence during her pregnancy. Nor would he himself (and the violence of this reaction surprised him) have the pleasure of seeing her during her pregnancy. And one more thing; he would have to write to her and tell her that he would not be keeping his promises, that there was no chance of their meeting. He would be causing her terrible pain, not only because her idol would be revealed to her as a man who could not, or perhaps even would not, keep his word.

He was recalled suddenly from these thoughts, from these mental pictures of Maria, by hearing his name spoken during the conversation round the table. Nearly everyone present was looking at him, and he had to ferret hurriedly through his unconscious memory to recapture what had been said. Someone — it must have been Cornwallis himself — had said that the information he had gathered from the French coast had been satisfactory and illuminating. But for the life of him Hornblower could not recall what had next been said, and now here he was, with every eye on him, gazing round the table with a bewilderment that he tried to conceal behind an impassive countenance.

"We are all interested in your sources of information, Hornblower," prompted Cornwallis, apparently repeating something already said.

Hornblower shook his head in decisive negation; that was his instant reaction, before he could analyse the situation, and before he could wrap up a blunt refusal in pretty words.

"No," he said, to back up the shaking of his head.

There were all these people present; nothing would remain a secret if known to so large a group. The pilchard fishermen and lobster-pot men with whom he had been having furtive dealings and on whom he had been lavishing British gold — French gold, to be exact — would meet with short shrift if their activities became known to the French authorities. Not only would they die, but they would never be able to supply him with any further news. He was passionately anxious for his secrets to remain secrets, yet he was surrounded by all these senior officers any one of whom might have an influence on his career. Luckily he was already committed by the curt negative that had been surprised out of him — nothing could commit him more deeply than that, and that was thanks to Maria. He must not think about Maria, yet he must find some way of softening his abrupt refusal.

"It's more important than a formula for fattening chickens, sir," he said, and then, with a bright further inspiration he shifted the responsibility. "I would not like to disclose my operations without a direct order."

His sensibilities, keyed to the highest pitch, detected sympathy in Cornwallis's reaction.

"I'm sure there's no need, Hornblower," said Cornwallis, turning back to the others. Now, before he turned, was it true that the eyelid of his left eye, nearest to Hornblower, flickered a trifle? Was it? Hornblower could not be sure.

As the conversation reverted to a discussion of future operations Hornblower's sense, almost telepathic, became aware of something else in the past atmosphere which called up hot resentment in his mind. These fighting officers, these captains of ships of the line, were content to leave the dirty details of the gathering of intelligence to a junior, to someone hardly worthy of their lofty notice. They would not sully their aristocratic white hands; if the insignificant Commander of an insignificant sloop chose to do the work they would leave it to him in tolerant contempt.

Now the contempt was in no way one-sided. Fighting captains had their place in the scheme of things, but only an insignificant place, and anyone could be a fighting captain, even if he had to learn to swallow down the heart from his mouth and master the tensions that set his limbs a-tremble. Hornblower was experiencing symptoms not unlike these at this moment, when he was in no danger at all. Vintage port and a good dinner, thoughts of Maria and resentment against the captains, combined within him in a witches' brew that threatened to boil over. Luckily the bubbling mixture happened to distil off a succession of ideas, first one and then another. They linked themselves in a logical chain. Hornblower, along with his agitation, could feel the flush of blood under his skin that foretold the development of a plan, in the same way that the witch in Macbeth could tell the approach of something wicked by the pricking in her thumbs. Soon the plan was mature, complete, and Hornblower was left calm and clearheaded after his spiritual convulsion; it was like the clearness of head that follows the crisis of an attack of fever — possibly that was exactly what it was.

The plan called for a dark night, and for half-flood an hour before dawn; nature would supply those sooner or later, following her immutable laws. It called for some good fortune, and it would call for resolution and promptitude of action, but those were accessory ingredients in every plan. It included possibilities of disaster, but was there ever a plan that did not? It also called for the services of a man who spoke perfect French, and Hornblower, measuring his abilities with a cold eye, knew that he was not that man. The penniless noble French refugee who in Hornblower's boyhood had instructed him, with fair success, in French and Deportment (and, totally unsuccessfully, in Music and Dancing), had never managed to confer a good accent upon his tone-deaf pupil. His grammar and his construction were excellent, but no one would ever mistake him for a Frenchman.

Hornblower had reached every necessary decision by the time the party began to break up, and he made it his business to take his stand, casually, beside Collins at the moment the Admiral's barge was called.

"Is there anyone in the Channel Fleet who speaks perfect French, sir?" he asked.

"You speak French yourself," replied Collins.

"Not well enough for what I have in mind, sir," said Hornblower, more struck by the extent of Collins' knowledge than flattered. "I might find a use for a man who speaks French exactly like a Frenchman."

"There's Côtard," said Collins, meditatively rubbing his chin. "Lieutenant in the *Marlborough*. He's a Guernsey-man. Speaks French like a native — always spoke it as a child, I believe. What do you want him to do?"

"Admiral's barge coming alongside, sir," reported a breathless messenger to Pellew.

"Hardly time to tell you now, sir," said Hornblower. "I can submit a plan to Sir Edward. But it'll be no use without someone speaking perfect French."

The assembled company was now filing to the gangway; Collins, in accordance with naval etiquette, would have to go down the side into the barge ahead of Cornwallis.

"I'll detail Côtard from his ship on special service," said Collins hastily. "I'll send him over to you and you can look him over."

"Thank you, sir."

Cornwallis was now thanking his host and saying good-bye to the other captains; Collins unobtrusively yet with remarkable rapidity contrived to do the same, and disappeared over the side. Cornwallis followed, with all the time honoured ceremonial of guard of honour and band and sideboys, while his flag was hauled down from the foretopmast head. After his departure barge after barge came alongside, each gaudy with new paint, with

every crew tricked out in neat clothing paid for out of their captains' pockets, and captain after captain went down into them, in order of seniority, and shoved off to their respective ships.

Lastly came *Hotspur's* drab little quarter-boat, its crew dressed in the clothes issued to them in the slop-ship the day they were sent on board.

"Good-bye, sir," said Hornblower, holding out his hand to Pellew.

Pellew had shaken so many hands, and had said so many good-byes, that Hornblower was anxious to cut this farewell as short as possible.

"Good-bye, Hornblower," said Pellew, and Hornblower quickly stepped back, touching his hat. The pipes squealed until his head was below the level of the main-deck, and then he dropped perilously into the boat, hat, gloves, sword and all, all of them shabby.

Chapter 10

"I'll take this opportunity, Mr Bush," said Hornblower, "of repeating what I said before. I'm sorry you're not being given your chance."

"It can't be helped, sir. It's the way of the service," replied the shadowy figure confronting Hornblower on the dark quarter-deck. The words were philosophical, but the tone was bitter. It was all part of the general logical madness of war, that Bush should feel bitter at not being allowed to risk his life, and that Hornblower, about to be doing so, should commiserate with Bush, speaking in flat formal tones as if he were not in the least excited — as if he were feeling no apprehension at all.

Hornblower knew himself well enough to be sure that if some miracle were to happen, if orders were to arrive forbidding him to take personal part in the coming raid, he would feel a wave of relief; delight as well as relief. But it was quite impossible, for the orders had definitely stated that 'the landing party will be under the command of Captain Horatio Hornblower of the *Hotspur*.' That sentence had been explained in advance in the preceding one . . . 'because Lieut. Côtard is senior to Lieut. Bush.' Côtard could not possibly have been transferred from one ship and given command of a landing party largely provided by another; nor could he be expected to serve under an officer junior to him, and the only way round the difficulty had been that Hornblower should command. Pellew, writing out those orders in the quiet of his magnificent cabin, had been like a Valkyrie in the Norse legends now attaining a strange popularity in England — he had been a Chooser of the Slain. Those scratches of his pen could well mean that Bush would live and Hornblower would die.

But there was another side to the picture. Hornblower had grudgingly to admit to himself that he would have been no more happy if Bush had been in command. The operation planned could only be successful if carried through with a certain verve and with an exactness of timing that Bush possibly could not provide. Absurdly, Hornblower was glad he was to command, and that was one demonstration in his mind of the defects of his temperament.

"You are sure about your orders until I return, Mr Bush?" he said. "And in case I don't return?"

"Yes, sir."

Hornblower had felt a cold wave up his spine while he spoke so casually about the possibility of his death. An hour from now he might be a disfigured stiffening corpse.

"Then I'll get myself ready," he said, turning away with every appearance of nonchalance.

He had hardly reached his cabin when Grimes entered.

"Sir!" said Grimes, and Hornblower swung round and looked at him. Grimes was in his early twenties, skinny, highly strung, and excitable. Now his face was white — his duties as steward meant that he spent little time on deck in the sun — and his lips were working horribly.

"What's the matter?" demanded Hornblower curtly.

"Don't make me come with you, sir!" spluttered Grimes. "You don't want me with you, sir, do you, sir?"

It was an astonishing moment. In all his years of service Hornblower had never met with any experience in the least similar, and he was taken aback. This was cowardice; it might even be construed as mutiny. Grimes had in

the last five seconds made himself liable not merely to the cat but to the noose. Hornblower could only stand and stare, wordless.

"I'll be no use, sir," said Grimes. "I — I might scream!"

Now that was a very definite point. Hornblower, giving his orders for the raid, had nominated Grimes as his messenger and aide-de-camp. He had given no thought to the selection; he had been a very casual Chooser of the Slain. Now he was learning a lesson. A frightened man at his elbow, a man made clumsy by fear, could imperil the whole expedition. Yet the first words he could say echoed his earlier thoughts.

"I could hang you, by God!" he exclaimed.

"No, sir! No, sir! Please, sir —" Grimes was on the point of collapse; in another moment he would be down on his knees.

"Oh, for God's sake —" said Hornblower. He was conscious of contempt, not for the coward, but for the man who allowed his cowardice to show. And then he asked himself by what right he felt this contempt. And then he thought about the good of the Service, and then —. He had no time to waste in these trivial analyses.

"Very well," he snapped. "You can stay on board. Shut your mouth, you fool!"

Grimes was about to show gratitude, but Hornblower's words cut it off short.

"I'll take Hewitt out of the second boat. He can come with me. Pass the word for him."

The minutes were fleeting by, as they always did with the final touches to put on to a planned scheme.

Hornblower passed his belt through the loop on a cutlass sheath, and buckled it round him. A sword hanging on slings could be a hindrance, would strike against obstructions, and the cutlass was a handier weapon for what he contemplated. He gave a final thought to taking a pistol, and again rejected the idea. A pistol might be useful in certain circumstances, but it was a bulky encumbrance. Here was something more silent — a long sausage of stout canvas filled with sand, with a loop for the wrist. Hornblower settled it conveniently in his right hand pocket.

Hewitt reported, and had to be briefly told what was expected of him. The sidelong glance he gave to Grimes revealed much of what Hewitt thought, but there was no time for discussion; that matter would have to be sorted out later. Hewitt was shown the contents of the bundle originally allotted to Grimes — the flint and steel for use if the dark lantern were extinguished, the oily rags, the slow match, the quick match, the blue lights for instant intense combustion. Hewitt took solemn note of each item and weighed his sandbag in his hand.

"Very well. Come along," said Hornblower.

"Sir!" said Grimes at that moment in a pleading tone, but Hornblower would not — indeed could not — spare time to hear any more.

On deck it was pitch dark, and Hornblower's eyes took long to adjust themselves.

Officer after officer reported all ready.

"You're sure of what you have to say, Mr Côtard?"

"Yes, sir."

There was no hint of the excitable Frenchman about Côtard. He was as phlegmatic as any commanding officer could desire.

"Fifty-one rank and file present, sir," reported the captain of marines.

Those marines, brought on board the night before, had lain huddled below decks all day, concealed from the telescopes on Petit Minou.

"Thank you, Captain Jones. You've made sure no musket is loaded?"

"Yes, sir."

Until the alarm was given not a shot was to be fired. The work was to be done with the bayonet and the butt, and the sandbag — but the only way to be certain of that was to keep the muskets unloaded.

"First landing party all down in the fishing boat, sir," reported Bush.

"Thank you, Mr Bush. Very well, Mr Côtard, we may as well start."

The lobster-boat, seized earlier in the night to the surprise of its crew, lay alongside. The crew were prisoners down below; their surprise was due to the breach of the traditional neutrality enjoyed during the long wars by fishing-boats. These men were all acquainted with Hornblower, had often sold him part of their catch in exchange for gold, yet they had hardly been reassured when they were told that their boat would be returned

to them later. Now it lay alongside, and Côtard followed Hewitt, and Hornblower followed Côtard, down into it. Eight men were squatting in the bottom where the lobster-pots used to lie.

"Sanderson, Hewitt, Black, Downes take the oars. The rest of you get down below the gunners. Mr Côtard, sit here against my knees, if you please."

Hornblower waited until they had settled themselves. The black silhouette of the boat must appear no different in the dark night. Now came the moment.

"Shove off," said Hornblower.

The oars dragged through the water, bit more effectively at the next stroke, pulled smoothly at the third, and they were leaving *Hotspur* behind them. They were setting off on an adventure, and Hornblower was only too conscious that it was his own fault. If he had not been bitten with this idea they might all be peacefully asleep on board; tomorrow men would be dead who but for him would still be alive.

He put the morbid thought to one side, and then immediately he had to do the same with thoughts about Grimes. Grimes could wait perfectly well until his return, and Hornblower would not trouble his mind about him until then. Yet even so, as Hornblower concentrated on steering the lobster-boat, there was a continual undercurrent of thought — like ship's noises: during a discussion of plans — regarding how the crew on board would be treating Grimes, for Hewitt, before leaving the ship, would have certainly told the story to his cronies.

Hornblower, with his hand on the tiller, steered a steady course northward towards Petit Minou. A mile and a quarter to go, and it would never do if he missed the little jetty so that the expedition would end in a miserable fiasco. He had the faint outline of the steep hills on the northern shore of the Goulet to guide him; he knew them well enough now, after all these weeks of gazing at them, and the abrupt shoulder, where a little stream came down to the sea a quarter of a mile west of the semaphore, was his principal guide. He had to keep that notch open as the boat advanced, but after a few minutes he could actually make out the towering height of the semaphore itself, just visible against the dark sky, and then it was easy.

The oars groaned in the rowlocks, the blades splashing occasionally in the water; the gentle waves which raised them and lowered them seemed to be made of black glass. There was no need for a silent or invisible approach; on the contrary, the lobster-boat had to appear as if she were approaching on her lawful occasions. At the foot of the abrupt shore was a tiny half-tide jetty, and it was the habit of the lobster-boats to land there and put ashore a couple of men with the pick of the catch. Then, each with a basket on his head containing a dozen live lobsters, they would run along the track over the hills into Brest so as to be ready for the opening of the market, regardless of whether the boat was delayed by wind and tide or not. Hornblower, scouting at a safe distance in the jolly boat, had ascertained during a succession of nights such of the routine as he had not been able to pick up in conversation with the fishermen.

There it was. There was the jetty. Hornblower found his grip tightening on the tiller. Now came the loud voice of the sentry at the end of the jetty.

"Qui va là?"

Hornblower nudged Côtard with his knee, unnecessarily, for Côtard was ready with the answer.

"*Camilla*," he hailed, and continued in French. "Lobster-boat. Captain Quillien."

They were already alongside; the crucial moment on which everything depended. Black, the burly captain of the fo'c'sle, knew what he had to do the moment opportunity offered. Côtard spoke from the depths of the boat.

"I have the lobster for your officer."

Hornblower, standing up and reaching for the jetty, could just see the dark of the sentry looking down, but Black had already leaped up from the bows like a panther, Downs and Sanderson following him. Hornblower saw a swift movement of shadow, but there was not a sound — not a sound.

"All right, sir," said Black.

Hornblower, with a line in his hand, managed to propel himself up the slippery side, arriving on the top on his hands and knees. Black was standing holding the inanimated body of the sentry in his arms. Sandbags were silent; a vicious blow from behind at the exposed back of the neck, a quick grab, and it was finished. The sentry had not even dropped his musket; he and it were safe in Black's monstrous arms.

Black lowered the body — senseless or dead, it did not matter which — on to the slimy stone flags of the jetty.

"If he makes a sound cut his throat," said Hornblower.

This was all orderly and yet unreal, like a nightmare. Hornblower, turning to drop a clove-hitch with his line over a bollard, found his upper lip was still drawn up in a snarl like a wild beast's. Côtard was already beside him; Sanderson had already made the boat fast forward.

"Come on."

The jetty was only a few yards long; at the far end, where the paths diverged up to the batteries, they would find the second sentry. From the boat they passed up a couple of empty baskets, and Black and Côtard had them on their heads and set off, Côtard in the middle, Hornblower on the left, and Black on the right where his right arm would be free to swing his sandbag. There was the sentry. He made no formal challenge, greeting them in jocular fashion while Côtard spoke again about the lobster which was the recognized though unofficial toll paid to the officer commanding the guard for the use of the jetty. It was a perfectly ordinary encounter until Black dropped his basket and swung with his sandbag and they all three leaped on the sentry, Côtard with his hands on the sentry's throat, Hornblower striking madly with his sandbag as well, desperately anxious to make sure. It was over in an instant, and Hornblower looked round at the dark and silent night with the sentry's body lying at his feet. He and Black and Côtard were the thin point of the wedge that had pierced the ring of the French defences. It was time for the wedge to be driven home. Behind them were the half-dozen others who had crouched in the lobster-boat, and following them up were the seventy marines and seamen in the boats of the *Hotspur*.

They dragged the second sentry back to the jetty and left him with the two boat-keepers. Now Hornblower had eight men at his back as he set his face to the steep climb up the path, the path he had only seen through a telescope from *Hotspur's* deck. Hewitt was behind him; the smell of hot metal and fat in the still night air told him that the dark lantern was still alight. The path was stony and slippery, and Hornblower had to exert his self-control as he struggled up it. There was no need for desperate haste, and although they were inside the ring of sentries, in an area where civilians apparently passed fairly freely, there was no need to scramble noisily and attract too much attention.

Now the path became less steep. Now it was level, and here it intersected another path at right angles.

"Halt!" grunted Hornblower to Hewitt, but he took another two paces forward while Hewitt passed the word back; a sudden stop would mean that the people behind would be cannoning into each other.

This was indeed the summit. Owing to the levelling-off of the top this was an area unsearched by telescopes from the *Hotspur*; even from the main topgallant masthead, with the ship far out in the Iroise, they had not been able to view the ground here. The towering telegraph had been plainly in view, and at its foot just a hint of a roof, but they had not been able to see what was at ground level here, nor had Hornblower been able to obtain any hint in his conversations with fishermen.

"Wait!" he whispered back, and stepped cautiously forward, his hands extended in front of him. Instantly they came into contact with a wooden paling, quite an ordinary fence and by no means a military obstacle. And this was a gate, an ordinary gate with a wooden latch. Obviously the semaphore station was not closely guarded — fence and gate were only polite warnings to unauthorized intruders — and of course there was no reason why they should be, here among the French coastal batteries.

"Hewitt! Côtard!"

They came up to him and all three strained their eyes in the darkness.

"Do you see anything?"

"Looks like a house," whispered Côtard.

Something in two storeys. Windows in the lower one, and above that a sort of platform. The crew who worked the telegraph must live here. Hornblower cautiously fumbled with the latch of the gate, and it opened without resistance. Then a sudden noise almost in his ear tensed him rigid, to relax again. It was a cock crowing, and he could hear a fluttering of wings. The semaphore crew must keep chickens in coops here, and the cock was giving premature warning of day. No reason for further delay; Hornblower whispered his orders to his band whom he called up to the gate. Now was the time; and this was the moment when the parties of marines must be half-way up the climb to the battery. He was on the point of giving the final word when he saw something else which stopped him dead, and Côtard grabbed his shoulder at the same moment. Two of the windows

before him were showing a light, a tiny glimmer, which nevertheless to their dilated pupils made the whole cottage plain to their view.

"Come on!"

They dashed forward, Hornblower, Côtard, Hewitt, and the two men with axes in one group, the other four musket men scattering to surround the place. The path led straight to a door, again with a wooden latch, which Hornblower feverishly tried to work. But the door resisted; it was bolted on the inside, and at the rattling of the latch a startled cry made itself heard inside. A woman's voice! It was harsh and loud, but a woman's voice, undoubtedly. The axeman at Hornblower's shoulder heaved up his axe to beat in the door, but at the same moment the other axeman shattered a window and went leaping through followed by Côtard. The woman's voice rose to a scream; the bolt was drawn and the door swung open and Hornblower burst in. A tallow dip lit the odd scene, and Hewitt opened the shutter of the dark lantern to illuminate it further, sweeping its beam in a semicircle. There were large baulks of timber, each set at an angle of forty-five degrees, to act as struts for the mast. Where floor space remained stood cottage furniture, a table and chairs, a rush mat on the floor, a stove. Côtard stood in the centre with sword and pistol, and at the far side stood a screaming woman. She was hugely fat, with a tangle of black hair, and all she wore was a nightshirt that hardly came to her knees. There was an inner door from which emerged a bearded man with hairy legs showing below his shirt-tails. The woman still screamed, but Côtard spoke loudly in French, waving his pistol — empty presumably — and the noise ceased, not, perhaps, because of Côtard's threats but because of the woman's sheer curiosity regarding these dawn intruders. She stood goggling at them, making only the most perfunctory gestures to conceal her nakedness.

But decisions had to be made; those screams might have given the alarm and probably had done so. Against the thick bulk of the semaphore mast a ladder led up to a trap door. Overhead must be the apparatus for working the semaphore arms. The bearded man in his shirt must be the telegraphist, a civilian perhaps, and he and his wife presumably lived beside their work. It must have been convenient for them that the construction of the working platform overhead made it easy to build these cottage rooms underneath.

Hornblower had come to burn the semaphore, and burn it he would, even if a civilian dwelling were involved. The rest of his party were crowding into the living-room, two of the musket men appearing from the bedroom into which they must have made their way by another window. Hornblower had to stop and think for a perceptible space. He had expected that at this moment he would be fighting French soldiers, but here he was already in complete possession and with a woman on his hands. But his wits returned to him and he was able to put his thoughts in order.

"Get out, you musket men," he said. "Get out to the fence and keep watch. Côtard, up that ladder. Bring down all the signal books you can find. Any papers there are. Quick — I'll give you two minutes. Here's the lantern. Black, get something for this woman. The clothes from the bed'll do, and then take these two out and guard 'em. Are you ready to burn this place, Hewitt?"

It flashed through his mind that the *Moniteur* in Paris could make a great deal of noise about ill-treatment of a woman by the licentious British sailors, but it would do that however careful he might be. Black hung a ragged quilt over the woman's shoulders and then hustled his charges out of the front door. Hewitt had to stop and think. He had never set about burning a house before, and clearly he did not adapt himself readily to new situations.

"That's the place," snapped Hornblower, pointing to the foot of the telegraph mast. There were the great baulks of timber round the mast; Hornblower joined with Hewitt in pushing the furniture under them, and then hurried into the bedroom to do the same.

"Bring some rags here!" he called.

Côtard came scrambling down the ladder with one arm full of books.

"Now. Let's start the fire," said Hornblower.

It was a strange thing to do, in cold blood.

"Try the stove," suggested Côtard.

Hewitt unlatched the door of the stove, but it was too hot to touch after that. He set his back to the wall and braced his feet against the stove and shoved; the stove fell and rolled, scattering a few embers over the floor. But Hornblower had snatched up a handful of blue lights from Hewitt's bundle; the tallow dip was still burning

and available to light the fuses. The first fuse spluttered and then the firework spouted flames. Sulphur and saltpetre with a sprinkling of gunpowder; blue lights were ideal for this purpose. He tossed the blazing thing on to the oily rags, lit another and threw it, lit another still.

This was like some scene in Hell. The uncanny blue gleam lit the room, but soon the haze of smoke made everything dim, and the fumes of the burning sulphur offended their nostrils as the fireworks hissed and roared, while Hornblower went on lighting fuses and thrusting the blue lights where they would be most effective in living-room and bedroom. Hewitt in an inspired moment tore the rush mat up from the floor and flung it over the rising flames of the rags. Already the timber was crackling and throwing out showers of yellow sparks to compete with the blue glare and the thickening smoke.

"That'll burn!" said Côtard.

The flames from the blazing mat were playing on one of the sloping timbers, and engendering new flames which licked up the rough wooden surface. They stood and watched fascinated. On this rocky summit there could be no well, no spring, and it would be impossible to extinguish this fire once it was thoroughly started. The laths of the partition wall were alight in two places where Hornblower had thrust blue lights into the crannies; he saw the flames at one point suddenly leap two feet up the partition with a volley of loud reports and fresh showers of sparks.

"Come on!" he said.

Outside the air was keen and clear and they blinked their dazzled eyes and stumbled over inequalities at their feet, but there was a faint tiny light suffusing the air, the first glimmer of daylight. Hornblower saw the vague shape of the fat woman standing huddled in her quilt: she was sobbing in a strange way, making a loud gulping noise regularly at intervals of a couple of seconds or so. Somebody must have kicked over the chicken coop, because there seemed to be clucking chickens everywhere in the half-light. The interior of the cottage was all ablaze, and now there was light enough in the sky for Hornblower to see the immense mast of the telegraph against it, oddly shaped with its semaphore arms dangling. Eight stout cables radiated out from it, attached to pillars sunk in the rock. The cables braced the unwieldy mast against the rude winds of the Atlantic, and the pillars served also to support the tottering picket fence that surrounded the place. There was a pathetic attempt at a garden on small patches of soil that might well have been carried up by hand from the valley below; a few pansies, a patch of lavender, and two unhappy geraniums trodden down by some blunderer. Yet the light was still only just apparent; the flames that were devouring the cottage were brighter. He saw illuminated smoke pouring from the side of the upper storey, and directly after that flames shot out from between the warping timbers.

"The devil of a collection of ropes and blocks and levers up there," said Côtard. "Not much of it left by this time."

"No one'll put that out now. And we've heard nothing from the marines," said Hornblower. "Come along, you men."

He had been prepared to fight a delaying action with his musket men if the enemy had appeared before the place was well alight. Now it was unnecessary, so well had everything gone. So well, indeed, that it called for a moment or two's delay to collect the men. These leisurely minutes had made all haste appear unnecessary as they filed out through the gate. There was a slight haze lying over the surface of the summer sea; the topsails of the *Hotspur* — main-topsail aback — were far more visible than her hull, a grey pearl in the pearly mist. The fat woman stood at the gate, all modesty gone with the quilt that had fallen from her shoulders, waving her arms and shrieking curses at them.

From the misty valley on their right as they faced the descent came the notes of a musical instrument, some trumpet or bugle.

"That's their reveille," commented Côtard, sliding down the path on Hornblower's heels.

He had hardly spoken when the call was taken up by other bugles. A second or two later came the sound of a musket shot, and then more musket shots, and along with them the echoing roll of a drum, and then more drums beating the alarm.

"That's the marines," said Côtard.

"Yes," snapped Hornblower. "Come on!"

Musketry meant a bad mark against the landing party that had gone up against the battery. Very likely there was a sentry there, and he should have been disposed of silently. But somehow the alarm had been given. The guard had turned out — say twenty men armed and equipped — and now the main body was being roused. That would be the artillery unit in their hutments below the ridge; not too effective, perhaps, fighting with musket and bayonet, but over the other side there was a battalion of infantry at this very moment being roused from sleep. Hornblower had given his order and broken into a run along the right-hand path towards the battery before these thoughts had formulated themselves quite so clearly. He was ready with his new plan before they topped the ridge.

"Halt!"

They assembled behind him.

"Load!"

Cartridges were bitten open; pans were primed, and charges poured down the barrels of muskets and pistols. The wadded cartridge papers were thrust into the muzzles, the bullets were spat in on top, and then the ramrods were plied to drive all home.

"Côtard, take the musket men out to the flank. You others, come with me."

There was the great battery with its four thirty-two pounders looking through the embrasures of its curving parapet. Beyond it a skirmish line of marines, their uniforms showing scarlet in the growing light, were holding at bay a French force only outlined by musket flashes and puffs of smoke. The sudden arrival of Côtard and his men, an unknown force on their flank caused the momentary withdrawal of this French force.

In the centre of the inner face of the parapet Captain Jones in his red coat with four other men were struggling with a door; beside him was laid out a bundle similar to the one Hewitt carried, blue lights, reels of slow match and quick match. Beyond him lay two dead marines, one of them shot hideously in the face. Jones looked up as Hornblower arrived, but Hornblower wasted no time in discussion.

"Stand aside! Axemen!"

The door was of solid wood and reinforced with iron, but it was only intended to keep out thieving civilians; a sentry was supposed to guard it, and under the thundering of the axes, it gave way rapidly.

"The guns are all spiked," said Jones.

That was only the smallest part of the business. An iron spike driven into the touch-hole of a gun would render it useless in the heat of the moment, but an armourer working with a drill would clear it in an hour's work.

Hornblower was on the step of the parapet looking over the top; the French were rallying for a new attack. But an axehandle was working as a lever through a gap driven in the door. Black had hold of the edge of a panel and with a wild effort tore it free. A dozen more blows, another wrench, and there was a way open through the door. A crouching man could make his way into the blackness inside.

"I'll go," said Hornblower. He could not trust Jones or the marines. He could trust no one but himself. He seized the reel of quick match and squeezed through the shattered door. There were timbered steps under his feet, but he expected that and so did not fall down them. He crouched under the roof and felt his way down. There was a landing and a turn, and then more steps, much darker, and then his outstretched hands touched a hanging curtain of serge. He thrust this aside and stepped cautiously beyond it. Here it was utterly black. He was in the magazine. He was in the area where the ammunition party would wear list slippers, because nailed shoes might cause a spark to ignite the gun-powder. He felt cautiously about him; one hand touched a wall of cartridges, serge cylinders ready filled, and the other hand touched the harsh outline of a cask. Those were the powder-barrels — his hand involuntarily withdrew itself, as though it had touched a snake. No time for that sort of idiocy, he was surrounded by violent death.

He drew his cutlass, snarling in the darkness with the intensity of his emotion. Twice he stabbed into the wall of cartridge, and his ears were rewarded by the whispering sound of a cascade of powder-grains pouring out through the gashes he had made. He must have a firm anchorage for the fuse; and he stooped and sank the blade of the cutlass into another cartridge. He unravelled a length of quick match and wound a bight firmly round the hilt, and he buried the end in the pile of powder-grains on the floor; an unnecessarily careful measure, perhaps, when a single spark would set off the explosion. Unreeling the quick match behind him, carefully, very carefully, lest he jerk the cutlass loose, he made his way out past the curtain again, and up the

steps, up into the growing light, round the corner. The light through the broken door was dazzling, and he blinked as he came out crouching through it, still unreeling the quick match.

"Cut this!" he snapped, and Black whipped out his knife and sawed through the quick match at the point indicated by Hornblower's hand.

Quick match burned faster than the eye could follow; the fifty feet or so that extended down to the magazine would burn in less than a second.

"Cut me a yard off that!" said Hornblower pointing to the slow match.

Slow match was carefully tested. It burned in still air at exactly thirty inches in one hour, one inch in two minutes. Hornblower had no intention whatever of allowing an hour or more for the combustion of this yard, however. He could hear the muskets banging; he could hear drums echoing in the hills. He must keep calm.

"Cut off another foot and light it!"

While Black was executing this order Hornblower was tying quick match to slow match, making sure they were closely joined. Yet he still had to think of the general situation in addition to these vital details.

"Hewitt!" he snapped, looking up from his work. "Listen carefully. Run to the lieutenant's party of marines over the ridge there. Tell him we're going to fall back now, and he is to cover our retreat at the last slope above the boats. Understand?"

"Aye aye, sir."

"Then run."

Just as well that it was not Grimes who had to be entrusted with the mission. The fuses were knotted together now, and Hornblower looked round him.

"Bring that dead man over here!"

Black asked no questions, but dragged the corpse to the foot of the door. Hornblower had looked first for a stone, but a corpse would be better in every way. It was not yet stiff, and the arm lay limply across the quick match just above the knot, after Hornblower had passed all excess slack back through the shattered door. The dead man served to conceal the existence of the fuse. If the French arrived too early he would gain valuable seconds for the plan; the moment the fire reached the quick match it would flash under the dead man's arm and shoot on down to the powder. If to investigate the magazine they dragged the corpse out of the way, the weight of a fuse inside the door would whisk the knot inside and so gain seconds too — perhaps the burning end would tumble down the steps, perhaps right into the magazine.

"Captain Jones! Warn everybody to be ready to retreat. At once, please. Give me that burning fuse, Black."

"Let me do that, sir."

"Shut your mouth."

Hornblower took the smouldering slow match and blew on it to quicken its life. Then he looked down at the length of slow match knotted to the quick match. He took special note of a point an inch and a half from the knot; there was a black spot there which served to mark the place. An inch and a half. Three minutes.

"Get up on the parapet, Black. Now. Yell for them to run. Yell!"

As Black began to bellow Hornblower pressed the smouldering end down upon the black spot. After two seconds he withdrew it; the slow match was alight and burning in two directions — in one, harmlessly towards the inoperative excess, and in the other towards the knot, the quick match an inch and a half away.

Hornblower made sure it was burning, and then he scrambled to his feet and leaped up on the parapet.

The marines were trooping past him, with Côtard and his seamen bringing up the rear. A minute and a half — a minute, now, and the French were following them up, just out of musket range.

"Better hurry, Côtard. Come on!"

They broke into a jogtrot.

"Steady, there!" yelled Jones. He was concerned about panic among these men if they ran from the enemy instead of retreating steadily, but there was a time for everything. The marines began to run, with Jones yelling ineffectually and waving his sword.

"Come on, Jones," said Hornblower as he passed him, but Jones was filled with fighting madness, and went on shouting defiance at the French, standing alone with his face to the enemy.

Then it happened. The earth moved back and forth under their feet so that they tripped and staggered, while a smashing, overwhelming explosion burst on their ears, and the sky went dark. Hornblower looked back. A

column of smoke was still shooting upwards, higher and higher, and dark fragments were visible in it. Then the column spread out, mushrooming at the top. Something fell with a crash ten yards away, throwing up chips of stone which rattled round Hornblower's feet. Something came whistling through the air, something huge, curving down as it twirled. Selectively, inevitably, it fell, half a ton of rock, blown from where it roofed the magazine right on to Jones in his red coat, sliding along as if bestially determined to wipe out completely the pitiful thing it dragged beneath it. Hornblower and Côtard gazed at it in mesmerized horror as it came to rest six feet from their left hands.

It was the most difficult moment of all for Hornblower to keep his senses, or to regain them. He had to shake himself out of a daze.

"Come on."

He still had to think clearly. They were at the final slope above the boats. The lieutenant's party of marines, sent out as a flank guard, had fallen back to this point and were drawn up here firing at a threatening crowd of Frenchmen. The French wore white facings on their blue uniforms — infantry men, not the artillery men who had opposed them round the battery. And beyond them was a long column of infantry, hurrying along, with a score of drums beating an exhilarating rhythm — the *pas de charge*.

"You men get down into the boats," said Hornblower, addressing the rallying group of seamen and marines from the battery, and then he turned to the lieutenant.

"Captain Jones is dead. Make ready to run for it the moment those others reach the jetty."

"Yes, sir."

Behind Hornblower's back, turned as it was to the enemy, they heard a sharp sudden noise, like the impact of a carpenter's axe against wood. Hornblower swung round again. Côtard was staggering, his sword and the books and papers he had carried all this time fallen to the ground at his feet. Then Hornblower noticed his left arm, which was swaying in the air as if hanging by a thread. Then came the blood. A musket bullet had crashed into Côtard's upper armbone, shattering it. One of the axemen who had not left caught him as he was about to fall.

"Ah — ah — ah!" gasped Côtard, with the jarring of his shattered arm. He stared at Hornblower with bewildered eyes.

"Sorry you've been hit," said Hornblower, and to the axeman, "Get him down to the boat."

Côtard was gesticulating towards the ground with his right hand, and Hornblower spoke to the other axeman.

"Pick those papers up and go down to the boat too."

But Côtard was not satisfied.

"My sword! My sword!"

"I'll look after your sword," said Hornblower. These absurd notions of honour were so deeply ingrained that even in these conditions Côtard could not bear the thought of leaving his sword on the field of battle.

Hornblower realized he had no cutlass as he picked up Côtard's sword. The axeman had gathered up the books and papers.

"Help Mr Côtard down," said Hornblower, and added, as another thought struck him. "Put a scarf round his arm above the wound and strain it tight. Understand?"

Côtard, supported by the other axeman was already tottering down the path. Movement meant agony. That heartrending "ah — ah — ah!" came back to Hornblower's ears at every step Côtard took.

"Here they come!" said the marine lieutenant.

The skirmishing Frenchmen, emboldened by the near approach of their main body, were charging forward. A hurried glance told Hornblower that the others were all down on the jetty; the lobster-boat was actually pushing off, full of men.

"Tell your men to run for it," he said, and the moment after they started he followed them.

It was a wild dash, slipping and sliding, down the path to the jetty, with the French yelling in pursuit. But here was the covering party, as Hornblower had ordered so carefully the day before; *Hotspur's* own thirteen marines, under their own sergeant. They had built a breastwork across the jetty, again as Hornblower had ordered when he had visualized this hurried retreat. It was lower than waist-high, hurriedly put together with rocks and fish-barrels full of stones. The hurrying mob poured over it. Hornblower, last of all, gathered himself

together and leaping over it, arms and legs flying, to stumble on the far side and regain his footing by a miracle.

"*Hotspur's* marines! Line the barricade. Get into the boats, you others!"

Twelve marines knelt at the barricade; twelve muskets levelled themselves over it. At the sight of them the pursuing French hesitated, tried to halt.

"Aim low!" shouted the marine lieutenant hoarsely.

"Go back and get the men into the boats, Mr What's-your-name," snapped Hornblower. "Have the launch ready to cast off, while you shove off in the yawl and get away."

The French were coming forward again; Hornblower looked back and saw the lieutenant drop off the jetty on the heels of the last marine.

"Now sergeant. Let 'em have it."

"Fire!" said the sergeant.

That was a good volley, but there was not a moment to admire it.

"Come on!" yelled Hornblower. "Over to the launch!"

With the weight of *Hotspur's* marines leaping into it the launch was drifting away by the time he was at the edge; there was a yard of black water for Hornblower to leap over, but his feet reached the gunnel and he pitched forward among the men clustered there; he luckily remembered to drop Côtard's sword so that he fell harmlessly into the bottom of the boat without wounding anyone. Oars and boat-hooks thrust against the jetty and the launch surged away while Hornblower scrambled into the stern sheets. He almost stepped on Côtard's face; Côtard was lying apparently unconscious on the bottom boards.

Now the oars were grinding in the rowlocks. They were twenty yards away, thirty yards away, before the first Frenchmen came yelling along the jetty, to stand dancing with rage and excitement on the very edge of the masonry. For an invaluable second or two they even forgot the muskets in their hands. In the launch the huddled men raised their voices in a yell of derision that excited Hornblower's cold rage.

"Silence! Silence, all of you!"

The stillness that fell on the launch was more unpleasant than the noise. One or two muskets banged off on the jetty, and Hornblower, looking over his shoulder, saw a French soldier drop on one knee and take deliberate aim, saw him choose a target, saw the musket barrel fore-shorten until the muzzle was pointed directly at him. He was wildly contemplating throwing himself down into the bottom of the boat when the musket went off. He felt a violent jar through his body, and realized with relief that the bullet had burried itself in the solid oak transom of the launch against which he was sitting. He recovered his wits; looking forward he saw Hewitt trying to force his way aft to his side and he spoke to him as calmly as his excitement permitted.

"Hewitt! Get for'ard to the gun. It's loaded with grape. Fire when it bears." Then he spoke to the oarsmen and to Cargill at the tiller. "Hard-a-port. Starboard-side oars, back water."

"Port side, back water."

The launch ceased to turn; she was pointed straight at the jetty, and Hewitt, having shoved the other men aside, was cold-bloodedly looking along the sights of the four-pounder carronade mounted in the bows, fiddling with the elevating coign. Then he leaned over to one side and pulled the lanyard. The whole boat jerked sternwards abruptly with the recoil, as though when underway she had struck a rock, and the smoke came back round them in a sullen pall.

"Give way, starboard side! Pull! Hard-a-starboard!" The boat turned ponderously. "Give way, port side!"

Nine quarter pound grapeshot-balls had swept through the group on the jetty; there were struggling figures, quiescent figures, lying there. Bonaparte had a quarter of a million soldiers under arms, but he had now lost some of them. It could not be called a drop out of the bucketful, but perhaps a molecule. Now they were out of musket shot, and Hornblower turned to Cargill in the stern sheets beside him.

"You managed your part of the business well enough, Mr Cargill."

"Thank you, sir."

Cargill had been appointed by Hornblower to land with the marines and to take charge of the boats and prepare them for the evacuation.

"But it might have been better if you'd sent the launch away first and kept the yawl back until the last. Then the launch could have lain off and covered the others with her gun."

"I thought of that, sir. But I couldn't be sure until the last moment how many men would be coming down in the last group. I had to keep the launch for that."

"Maybe you're right," said Hornblower, grudgingly, and then, his sense of justice prevailing, "In fact I'm sure you're right."

"Thank you, sir," said Cargill again, and, after a pause, "I wish you had let me come with you, sir."

Some people had queer tastes, thought Hornblower bitterly to himself, having regard to Côtard lying unconscious with a shattered arm at their feet, but he had to smooth down ruffled feelings in these touchy young men thirsting for honour and for the promotion that honour might bring.

"Use your wits, man," he said, bracing himself once more to think logically. "Someone had to be in charge on the jetty, and you were the best man for the job."

"Thank you, sir," said Cargill all over again, but still wistfully, and therefore still idiotically.

A sudden thought struck Hornblower, and he turned and stared back over his shoulder. He actually had to look twice, although he knew what he was looking for. The silhouette of the hills had changed. Then he saw a wisp of black smoke still rising from the summit. The semaphore was gone. The towering thing that had spied on their movements and had reported every disposition of the Inshore Squadron was no more. Trained British seamen and riggers and carpenters could not replace it — if they had such a job to do — in less than a week's work. Probably the French would take two weeks at least; his own estimate would be three.

And there was *Hotspur* waiting for them, main-topsail aback, as he had seen her half an hour ago; half an hour that seemed like a week. The lobster-boat and the yawl were already going round to her port side, and Cargill steered for her starboard side; in these calm waters and with such a gentle wind there was no need for the boats to be offered a lee.

"Oars!" said Cargill, and the launch ran alongside, and there was Bush looking down on them from close overhead. Hornblower seized the entering-ropes and swung himself up. It was his right as captain to go first, and it was also his duty. He cut Bush's congratulations short.

"Get the wounded out as quick as you can, Mr Bush. Send a stretcher down for Mr Côtard."

"Is he wounded, sir?"

"Yes." Hornblower had no desire to enter into unnecessary explanations. "You'll have to lash him to it and then sway the stretcher up with a whip from the yardarm. His arm's in splinters."

"Aye aye, sir." Bush by now had realized that Hornblower was in no conversational mood.

"The surgeon's ready?"

"He's started work, sir."

A wave of Bush's hand indicated a couple of wounded men who had come on board from the yawl and were being supported below.

"Very well."

Hornblower headed for his cabin; no need to explain that he had his report to write; no need to make excuses. But as always after action he yearned for the solitude of his cabin even more than he yearned to sink down and forget his weariness. But at the second step he pulled up short. This was not a neat clean end to the venture. No peace for him at the moment, and he swore to himself under this final strain, using filthy black blasphemies such as he rarely employed.

He would have to deal with Grimes, and instantly. He must make up his mind about what he should do. Punish him? Punish a man for being a coward? That would be like punishing a man for having red hair. Hornblower stood first on one foot and then on the other, unable to pace, yet striving to goad his weary mind to further action. Punish Grimes for showing cowardice? That was more to the point. Not that it would do Grimes any good, but it would deter other men from showing cowardice. There were officers who would punish, not in the interests of discipline, but because they thought punishment should be inflicted in payment for crime, as sinners had to go to Hell. Hornblower would not credit himself with the divine authority some officers thought natural.

But he would have to act. He thought of the court martial. He would be the sole witness, but the court would know he was speaking the truth. His word would decide Grimes' fate, and then — the hangman's noose, or at the very least five hundred lashes, with Grimes screaming in pain until he should fall unconscious, to be nursed

round for another day of torture, and another after that, until he was a gibbering idiot with neither mind nor strength left.

Hornblower hated the thought. But he remembered that the crew must have already guessed. Grimes must have already started his punishment, and yet the discipline of the *Hotspur* must be preserved. Hornblower would have to do his duty; he must pay one of the penalties for being a naval officer, just as he suffered sea-sickness — just as he risked his life. He would have Grimes put under arrest at once, and while Grimes was spending twenty-four hours in irons he could make up his mind to the final decision. He strode aft to his cabin, with all relief gone from the thought of relaxation.

Then he opened the door, and there was no problem left; only horror, further horror. Grimes hung there, from a rope threaded through the hook that supported the lamp. He was swaying with the gentle motion of the ship, his feet dragging on the deck so that even his knees were almost on the deck too. There was a blackened face and protruding tongue — actually there was no likeness to Grimes at all in the horrible thing hanging there. Grimes had not the courage to face the landing operation, but when the realization had come to him, when the crew had displayed their feelings, he had yet had the determination to do this thing, to submit himself to this slow strangulation, falling with a small preliminary jerk from a cramped position crouching on the cot.

In all the crew of the *Hotspur* Grimes had been the one man who as captain's steward could find the necessary privacy to do this thing. He had foreseen the flogging or the hanging, he had suffered the scorn of his shipmates; there was bitter irony in the thought that the semaphore station which he had feared to attack had turned out to be defended by a helpless civilian and his wife.

Hotspur rolled gently on the swell, and as she rolled the lolling head and the dangling arms swayed in unison, and the feet scraped over the deck. Hornblower shook off the horror that had seized him, drove himself to be clear-headed once more despite his fatigue and his disgust. He went to the door of the cabin; it was excusable that no sentry had yet been reposted there, seeing that the *Hotspur's* marines had only just come on board.

"Pass the word for Mr Bush," he said.

Within a minute Bush hurried in, to pull up short as soon as he saw the thing.

"I'll have that removed at once, if you please, Mr Bush. Put it over the side. Give it a burial, Christian burial, if you like."

"Aye aye, sir."

Bush shut his mouth after his formal statement of compliance. He could see that Hornblower was in even less a conversational mood in this cabin than he had been when on deck. Hornblower passed into the chart-room and squeezed himself into the chair, and sat still, his hands motionless on the table. Almost immediately he heard the arrival of the working party Bush had sent. He heard loud amazed voices, and something like a laugh, all instantly repressed when they realized that he was next door. The voices died to hoarse whispers. There was a clump or two, and then a dragging noise and he knew the thing was gone.

Then he got to his feet to carry out the resolution formed during his recent clarity of mind. He walked firmly into the cabin, a little like someone unwillingly going into a duel. He did not want to; he hated this place, but in a tiny ship like *Hotspur* he had nowhere else to go. He would have to grow used to it. He put aside the weak thought that he could move himself into one of the screened-off cabins in the 'tween decks, and send, for instance, the warrant officers up here. That would occasion endless inconvenience, and — even more important — endless comment as well. He had to use this place and the longer he contemplated the prospect the less inviting it would be. And he was so tired he could hardly stand. He approached the cot; a mental picture developed in his mind's eye of Grimes kneeling on it, rope round his neck, to pitch himself off. He forced himself coldly to accept that picture, as something in the past. This was the present, and he dropped on to the cot, shoes on his feet, cutlass-sheath at his side, sandbag in his pocket. Grimes was not present to help him with those.

Chapter 11

Hornblower had written the address, the date, and the word 'Sir' before he realized that the report would not be so easy to write. He was quite sure that this letter would appear in the Gazette, but he had been sure of that from the moment he had faced the writing of it. It would be a 'Gazette Letter', one of the few, out of the many hundreds of reports coming into the Admiralty, selected for publication, and it would be his first appearance in print. He had told himself that he would simply write a standard straightforward report along the time-honoured lines, yet now he had to stop and think, although stage fright had nothing to do with it. The publication of this letter meant that it would be read by the whole world. It would be read by the whole Navy, which meant that his subordinates would read it, and he knew, only too well, how every careless word would be scanned and weighed by touchy individuals.

Much more important still; it would be read by all England, and that meant that Maria would read it. It would open a peephole into his life that so far she had never been able to look through. From the point of view of his standing with the Navy it might be desirable to let the dangers he had undergone be apparent, in a modest sort of way, but that would be in direct contradiction of the breezy lighthearted letter he intended to write to Maria. Maria was a shrewd little person, and he could not deceive her; to read the Gazette letter after his letter would excite her mistrust and apprehension at a moment when she was carrying what might well be the heir to the Hornblower name, with possibly the worst effects both on Maria and on the child.

He faced the choice, and it had to be in favour of Maria. He would make light of his difficulties and dangers, and even then he could still hope that the Navy would read between the lines that which Maria in her ignorance would not guess at. He re-dipped his pen, and bit the end in a momentary mental debate as to whether all the Gazette Letters he had read had been written in the face of similar difficulties, and decided that was probably true of the majority. Well, it had to be written. There was no avoiding it — for that matter there was no postponing it. The necessary preliminary words, 'In accordance with your orders' set him off, started the flow. He had to remember all that he had to put in. 'Mr William Bush, my first lieutenant, very handsomely volunteered his services, but I directed him to remain in command of the ship.' Later on it was no effort to write 'Lieut. Charles Côtard, of HMS *Marlborough*, who had volunteered for the expedition, gave invaluable assistance as a result of his knowledge of the French language. I regret very much to have to inform you that he received a wound which necessitated amputation, and his life is still in danger.' Then there was something else he had to put in. 'Mr' — what was his first name? — 'Mr Alexander Cargill, Master's Mate, was allotted by me the duty of superintending the re-embarkation, which he carried out very much to my satisfaction.' The next passage would satisfy Maria. 'The Telegraph Station was seized by the party under my personal command without the slightest opposition, and was set on fire and completely destroyed after the confidential papers had been secured.' Intelligent naval officers would have a higher opinion of an operation carried through without loss of life than of one which cost a monstrous butcher's bill. Now for the battery; he had to be careful about this. 'Captain Jones of the Royal Marines, having gallantly secured the battery, was unfortunately involved in the explosion of the magazine, and I much regret to have to report his death, while several other Royal Marines of his party are dead or missing.' One of them had been as useful dead as alive. Hornblower checked himself. He still could not bear to remember those minutes by the magazine door. He went on with his letter. 'Lieutenant Reid of the Royal Marines guarded the flank and covered the retreat with small loss. His conduct calls for my unreserved approbation.'

That was very true, and pleasant to write. So was the next passage. 'It is with much gratification that I can inform you that the battery is completely wrecked. The parapet is thrown down along with the guns, and the gun-carriages destroyed, as will be understood because not less than one ton of gunpowder was exploded in the battery.' There were four thirty-two pounders in that battery. A single charge for one of these guns was ten pounds of powder, and the magazine, sunk deep below the parapets, must have contained charges for fifty rounds per gun as a minimum. A crater had been left where once the parapet stood.

Not much more to write now. 'The retreat was effected in good order. I append the list of killed, wounded, and missing.' The rough list lay in front of him, and he proceeded to copy it out carefully; there were widows and bereaved parents who might derive consolation from the sight of those names in the Gazette. One seaman had been killed and several slightly wounded. He recorded their names and began a fresh paragraph. 'Royal

Marines. Killed. Captain Henry Jones. Privates —' A thought struck him at this moment and he paused with his pen in the air. There was not only consolation in seeing a name in the Gazette; parents and widows could receive the back pay of the deceased and some small gratuity. He was still thinking when Bush came hurrying in the door.

"Cap'n, sir. I'd like to show you something from the deck."

"Very well. I'll come."

He paused for only a short while. There was a single name in the paragraph headed 'Seamen killed' — James Johnson, Ordinary Seaman. He added another name. 'John Grimes, Captain's Steward' and then he put down the pen and came out on deck.

"Look over there, sir," said Bush, pointing eagerly ashore and proffering his telescope.

The landscape was still unfamiliar, with the semaphore gone and the battery — easily visible previously — replaced now by a mound of earth. But that was not what Bush was referring to. There was a considerable body of men on horseback riding along the slopes; through the telescope Hornblower could fancy he could detect plumes and gold lace.

"Those must be generals, sir," said Bush excitedly, "come out to see the damage. The commandant, and the governor, an' the chief engineer, an' all the rest of 'em. We're nearly in range now, sir. We could drop down without their noticing, run out the guns smartly, full elevation, and — we ought to hit a target that size with one shot in a broadside at least, sir."

"I think we could," agreed Hornblower. He looked up at the wind-vane and over at the shore. "We could wear ship and —"

Bush waited for Hornblower to complete his speech, but the end never came.

"Shall I give the order, sir?"

There was another pause.

"No," said Hornblower at last. "Better not."

Bush was too good a subordinate to protest, but his disappointment showed plainly enough, and it was necessary to soften the refusal with an explanation. They might kill a general, although the odds were that it would merely be an orderly dragoon. On the other hand they would be drawing most forcible attention to the present weakness of this portion of coast.

"Then they'll be bringing field batteries," went on Hornblower, "only nine-pounders, but —"

"Yes, sir. They might be a nuisance," said Bush in reluctant agreement. "Do you have anything in mind, sir?"

"Not me. Him," said Hornblower. All operations of the Inshore Squadron were Pellew's responsibility and should be to Pellets credit. He pointed towards the Inshore Squadron where Pellew's broad pendant flew. But the broad pendant was to fly there no longer. The boat that took Hornblower's report to the *Tonnant* returned not only with stores but with official dispatches.

"Sir," said Orrock, after handing them over. "The Commodore sent a man with me from the *Tonnant* who carries a letter for you."

"Where is he?"

He seemed a very ordinary sort of seaman, dressed in the standard clothes of the slop chest. His thick blond pigtail, as he stood hat in hand, indicated that he had long been a seaman. Hornblower took the letter and broke the seal.

My dear Hornblower,

It is with infinite pain to myself that I have to confirm the news, conveyed to you in the official despatches, that your latest report will also be the last that I shall have the pleasure of reading. My flag has come, and I shall hoist it as Rear-Admiral commanding the squadron assembling for the blockade of Rochefort. Rear Admiral Wm. Parker will take over the command of the Inshore Squadron and I have recommended you to him in the strongest terms although your actions speak even more strongly for you. But Commanding officers are likely to have their favourites, men with whom they are personally acquainted. We can hardly quarrel on this score, seeing that I have indulged myself in a favourite whose initials are H.H.! Now let us leave this subject for another even more personal.

I noted in your report that you have had the misfortune to lose your steward, and I take the liberty to send you James Doughty as a substitute. He was steward of the late Captain Stevens of the *Magnificent*, and he has been persuaded to volunteer for the *Hotspur*. I understand that he has had much practical experience in attending to gentlemen's needs, and I hope you will find him suitable and that he will look after you for many years. If during that time you are reminded of me by his presence I shall be well satisfied.

Your sincere friend,

Ed. Pellew

Even with all his quickness of mind it took Hornblower a little while to digest the manifold contents of this letter after reading it. It was all bad news; bad news about the change of command, and just as bad, although in a different way, that he was being saddled with a gentleman's gentleman who would sneer at his domestic arrangements. Yet if there was anything that a naval career taught anybody, it was to be philosophic about drastic changes.

"Doughty?" said Hornblower.

"Sir."

Doughty looked respectful, but there might be something quizzical in his glance.

"You're going to be my servant. Do your duty and you have nothing to fear."

"Yes, sir. No, sir."

"You've brought your dunnage?"

"Aye aye, sir."

"The First Lieutenant will detail someone to show you where to sling your hammock. You'll share a berth with my clerk."

The captain's steward was the only ordinary seaman in the ship who did not have to sleep in the tiers.

"Aye aye, sir."

"Then you can take up your duties."

"Aye aye, sir."

It was only a few minutes later that Hornblower, in his cabin, looked up to find a silent figure slipping in through the door; Doughty knew that as a personal servant he did not knock if the sentry told him the captain was alone.

"Have you had your dinner, sir?"

It took a moment to answer that question, at the end of a broken day following an entirely sleepless night. During that moment Doughty looked respectfully over Hornblower's left shoulder. His eyes were a startling blue.

"No, I haven't. You'd better see about something for me," replied Hornblower.

"Yes, sir."

The blue eyes looked round the cabin and found nothing.

"No. There are no cabin stores. You'll have to go to the galley. Mr Simmonds will find something for me." The ship's cook, as a warrant officer, rated the 'Mr' in front of his name. "No. Wait. There are two lobsters somewhere in this ship. You'll find 'em in a barrel of seawater somewhere on the booms. And that reminds me. Your predecessor has been dead for nearly twenty-four hours and that water hasn't been changed. You must do that. Go to the officer of the watch with my compliments and ask him to put the wash-deck pump to work on it. That'll keep one lobster alive while I have the other."

"Yes, sir. Or you could have this one hot tonight and the other one cold tomorrow if I boil them both now, sir."

"I could," agreed Hornblower without committing himself.

"Mayonnaise," said Doughty. "Are there any eggs in this ship, sir? Any salad oil?"

"No there are not!" rasped Hornblower. "There are no cabin stores whatever in this ship except those two damned lobsters."

"Yes, sir. Then I'll serve this one with drawn butter and I'll see what I can do tomorrow, sir."

"Do whatever you damned well like and don't trouble me," said Hornblower.

He was working into a worse and worse temper. He not only had to storm batteries but he also had to remember about keeping lobsters alive. And Pellew was leaving the Brest fleet; the official orders he had just

read gave details about salutes to the new flags tomorrow. And tomorrow this damned Doughty and his damned mayonnaise, whatever that was, would be pawing over his patched shirts.

"Yes, sir," said Doughty, and disappeared as quietly as he had entered.

Hornblower went out on deck to pace off his bad temper. The first breath of the delightful evening air helped to soothe him; so, too, did the hurried movement of everyone on the quarterdeck over to the lee side so as to leave the weather side to him. For him there was as much space as heart could desire — five long strides forward and aft — but all the other officers had now to take the air under crowded conditions. Let 'em. He had to write out his report to Pellew three times, the original draught, the fair copy, and the copy in his confidential letter book. Some captains gave that work to their clerks, but Hornblower would not do so. Captain's clerks made a practice of exploiting their confidential position; there were officers in the ship who would be glad to hear what their captain said about them, and what the future plans might be. Martin would never have the chance. He could confine himself to muster-rolls and returns of stores and the other nuisances that plagued a captain's life.

Now Pellew was leaving them, and that was a disaster. Earlier today Hornblower had actually allowed his mind to dally with the notion that some day he might know the inexpressible joy of being 'made Post', of being promoted to Captain. That called for the strongest influence, in the Fleet and in the Admiralty. With Pellew's transfer he had lost a friend in the Fleet. With Parry's retirement he had lost a friend in the Admiralty — he did not know a single soul there. His promotion to Commander had been a fantastic stroke of luck. When Hotspur should be paid off there were three hundred ambitious young Commanders all with uncles and cousins and all anxious to take his place. He could find himself rotting on the beach on half-pay. With Maria. With Maria and the child. The reverse side of the penny was no more attractive than the front.

This was not the way to work off the gloom that threatened to engulf him. He had written Maria a letter to be proud of, reassuring, cheerful, and as loving as he had found it possible to make it. Over there was Venus, shining out in the evening sky. This sea air was stimulating, refreshing, delightful. Surely this was a better world than his drained nervous condition allowed him to believe. It took a full hour of pacing to convince him fully of this. At the end of that time the comfortably monotonous exercise had slowed down his overactive mind. He was healthily tired now, and the moment he thought about it he knew he was ravenously hungry. He had seen Doughty flitting about the deck more than once, for however lost in distraction Hornblower might be he nevertheless took instant note, consciously or subconsciously, of everything that went on in the ship. He was growing desperately impatient, and night had entirely closed in, when his pacing was intercepted.

"Your dinner's ready, sir."

Doughty stood respectfully in front of him.

"Very well. I'll come."

Hornblower sat himself down at the chart-room table. Doughty standing at his chair in the cramped space.

"One moment, sir, while I bring your dinner from the galley. May I pour you some cider, sir?"

"Pour me some . . . ?"

But Doughty was already pouring from jug to cup, and then he vanished. Hornblower tasted gingerly. There was no doubt about it, it was excellent cider, rough and yet refined, fruity and yet in no way sweet. After water months in cask it was heavenly. He only took two preliminary sips before his head went back and the whole cupful shot delightfully down his throat. He had not begun to debate this curious phenomenon when Doughty slipped into the chart-room again.

"The plate is hot, sir," he said.

"What the devil's this?" asked Hornblower.

"Lobster cutlets, sir," said Doughty, pouring more cider, and then, with a gesture not quite imperceptible, he indicated the wooden saucer he had laid on the table at the same time. "Butter sauce, sir."

Extraordinary. There were neat brown cutlets on his plate that bore no outward resemblance to lobster, but when Hornblower cautiously added sauce and tasted, the result was excellent. Minced lobster. And when Doughty took the cover off the cracked vegetable dish there was a dream of delight revealed. New potatoes, golden and lovely. He helped himself hurriedly and very nearly burned his mouth on them. Nothing could be quite as nice as the first new potatoes of the year.

"These came with the ship's vegetables, sir," explained Doughty. "I was in time to save them."

Hornblower did not need to ask from what those new potatoes had been saved. He knew a good deal about Hufflell the purser, and he could guess at the appetite of the wardroom mess. Lobster cutlets and new potatoes and this pleasant butter sauce; he was enjoying his dinner, resolutely putting aside the knowledge that the ship's biscuit in the bread barge was weevily. He was used to weevils, which always showed up after the first month at sea, or earlier if the biscuit had been long in store. He told himself as he took another mouthful of lobster cutlet that he would not allow a weevil in his biscuit to be a fly in his ointment.

He took another pull at the cider before he remembered to ask where it came from.

"I pledged your credit for it, sir," said Doughty. "I took the liberty of doing so, to the extent of a quarter of a pound of tobacco."

"Who had it?"

"Sir," said Doughty, "I promised not to say."

"Oh, very well," said Hornblower.

There was only one source for cider — the *Camilla*, the lobster-boat he had seized last night. Of course the Breton fishermen who manned it would have a keg on board, and somebody had looted it; Martin, his clerk, most likely.

"I hope you bought the whole keg," said Hornblower.

"Only some of it, I am afraid, sir. All that remained."

Out of a two-gallon keg of cider — Hornblower hoped it might be more — Martin could hardly have downed more than a gallon in twenty-four hours. And Doughty must have noted the presence of a keg in the berth he shared with Martin; Hornblower was quite sure that more pressure than the offer of a mere quarter of a pound of tobacco had been applied to make Martin part with the keg, but he did not care.

"Cheese, sir," said Doughty; Hornblower had eaten everything else in sight.

And the cheese — the ration cheese supplied for the ship's company — was reasonably good, and the butter was fresh; a new firkin must have come in the boat and Doughty must somehow have got at it although the rancid previous assignment had not been used up. The cider jug was empty and Hornblower felt more comfortable than he had felt for days.

"I'll go to bed now," he announced.

"Yes, sir."

Doughty opened the chart-room door and Hornblower passed into his cabin. The lamp swayed from the deck beam. The patched nightshirt was laid out on the cot. Perhaps it was because he was full of cider that Hornblower did not resent Doughty's presence as he brushed his teeth and made ready for bed. Doughty was at hand to take his coat as he pulled it off; Doughty retrieved his trousers when he let them fall; Doughty hovered by as he dropped into bed and pulled the blankets over him.

"I'll brush this coat, sir. Here's your bed gown if you're called in the night, sir. Shall I put out the lamp, sir?"

"Yes."

"Good night, sir."

It was not until next morning that Hornblower remembered again that Grimes had hanged himself in this cabin. It was not until next morning that he remembered those minutes down in the magazine with the gunpowder. Doughty had already proved his worth.

Chapter 12

The salutes had been fired. Pellew's flag had been hoisted and then the *Tonnant* had sailed away to initiate the blockade of Rochefort. The *Dreadnought* had hoisted Admiral Parker's flag, and each flag had received thirteen guns from every ship. The French on their hillsides must have seen the smoke and heard the firing, and the naval officers among them must have deduced that one more rear admiral had joined the Channel Fleet; and must have shaken their heads a little sadly at this further proof that the British Navy was increasing its lead over the French in the race to build up maritime strength.

Hornblower, peering up the Goulet, over the black shapes of the Little Girls, could count the vessels of war swinging to their anchors in Brest Roads. Eighteen ships of the line now, and seven frigates, but with sub-minimum crews and incomplete stores; no match for the fifteen superb ships of the line under Cornwallis who waited for them outside, growing daily in efficiency and in moral ascendancy. Nelson off Toulon and now Pellew off Rochefort similarly challenged inferior French squadrons, and under their protection the merchant fleets of Britain sailed the seas unmolested except by privateers — and the merchant fleet themselves, bunched in vast convoys, received constant close cover from further British squadrons of a total strength even exceeding that of the blockading fleets. Cordage and hemp, timber and iron and copper, turpentine and salt, cotton and nitre, could all flow freely to the British Isles and be as freely distributed round them, maintaining the ship yards in constant activity, whilst the French yards were doomed to idleness, to the gangrene that follows the cutting off of the circulation.

But the situation was nevertheless not without peril. Along the Channel Coast Bonaparte had two hundred thousand soldiers, the most formidable army in the world, and collecting in the Channel Ports, from St Malo to Ostend and beyond was a flotilla of seven thousand flat-bottomed boats. Admiral Keith with his frigates, backed by a few ships of the line, had the Channel secure against Bonaparte's threat; there was no chance of invasion as long as England held naval command of the Channel.

Yet in a sense that command was precarious. If the eighteen ships of the line in Brest Roads could escape, could round Ushant and come up-Channel with Cornwallis distracted in some fashion, Keith might be driven away, might be destroyed. Three days would be sufficient to put Bonaparte's army into the boats and across the Channel, and Bonaparte would be issuing decrees from Windsor Castle as he had already done from Milan and Brussels. Cornwallis and his squadron, *Hotspur* and her mightier colleagues, were what made this impossible; a moment of carelessness, a misjudged movement, and the tricolour might fly over the Tower of London.

Hornblower counted the ships in Brest Roads, and as he did so he was very conscious that this morning routine was the ultimate, most insolent expression of the power of England at sea. England had a heart, a brain, an arm, and he and *Hotspur* were the final sensitive fingertip of that long arm. Nineteen ships of the line at anchor, two of them three-deckers. Seven frigates. They were the ones he had observed yesterday. Nothing had contrived to slip out unnoticed during the night, by the passage of the Four or the Raz.

"Mr Foreman! Signal to the Flag, if you please. 'Enemy at anchor. Situation unchanged.'"

Foreman had made that signal several times before, but, while Hornblower watched him unobtrusively, he checked the numbers in the signal book. It was Foreman's business to know all the thousand arbitrary signals off by heart, but it was best, when time allowed, that he should corroborate what his memory told him. An error of a digit might send the warning that the enemy was coming out.

"Flag acknowledges, sir," reported Foreman.

"Very well."

Poole, as officer of the watch, made note of the incident in the rough log. The hands were washing down the deck, the sun was lifting over the horizon. It was a beautiful day, with every promise of being a day like any other.

"Seven bells, sir," reported Prowse.

Only half an hour more of the ebb; time to withdraw from this lee shore before the flood set in.

"Mr Poole! Wear the ship, if you please. Course west by north."

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Mr Bush."

Bush knew better than to indulge in further conversation, besides, he could devote his attention to watching how smartly the hands braced the main-topsail round, and how Poole handled the ship when the topsails filled. Hornblower swept the northern shore, seeking as ever for any signs of change. His attention was concentrated on the ridge beyond which Captain Jones had met his death, when Poole reported again.

"Wind's come westerly, sir. Can't make west by north."

"Make it west nor'west," replied Hornblower, his eye still to the telescope.

"Aye aye, sir. West nor'west, full and bye." There was a hint of relief in Poole's voice; an officer is likely to be apprehensive when he has to tell his captain that the last order was impossible to execute.

Hornblower was aware that Bush had taken his stand beside him with his telescope trained in the same direction.

"A column of troops, sir," said Bush.

"Yes."

Hornblower had detected the head of the column crossing the ridge. He was watching now to see to what length the column would stretch. It continued interminably over the ridge, appearing through his glass like some caterpillar hurrying over the even rougher hillside. Ah! There was the explanation. Beside the caterpillar appeared a string of ants, hurrying even faster along the path. Field artillery — six guns and limbers with a wagon bringing up the rear. The head of the caterpillar was already over the farther ridge before the tail appeared over the nearer one. That was a column of infantry more than a mile long, five thousand men or more — a division of infantry with its attendant battery. It might be merely a portion of the garrison of Brest turning out for exercises and manoeuvres on the hillside, but its movements were somewhat more hurried and purposeful than would be expected in that case.

He swept his glass farther round the coast, and then checked it with a start and a gulp of excitement. There were the unmistakable lugsails of a French coaster coming round the bold headland of Point Matthew. There was another pair — a whole cluster. Could it possibly be that a group of coasters was trying to run the blockade into Brest in broad daylight in the teeth of *Hotspur*? Hardly likely. Now there was a bang — bang — bang of guns, presumably from the field battery, invisible over the farther ridge. Behind the coasters appeared a British frigate, and then another, showing up at the moment when the coasters began to go about; as the coasters tacked they revealed that they had no colours flying.

"Prizes, sir. And that's *Naiad* an' *Doris*," said Bush.

The two British frigates must have swooped down during the night by the passage of the Four inshore of Ushant and cut out these coasters from the creeks of Le Conquet where they had been huddled for shelter. A neat piece of work, undoubtedly, but bringing them out had only been made possible by the destruction of the battery on the Petit Minou. The frigates tacked in the wake of the coasters, like shepherd dogs following a flock of sheep. They were escorting their prizes in triumph back to the Inshore Squadron, whence, presumably they would be dispatched to England for sale. Bush had taken his telescope from his eye and had turned his gaze full on Hornblower, while Prowse came up to join them.

"Six prizes, sir," said Bush.

"A thousand pound each, those coasters run, sir," said Prowse. "More, if it's naval stores, and I expect it is. Six thousand pound. Seven thousand. An' no trouble selling 'em, sir."

By the terms of the royal proclamation issued on the declaration of war, prizes taken by the Royal Navy became — as was traditional by now — the absolute property of the captors.

"And we weren't in sight, sir," said Bush.

The proclamation also laid down the proviso that the value of the prizes, after a deduction for flag officers, should be shared among those ships in sight at the moment the colours came down or possession was secured.

"We couldn't expect to be," said Hornblower. He was honestly implying that *Hotspur* was too preoccupied with her duty of watching the Goulet, but the others misinterpreted the speech.

"No, sir, not with —" Bush broke off what he was saying before he became guilty of mutiny. He had been about to continue 'not with Admiral Parker in command' but he had more sense than to say it, after Hornblower's meaning had become clear to him.

"One eighth'd be nigh on a thousand pounds," said Prowse.

An eighth of the value of the prizes was, by the proclamation, to be divided among the lieutenants and masters taking part in the capture of the ships. Hornblower was making a different calculation. The share of the captains was two-eighths; if *Hotspur* had been associated in the venture with *Naiad* and *Doris* he would have been richer by five hundred pounds.

"And it was us that opened the way for 'em sir," went on Prowse.

"It was you, sir, who —" Bush broke off his speech for the second time

"That's the fortune of war," said Hornblower, lightly, "or the misfortune of war."

Hornblower was quite convinced that the whole system of prize money was vicious, and tended towards making the navy less effective in war. He told himself that this was sour grapes, that he would think differently if he had won great amounts of prize money, but that did not soften his present conviction.

"For'ard, there!" yelled Poole from beside the binnacle. "Get the lead going in the main chains."

The three senior officers beside the hammock nettings came back to the present world with a general start. Hornblower felt a chill wave of horror over his ribs as he realized his inexcusable carelessness. He had forgotten all about the course he had set. *Hotspur* was sailing tranquilly into peril, was in danger of running aground, and it was his fault, the result of his own inattention. He had no time for self-reproach at the present moment, all the same. He lifted his voice, trying to pitch it steadily.

"Thank you, Mr Poole," he called. "Belay that order. Put the ship on the other tack, if you please."

Bush and Prowse were wearing guilty, hangdog looks. It had been their duty, it had been Prowse's particular duty, to warn him when *Hotspur* was running into navigational dangers. They would not meet his eye; they tried to assume a pose of exaggerated interest in Poole's handling of the ship as she went about. The yards creaked as she came round, the sails flapped and then drew again, the wind blew on their faces from a different angle.

"Hard-a-lee!" ordered Poole, completing the manoeuvre. "Fore-tack! Haul the bowlines!"

Hotspur settled down on her new course, away from the dangerous shore to which she had approached too close, and all danger was averted.

"You see, gentlemen," said Hornblower coldly, and he waited until he had the full attention of Bush and Prowse. "You see, there are many disadvantages about the system of prize money. I am aware now of a new one, and I hope you are too. Thank you, that will do."

He remained by the hammock netting as they slunk away; he was taking himself to task. It was his first moment of carelessness in a professional career of ten years. He had made mistakes through ignorance, through recklessness, but never carelessness before. If there had been a fool as officer of the watch just now utter ruin would have been possible. If *Hotspur* had gone aground, in clear weather and a gentle breeze, it would have been the end of everything for him. Court martial and dismissal from the service, and then . . . ? In his bitter self-contempt he told himself that he would not be capable even of begging his bread, to say nothing of Maria's. He might perhaps ship before the mast, and with his clumsiness and abstraction he would be the victim of the cat, of the boatswain's rattan. Death would be better. He shuddered with cold.

Now he turned his attention to Poole, standing impassive by the binnacle. What had been the motives that had impelled him to order the lead into use? Had it been mere precaution, or had it been a tactful way of calling his captain's attention to the situation of the ship? His present manner and bearing gave no hint of the answer. Hornblower had studied his officers carefully since *Hotspur* was commissioned; he was not aware of any depths of ingenuity or tact in Poole, but he freely admitted to himself that they might exist, unobserved. In any case, he must allow for them. He sauntered down the quarter-deck.

"Thank you, Mr Poole," he said, slowly and very distinctly.

Poole touched his hat in reply, but his homely face did not change its expression. Hornblower walked on, nettled — amused — that his questions remained unanswered. It was a momentary relief from the torments of conscience which still plagued him.

The lesson he had learned remained with him during that summer to trouble his conscience. Otherwise during those golden months the blockade of Brest might have been for *Hotspur* and Hornblower a yachting holiday, a holiday with a certain macabre quality. Just as some lay theologians advanced the theory that in Hell sinners would be punished by being forced to repeat, in unutterable tedium and surfeit, the sins they had committed during life, so Hornblower spent those delightful months doing delightful things until he felt he could not do them any longer. Day after day, and night after night, through the finest summer in human memory, *Hotspur* cruised in the approaches to Brest. She pressed up to the Goulet with the last of the flood, and cannily withdrew in to safety with the last of the ebb. She counted the French fleet, she reported the result of her observations to Admiral Parker. She drifted, hove-to, over calm seas amid gentle breezes. With westerly winds she worked her way out to give the lee shore a wide berth; with easterly winds she beat back again to beard the impotent French in their safe harbour.

They were months of frightful peril for England, with the Grande Armée, two hundred thousand strong, poised within thirty miles of the Kentish beaches, but they were months of tranquillity for *Hotspur*, even with a score of hostile battleships in sight. There were occasional flurries when the coasters tried too boldly to enter or leave; there were occasional busy moments when squalls came down and topsails had to be reefed. There were encounters after dark with fishing vessels, conversations over a glass of rum with the Breton captains, purchases of crabs and lobsters and pilchards — and of the latest decree of the *Inscription Maritime*, or of a week-old copy of the *Moniteur*.

Hornblower's telescope revealed ant-like hordes of workmen rebuilding the blown-up batteries, and for a couple of weeks he watched the building of scaffolding and the erection of sheers on the Petit Minou, and, for three continuous days, as a result, the slow elevation to the vertical of the new mast of the semaphore station. The subsequent days added horizontal and vertical arms; before the summer was over those arms were whirling about reporting once more the movements of the blockading squadron.

Much good might that do the French, huddled in their anchored ships in the Roads. Inertia and a sense of inferiority would work their will on the unfortunate crews. The ships ready for sea might slowly increase in number; men might slowly be found for them, but every day the balance of fighting quality, of naval power, swung faster and faster over in favour of the British, constantly exercising at sea, and constantly reinforced by the seaborne tribute of the world.

There was a price to be paid; the dominion of the seas was not given freely by destiny. The Channel Fleet paid in blood, in lives, as well as in the sacrifice of the freedom and leisure of every officer and man on board. There was a constant petty drain. Ordinary sickness took only small toll; among men in the prime of life isolated from the rest of the world illnesses were few, although it was noticeable that after the arrival of victualling ships from England epidemics of colds would sweep through the fleet, while rheumatism — the sailor's disease — was always present.

The losses were mainly due to other causes. There were men who, in a moment of carelessness or inattention, fell from the yard. There were the men who ruptured themselves, and they were many, for despite the ingenuity of blocks and tackles there were heavy weights to haul about by sheer manpower. There were crushed fingers and crushed feet when ponderous casks of salted provisions were lowered into boats from the storeships and hauled up on to the decks of the fighting ships. And frequently a lacerated limb would end — despite all the care of the surgeons — in gangrene, in amputation, and death. There were the careless men who, during target practice with the cannon, lost their arms by ramming a cartridge into an improperly sponged gun, or who did not remove themselves from the line of recoil. Three times that year there were men who died in quarrels, when boredom changed to hysteria and knives were drawn; and on each of those occasions another life was lost, a life for a life, a hanging with the other ships clustered round and the crews lining the sides to learn what happened when a man lost his temper. And once the crews manned the sides to see what happened when a wretched young seaman paid the price for a crime worse even than murder — for raising his fist to his superior officer. Incidents of that sort were inevitable as the ships beat back and forth monotonously, over the eternal grey inhospitable sea.

It was well for the *Hotspur* that she was under the command of a man to whom any form of idleness or monotony was supremely distasteful. The charts of the Iroise were notoriously inaccurate; *Hotspur* set herself to run line after line of soundings, to take series after series of careful triangulations from the headlands and hilltops. When the fleet ran short of silver sand, so necessary to keep the decks spotless white, it was *Hotspur* who supplied the deficiency, finding tiny lost beaches round the coast where a park could land — trespassing upon Bonaparte's vaunted dominion over Europe — to fill sacks with the precious commodity. There were fishing competitions, whereby the lower-deck's rooted objection to fish as an item of diet was almost overcome; a prize of a pound of tobacco for the biggest catch by an individual mess set all the messes to work on devising more novel fish-hooks and baits. There were experiments in ship-handling, when obsolescent and novel methods were tested, when by careful and accurate measurement with the log the effect of goose-winging the topsails was ascertained; or, it being assumed that the rudder was lost, the watch keeping officers tried their hands at manoeuvring the ship by the sails alone.

Hornblower himself found mental exercise in working out navigational problems. Conditions were ideal for taking lunar observations, and by their aid it was possible to arrive at an accurate determination of longitude

— a subject of debate since the days of the Carthaginians — at the cost of endless calculations. Hornblower was determined to perfect himself in this method, and his officers and young gentlemen bewailed the decision, for they, too, had to make lunar observations and work out the resulting sums. The longitude of the *Little Girls* was calculated on board the *Hotspur* a hundred times that summer, with nearly a hundred different results.

To Hornblower it was a satisfactory occupation, the more satisfactory as it became obvious that he was acquiring the necessary knack. He tried to acquire the same facility in another direction, without the same satisfaction, as he wrote his weekly letters to Maria. There was only a limited number of endearments, only a limited number of ways of saying that he missed her, that he hoped her pregnancy was progressing favourably. There was only the one way of excusing himself for not returning to England as he had promised to do, and Maria was inclined to be a little peevish in her letters regarding the exigencies of the service. When the water-hoys arrived periodically and the enormous labour had to be undertaken of transferring the already stale liquid into the *Hotspur* Hornblower always found himself thinking that getting those eighteen tons of water on board meant another month of writing letters to Maria.

Chapter 13

Hotspur's bell struck two double strokes; it was six o'clock in the evening, and the first dog watch had come to an end in the gathering darkness.

"Sunset, sir," said Bush.

"Yes," agreed Hornblower.

"Six o'clock exactly. The equinox, sir."

"Yes," agreed Hornblower again; he knew perfectly well what was coming.

"We'll have a westerly gale, sir, or my name's not William Bush."

"Very likely," said Hornblower, who had been sniffing the air all day long.

Hornblower was a heretic in this matter. He did not believe that the mere changing from a day a minute longer than twelve hours to one a minute shorter made gales blow from out of the west. Gales happened to blow at this time because winter was setting in, but ninety-nine men out of a hundred firmly believed in a more direct, although more mysterious causation.

"Wind's freshening and sea's getting up a bit, sir," went on Bush, inexorably.

"Yes."

Hornblower fought down the temptation to declare that it was not because the sun happened to set at six o'clock, for he knew that if he expressed such an opinion it would be received with the tolerant and concealed disagreement accorded to the opinions of children and eccentrics and captains.

"We've water for twenty-eight days, sir. Twenty-four allowing for spillage and ullage."

"Thirty-six, on short allowance," corrected Hornblower.

"Yes, sir," said Bush, with a world of significance in those two syllables.

"I'll give the order within a week," said Hornblower.

No gale could be expected to blow for a month continuously, but a second gale might follow the first before the water-hoys could beat down from Plymouth to refill the casks. It was a tribute to the organization set up by Cornwallis that during nearly six continuous months at sea *Hotspur* had not yet had to go on short allowance for water. Should it become necessary, it would be one more irksome worry brought about by the passage of time.

"Thank you, sir," said Bush, touching his hat and going off about his business along the darkened reeling deck. There were worries of all sorts. Yesterday morning Doughty had pointed out to Hornblower that there were holes appearing in the elbows of his uniform coat, and he only had two coats apart from full dress. Doughty had done a neat job of patching, but a search through the ship had not revealed any material of exactly the right weather-beaten shade. Furthermore the seats of nearly all his trousers were paper-thin, and Hornblower did not fancy himself in the baggy slop-chest trousers issued to the lower-deck; yet as that store was fast

running out he had had to secure a pair for himself before they should all go. He was wearing his thick winter underclothing; three sets had appeared ample last April, but now he faced the prospect, in a gale, of frequent wettings to the skin with small chance of drying anything. He cursed himself and went off to try to make sure of some sleep in anticipation of a disturbed night. At least he had a good dinner inside him; Doughty had braised an oxtail, the most despised and rejected of all the portions of the weekly ration bullock, and had made of it a dish fit for a king. It might be his last good dinner for a long time if the gale lasted — winter affected land as well as sea, so that he could expect no other vegetables than potatoes and boiled cabbage until next spring.

His anticipation of a disturbed night proved correct. He had been awake for some time, feeling the lively motion of the *Hotspur* and trying to make up his mind to rise and dress or to shout for a light and try to read when they came thundering on his door.

"Signal from the Flag, sir!"

"I'll come."

Doughty was really the best of servants; he arrived at the same moments with a storm lantern.

"You'll need your pea jacket, sir, and oilskins over it. Your sou'wester, sir. Better have your scarf, sir, to keep your pea jacket dry."

A scarf round his neck absorbed spray that might otherwise drive in between sou'wester and oilskin coat and soak the pea jacket. Doughty tucked Hornblower into his clothes like a mother preparing her son for school, while they reeled and staggered on the leaping deck. Then Hornblower went out into the roaring darkness.

"A white rocket and two blue lights from the Flag, sir," reported Young. "That means 'take offshore stations'."

"Thank you. What sail have we set?" Hornblower could guess the answer by the feel of the ship, but he wanted to be sure. It was too dark for his dazzled eyes to see as yet.

"Double reefed tops'ls and main course, sir."

"Get that course in and lay her on the port tack."

"Port tack. Aye aye, sir."

The signal for offshore stations meant a general withdrawal of the Channel Fleet. The main body took stations seventy miles to seaward off Brest, safe from that frightful lee shore and with a clear run open to them for Tor Bay — avoiding Ushant on the one hand and the Start on the other — should the storm prove so bad as to make it impossible to keep the sea. The Inshore Squadron was to be thirty miles closer in. They were the most weatherly ships and could afford the additional risk in order to be close up to Brest should a sudden shift of wind enable the French to get out.

But there was not merely the question of the French coming out, but of other French ships coming in. Out in the Atlantic there were more than one small French squadron — Bonaparte's own brother was on board one of them, with his American wife — seeking urgently to regain a French port before food and water should be completely exhausted. So *Naiad* and *Doris* and *Hotspur* had to stay close in, to intercept and report. They could best encounter the dangers of the situation. And they could best be spared if they could not. So *Hotspur* had to take her station only twenty miles to the west of Ushant, where French ships running before the gale could be best expected to make their landfall.

Bush loomed up in the darkness, shouting over the gale.

"The equinox, just as I said, sir."

"Yes."

"It'll be worse before it's better, sir."

"No doubt."

Hotspur was close-hauled now, soaring, pitching and rolling over the vast invisible waves that the gale was driving in upon her port bow. Hornblower felt resentfully that Bush was experiencing pleasure at this change of scene. A brisk gale and a struggle to windward was stimulating to Bush after long days of fair weather, while Hornblower struggled to keep his footing and felt a trifle doubtful about the behaviour of his stomach as a result of this sudden change.

The wind howled round them and the spray burst over the deck so that the black night was filled with noise. Hornblower held on to the hammock netting; the circus riders he had seen in his childhood, riding round the

ring, standing upright on two horses with one foot on each, had no more difficult task than he had at present. And the circus riders were not smacked periodically in the face with bucketfuls of spray.

There were small variations in the violence of the wind. They could hardly be called gusts; Hornblower took note that they were increases in force without any corresponding decreases. Through the soles of his feet, through the palms of his hands, he was aware of a steady increase in *Hotspur's* heel and a steady stiffening in her reaction. She was showing too much canvas. With his mouth a yard from Young's ear he yelled his order. "Four reefs in the tops'ls!"

"Aye aye, sir."

The exaggerated noises of the night were complicated now with the shrilling of the pipes of the bos'n's mates; down in the waist the orders were bellowed at hurrying, staggering men.

"All hands reef tops'ls!"

The hands clawed their way to their stations; this was the moment when a thousand drills bore fruit, when men carried out in darkness and turmoil the duties that had been ingrained into them in easier conditions. Hornblower felt *Hotspur's* momentary relief as Young set the topsails a-shiver to ease the tension on them. Now the men were going aloft to perform circus feats compared with which his maintenance of his foothold was a trifle. No trapeze artist ever had to do his work in utter darkness on something as unpredictable as a foot-rope in a gale, or had to exhibit the trained strength of the seaman passing the ear-ring while hanging fifty feet above an implacable sea. Even the lion tamer, keeping a wary eye on his treacherous brutes, did not have to encounter the ferocious enmity of the soulless canvas that tried to tear the topmost men from their precarious footing.

A touch of the helm set the sails drawing again, and *Hotspur* lay over in her fierce struggle with the wind. Surely there was no better example of the triumph of man's ingenuity over the blind forces of nature than this, whereby a ship could wring advantage out of the actual attempt of the gale to push her to destruction. Hornblower clawed his way to the binnacle and studied the heading of the ship, working out mental problems of drift and leeway against the background of his mental picture of the trend of the land. Prowse was there, apparently doing the same thing.

"I should think we've made our offing, sir." Prowse had to shout each syllable separately. Hornblower had to do the same when he replied.

"We'll hold on a little longer, while we can."

Extraordinary how rapidly time went by in these circumstances. It could not be long now until daylight. And this storm was still working up; it was nearly twenty-four hours since Hornblower had detected the premonitory symptoms, and it had not yet reached its full strength. It was likely to blow hard for a considerable time, as much as three days more, possibly even longer than that. Even when it should abate the wind might stay westerly for some considerable further time, delaying the water-hoys and the victuallers in their passage from Plymouth, and when eventually they should come, *Hotspur* might well be up in her station off the Goulet.

"Mr Bush!" Hornblower had to reach out and touch Bush's shoulder to attract his attention in the wind. "We'll reduce the water allowance from today. Two between three."

"Aye aye, sir. Just as well, I think, sir."

Bush gave little thought to hardship, either for the lower-deck or for himself. It was no question of giving up a luxury; to reduce the water ration meant an increase in hardship. The standard issue of a gallon a day a head was hardship, even though a usual one; a man could just manage to survive on it. Two thirds of a gallon a day was a horrible deprivation; after a few days thirst began to colour every thought. As if in mockery the pumps were going at this moment. The elasticity and springiness that kept *Hotspur* from breaking up under these strains meant also that the sea had greater opportunities of penetrating her fabric, working its way in through the straining seams both above and below the water line. It would accumulate in the bilge, one — two — three feet deep. While the storm blew most of the crew would have six hours' hard physical work a day — an hour each watch — pumping the water out.

Here was the grey dawn coming, and the wind was still increasing, and *Hotspur* could not battle against it any longer.

"Mr Cargill!" Cargill was now officer of the watch. "We'll heave to. Put her under main-topmast stays'l."

Hornblower had to shout the order at the top of his lungs before Cargill nodded that he understood.

"All hands! All hands!"

Some minutes of hard work effected a transformation. Without the immense leverage of the topsails *Hotspur* ceased to lie over quite so steeply; the more gentle influence of the main-topmast stay-sail kept her reasonably steady, and now the rudder desisted from its hitherto constant effort to force the little ship to battle into the wind. Now she rose and swooped more freely, more extravagantly yet with less strain. She was leaping wildly enough, and still shipping water over her weather bow, but her behaviour was quite different as she yielded to the wind instead of defying it at the risk of being torn apart.

Bush was offering him a telescope, and pointing to windward, where there was now a grey horizon dimly to be seen — a serrated horizon, jagged with the waves hurrying towards them. Hornblower braced himself to put two hands to the telescope. Sea and then sky raced past the object glass as *Hotspur* tossed over successive waves. It was hard to sweep the area indicated by Bush; that had to be done in fits and starts, but after a moment something flashed across the field, was recaptured — many hours of using a telescope had developed Hornblower's reflex skills — and soon could be submitted to intermittent yet close observation.

"*Naiad*, sir," shouted Bush into his ear.

The frigate was several miles to windward, hove-to like *Hotspur*. She had one of those new storm-topsails spread, very shallow and without reefs. It might be of considerable advantage when lying-to, for even the reduction in height alone would be considerable, but when Hornblower turned his attention back to the *Hotspur* and observed her behaviour under her main-topmast stay-sail he felt no dissatisfaction. Politeness would have led him to comment on it when he handed back the glass, but politeness stood no chance against the labour of making conversation in the wind, and he contented himself with a nod. But the sight of *Naiad* out there to westward was confirmation that *Hotspur* was on her station, and beyond her Hornblower had glimpses of the *Doris* reeling and tossing on the horizon. He had done all there was to be done at present. A sensible man would get his breakfast while he might, and a sensible man would resolutely ignore the slight question of stomach occasioned by this new and different motion of the ship. All he had to do now was to endure it.

There was a pleasant moment when he reached his cabin and Huffnell the purser came in to make his morning report, for then it appeared that at the first indication of trouble Bush and Huffnell between them had routed out Simmonds the cook and had set him to work cooking food.

"That's excellent, Mr Huffnell."

"It was laid down in your standing orders, sir."

So it was, Hornblower remembered. He had added that paragraph after reading Cornwallis's orders regarding stations to be assumed in westerly gales. Simmonds had boiled three hundred pounds of salt pork in *Hotspur's* cauldrons, as well as three hundred pounds of dried peas, before the weather had compelled the galley fires to be extinguished.

"Pretty nigh on cooked, anyway, sir," said Huffnell.

So that for the next three days — four at a pinch — the hands would have something more to eat than dry biscuit. They would have cold parboiled pork and cold pease porridge; the latter was what the Man in the Moon burned his mouth on according to the nursery rhyme.

"Thank you, Mr Huffnell. It's unlikely that this gale will last more than four days."

That was actually the length of time that gale lasted, the gale that ushered in the worst winter in human memory, following the best summer. For those four days *Hotspur* lay hove-to, pounded by the sea, flogged by the wind, while Hornblower made anxious calculations regarding leeway and drift; as the wind backed northerly his attention was diverted from Ushant to the north to the Isle de Sein to the south of the approaches to Brest. It was not until the fifth day that *Hotspur* was able to set three-reefed top-sails and thrash her way back to station while Simmonds managed to start his galley fires again and to provide the crew — and Hornblower — with hot boiled beef as a change from cold boiled pork.

Even then that three-reefed gale maintained the long Atlantic rollers in all their original vastness, so that *Hotspur* soared over them and slithered unhappily down the far side, adding her own corkscrew motion as her weather-bow met the swells, her own special stagger when a rogue wave crashed into her, and the worse lurch when — infrequently — a higher wave than usual blanketed her sails so that she reeled over her decks.

But an hour's work at the pumps every watch kept the bilges dear, and by tacking every two hours *Hotspur* was able to beat painfully out to sea again — not more than half a mile's gain to windward on each tack — and recover the comparative safety of her original station before the next storm.

It was as if in payment for that fair weather summer that these gales blew, and perhaps that was not an altogether fanciful thought; to Hornblower's mind there might be some substance to the theory that prolonged local high pressure during the summer now meant that the pent-up dirty weather to the westward could exert more than its usual force. However that might be, the mere fresh gale that endured for four days after the first storm then worked up again into a tempest, blowing eternally from the westward with almost hurricane force; grey dreary days of lowering cloud, and wild black nights, with the wind howling unceasingly in the rigging until the ear was sated with the noise, until no price seemed too great to pay for five minutes of peace — and yet no price however great could buy even a second of peace. The creaking and the groaning of *Hotspur's* fabric blended with the noise of the wind, and the actual woodwork of the ship vibrated with the vibration of the rigging until it seemed as if body and mind, exhausted with the din and with the fatigues of mere movement, could not endure for another minute, and yet went on to endure for days.

The tempest died down to a fresh gale, to a point when the top-sails needed only a single reef, and then, unbelievably, worked up into a tempest again, the third in a month, during which all on board renewed the bruises that covered them as a result of being flung about by the motion of the ship. And it was during that tempest that Hornblower went through a spiritual crisis. It was not a mere question of calculation, it went far deeper than that, even though he did his best to appear quite imperturbable as Bush and Huffnell and Wallis the surgeon made their daily reports. He might have called them into a formal council of war; he might have covered himself by asking for their opinions in writing, to be produced in evidence should there be a court of inquiry, but that was not in his nature. Responsibility was the air he breathed; he could no more bring himself to evade it than he could hold his breath indefinitely.

It was the first day that reefed topsails could be set that he reached his decision.

"Mr Prowse, I'd be obliged if you would set a course to close *Naiad* so that she can read our signals."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower, standing on the quarter-deck in the eternal, infernal wind, hated Prowse for darting that inquiring glance at him. Of course the wardroom had discussed his problem. Of course they knew of the shortage of drinking water; of course they knew that Wallis had discovered three cases of sore gums — the earliest symptoms of scurvy in a navy that had overcome scurvy except in special conditions. Of course they had wondered about when their captain would yield to circumstances. Perhaps they had made bets on the date. The problem, the decision, had been his and not theirs.

Hotspur clawed her way over the tossing sea to the point on *Naiad's* lee bow when the signal flags would blow out at right angles to the line of sight.

"Mr Foreman! Signal to *Naiad*, if you please. 'Request permission to return to port'."

"Request permission to return to port. Aye aye, sir."

Naiad was the only ship of the Inshore Squadron — of the Channel Fleet — in sight, and her captain was therefore senior officer on the station. Every captain was senior to the captain of the *Hotspur*.

"*Naiad* acknowledges, sir," reported Foreman, and then, after ten seconds' wait "*Naiad* to *Hotspur*, sir 'Interrogative'."

Somehow it might have been more politely put. Chambers of the *Naiad* might have signalled 'Kindly give reasons for request,' or something like that. But the single interrogative hoist was convenient and rapid. Hornblower framed his next signal equally tersely.

"*Hotspur* to *Naiad*. 'Eight days water'."

Hornblower watched the reply soar up *Naiad's* signal halliards. It was not the affirmative; if it was permission, it was a qualified permission.

"*Naiad* to *Hotspur*, sir. 'Remain four more days'."

"Thank you, Mr Foreman."

Hornblower tried to keep all expression out of his voice and his face.

"I'll wager he has two months' water on board, sir," said Bush, angrily.

"I hope he has, Mr Bush."

They were seventy leagues from Tor Bay; two days' sailing with a fair wind. There was no margin for misfortune. If at the end of four days the wind should shift easterly, as was perfectly possible, they could not reach Tor Bay in a week or even more; the water-hoys might come down-channel, but might easily not find them at once, and then it was not unlikely that the sea would be too rough for boat work. There was an actual possibility that the crew of the *Hotspur* might die of thirst. It had not been easy for Hornblower to make his request; he had no desire to be thought one of those captains whose sole desire was to return to port, and he had waited to the last sensible moment. Chambers saw the problem differently, as a man well might do as regards the possible misfortune of other people. This was an easy way of demonstrating his resolution and firmness. An easy way, a comfortable way, a cheap way.

"Send this signal, if you please, Mr Foreman. 'Thank you. Am returning to station. Good-bye.' Mr Prowse, we can bear away when that signal is acknowledged. Mr Bush, from today the water ration is reduced. One between two."

Two quarts of water a day for all purposes — and such water — to men living on salted food, was far below the minimum for health. It meant sickness as well as discomfort, but the reduction also meant that the last drop of water would not be drunk until sixteen days had passed.

Captain Chambers had not foreseen the future weather, and perhaps he could not be blamed for that, seeing that on the fourth day after the exchange of signals the westerly wind worked up again, unbelievably, into the fourth tempest of that gale-ridden autumn. It was towards the end of the afternoon watch that Hornblower was called on deck again to give his permission for the reefed topsails to be got in and the storm staysail set once more. Significantly it was growing dark already; the days of the equinox when the sun set at six o'clock were long past, and, equally significantly, that roaring westerly gale now had a chilling quality about it. It was cold; not freezing, not icy, but cold, searchingly cold. Hornblower tried to pace the unstable deck in an endeavour to keep his circulation going; he grew warm, not because of his walking, but because the physical labour of keeping his feet was great enough for the purpose. *Hotspur* was leaping like a deer beneath him, and from down below, too, came the dreary sound of the pumps at work.

Six days' water on board now; twelve at half-rations. The gloom of the night was no more gloomy than his thoughts. It was five weeks since he had last been able to send a letter to Maria, and it was six weeks since he had last heard from her, six weeks of westerly gales and westerly tempests. Anything might have happened to her or to the child, and she would be thinking that anything might have happened to the *Hotspur* or to him.

A more irregular wave than usual, roaring out of the darkness, burst upon *Hotspur's* weather bow. Hornblower felt her sudden sluggishness, her inertia, beneath his feet. That wave must have flooded the waist to a depth of a yard or more, fifty or sixty tons of water piled up on her deck. She lay like something dead for a moment. Then she rolled, slightly at first, and then more freely; the sound of the cataracts of water pouring across could be clearly heard despite the gale. She freed herself as the water cascaded out through the overworked scuppers, and she came sluggishly back to life, to leap once more in her mad career from wave crest to trough. A blow like that could well be her death; some time she might not rise to it; some time her deck might be burst in. Another wave beat on her bow like the hammer of a mad giant, and another after that.

Next day was worse, the worst day that *Hotspur* had experienced in all these wild weeks. Some slight shift in the wind, or the increase in its strength, had worked up the waves to a pitch that was particularly unsuited to *Hotspur's* idiosyncrasies. The waist was flooded most of the time now, so that she laboured heavily without relief, each wave catching her before she could free herself. That meant that the pumps were at work three hours out of every four, so that even with petty officers and idlers and waisters and marines all doing their share, every hand was engaged on the toilsome labour for twelve hours a day.

Bush's glance was more direct even than usual when he came to make his report.

"We're still sighting *Naiad* now and then, sir, but not a chance of signals being read."

This was the day when by Captain Chambers's orders they were free to run for harbour.

"Yes. I don't think we can bear away in this wind and sea."

Bush's expression revealed a mental struggle. *Hotspur's* powers of resistance to the present battering were not unlimited, but on the other hand to turn tail and run would be an operation of extreme danger.

"Has Huffnell reported to you yet, sir?"

"Yes," said Hornblower

There were nine hundred-gallon casks of freshwater left down below, which had been standing in the bottom tier for a hundred days. And now one of them had proved to be contaminated with seawater and was hardly drinkable. The others might perhaps be even less so.

"Thank you, Mr Bush," said Hornblower, terminating the interview. "We'll remain hove-to for today at least." Surely a wind of this force must moderate soon, even though Hornblower had a premonition that it would not. Nor did it. The slow dawn of the new day found *Hotspur* still labouring under the dark clouds, the waves still as wild, the wind still as insane. The time had come for the final decision, as Hornblower well knew as he came out on deck in his clammy clothes. He knew the dangers, and he had spent a large part of the night preparing his mind to deal with them.

"Mr Bush, we'll get her before the wind."

"Aye aye, sir."

Before she could come before the wind she would have to present her vulnerable side to the waves. There would be seconds during which she could be rolled over on to her beam ends, beaten down under the waves, pounded into a wreck.

"Mr Cargill!"

This was going to be a moment far more dangerous than being chased by the *Loire*, and Cargill would have to be trusted to carry out a similar duty as on a tense occasion then. Face close to face, Hornblower shouted his instructions.

"Get for'ard. Make ready to show a bit of the fore-topmast stays'l. Haul it up when I wave my arm."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Get it in the moment I wave a second time."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Mr Bush! We shall need the fore-tops'l."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Goose-wing it."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Stand by the sheets. Wait for me to wave my arm the second time."

"The second time. Aye aye, sir."

Hotspur's stern was nearly as vulnerable as her side. If she presented it to the waves while stationary she would be 'pooped' — a wave would burst over her and sweep her from stern to stem, a blow she would probably not survive. The fore-topsail would give her the necessary way, but spreading it before she was before the wind would lay her over on her beam ends. 'Goose-winging it' — pulling down the lower corners while leaving the centre portion still furled — would expose less canvas than the reefed sail; enough in that gale to carry her forward at the necessary speed.

Hornblower took his station beside the wheel, where he could be clearly seen from forward. He ran his eyes aloft to make sure that the preparations for goose-winging the fore-topsail were complete, and his gaze lingered for a while longer as he observed the motion of the spars relative to the wild sky. Then he transferred his attention to the sea on the weather side, to the immense rollers hurrying towards the ship. He watched the roll and the pitch; he gauged the strength of the howling wind which was trying to tear him from his footing. That wind was trying to stupefy him, to paralyse him, too. He had to keep the hard central core of himself alert and clear thinking while his outer body was numbed by the wind.

A rogue wave burst against the weather bow in a huge but fleeting pillar of spray, the green mass pounding aft along the waist, and Hornblower swallowed nervously while it seemed as if *Hotspur* would never recover. But she did, slowly and wearily, rolling off the load from her deck. As she cleared herself the moment came, a moment of regularity in the oncoming waves, with her bow just lifting to the nearest one. He waved his arm, and saw the slender head of the fore-topmast stay-sail rising up the stay, and the ship lay over wildly to the pressure.

"Hard-a-port," he yelled to the hands at the wheel.

The enormous leverage of the stay-sail, applied to the bowsprit, began to swing the *Hotspur* round like a weather vane; as she turned, the wind thrusting more and more from aft gave her steerage way so that the rudder could bite and accelerate the turn. She was down in the trough of the wave but turning, still turning. He

waved his arm again. The clews of the fore-topsail showed themselves as the hands hauled on the sheets, and *Hotspur* surged forward with the impact of the wind upon the canvas. The wave was almost upon them, but it disappeared out of the tail of Hornblower's eye as *Hotspur* presented first her quarter and then her stern to it. "Meet her! Midships!"

The tug of the sail on the foremast would put *Hotspur* right before the wind without the use of the rudder; indeed the rudder would only delay her acquiring all the way she could. Time enough to put the rudder to work again when she was going at her fastest. Hornblower braced himself for the impact of the wave now following them up. The seconds passed and then it came, but the stern had begun to lift and the blow was deprived of its force. Only a minor mass of water burst over the taffrail, to surge aft again as *Hotspur* lifted her bows. Now they were racing along with the waves; now they were travelling through the water ever so little faster. That was the most desirable point of speed; there was no need to increase or decrease even minutely the area of canvas exposed to the goose-winged fore-topsail. The situation was safe and yet unutterably precarious, balanced on a knife edge. The slightest yawing and *Hotspur* was lost.

'Keep her from falling off!' Hornblower yelled to the men at the wheel, and the grizzled senior quartermaster, his wet grey ringlets flapping over his cheeks from out of his sou'wester, nodded without taking his eyes from the fore-topsail. Hornblower knew — with his vivid imagination he could feel the actual sensation up his arms — how uncertain and unsatisfactory was the feel of wheel and rudder when running before a following sea, the momentary lack of response to the turning spokes, the hesitation of the ship as a mounting wave astern deprived the fore-topsail of some of the wind that filled it, the uncontrolled slithering sensation as the ship went down a slope. A moment's inattention — a moment's bad luck — could bring ruin.

Yet here they were momentarily safe before the wind, and running for the Channel. Prowse was already staring into the binnacle and noting the new course on the traverse board, and at a word from him Orrock and a seaman struggled aft to cast the log and determine the speed. And here came Bush, ascending to the quarter-deck, grinning over the success of the manoeuvre and with the exhilaration of the new state of affairs. "Course nor'east by east, sir," reported Prowse. "Speed better than seven knots."

Now there was a new set of problems to deal with. They were entering the Channel. There were shoals and headlands ahead of them; there were tides — the tricky tidal streams of the Channel — to be reckoned with. The very nature of the waves would change soon, with the effect upon the Atlantic rollers of the shallowing water and the narrowing Channel and the varying tides. There was the general problem of avoiding being blown all the way up Channel, and the particular one of trying to get into Tor Bay.

All this called for serious calculation and reference to tide tables, especially in face of the fact that running before the wind like this it would be impossible to take soundings. "We ought to get a sight of Ushant on this course, sir," yelled Prowse.

That would be a decided help, a solid base for future calculations, a new departure. A shouted word sent Orrock up to the fore-top-masthead with a telescope to supplement the look-out there, while Hornblower faced the first stage of the new series of problems — the question of whether he could bring himself to leave the deck — and the second stage — the question of whether he should invite Prowse to share his calculations. The answer to both was necessarily in the affirmative. Bush was a good seaman and could be trusted to keep a vigilant eye on the wheel and on the canvas; Prowse was a fair navigator and was by law co-responsible with Hornblower for the course to be set and so would have just cause for grievance if he was not consulted, however much Hornblower wished to be free of his company.

So it came about that Prowse was with Hornblower in the chart-room, struggling with the tide tables, when Foreman opened the door, his knocking not having been heard in the general din — and admitted all the noise of the ship in full volume.

"Message from Mr Bush, sir. Ushant in sight on the starboard beam, seven or eight miles, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Foreman."

That was a stroke of good fortune, the first they had had. Now they could plan the next struggle to bend the forces of nature to their will. It was a struggle indeed; for the men at the wheel a prolonged physical ordeal which made it necessary to relieve them every half-hour and for Hornblower a mental ordeal which was to keep him at full-strain for the next thirty hours. There was the tentative trying of the wheel, to see if it were possible to bring the wind a couple of points on her port quarter. Three times they made the attempt, to

abandon it hastily as wind and wave rendered the ship unmanageable, but at the fourth try it became possible, with the shortening of the waves in their advance up-Channel and the turn of the tide over on the French coast. Now they tore through the water, speed undiminished despite the drag of the rudder as the helmsmen battled with the wheel that kicked and struggled as if it were alive and malignant under their hands, and while the whole strength of the crew handled the braces to trim the yard exactly to make certain there was no danger of sailing by the lee.

At least the danger of running *Hotspur* bodily under water was now eliminated. There was no chance of her putting her bows into the slack back of a dilatory wave and never lifting them again. To balance the leverage of the fore-topsail they hauled up the mizzen staysail, which brought relief to the helmsmen even though it laid *Hotspur* over until her starboard gunports were level with the water. It lasted for a frantic hour, and it seemed to Hornblower that he was holding his breath during all that time, and until it burst in the centre with a report like a twelve pounder, splitting into flying pendants of canvas that cracked in the wind like coach-whips as the helmsmen fought against the renewed tendency of *Hotspur* to turn away from the wind. Yet the temporary success justified replacing the sail with the mizzen topmast staysail, just a corner of it showing, and the head and the tack still secured by gaskets. It was a brand new sail, and it managed to endure the strain, to compensate for the labour and difficulty of setting it.

The short dark day drew to an end, and now everything had to be done in roaring night, while lack of sleep intensified the numbness and fatigue and the stupidity induced by the unremitting wind. With his dulled sensitivity Hornblower's reaction was slow to the changed behaviour of *Hotspur* under his feet. The transition was gradual, in any case, but at last it became marked enough for him to notice it, his sense of touch substituting for his sense of sight to tell him that the waves were becoming shorter and steeper; this was the choppiness of the Channel and not the steady sweep of the Atlantic rollers.

Hotspur's motion was more rapid, and in a sense more violent; the waves broke over her bow more frequently though in smaller volume. Although still far below the surface the floor of the Channel was rising, from a hundred fathoms deep to forty fathoms, and there was the turn of the tide to be considered, even though this westerly tempest must have piled up the waters of the Channel far above mean level. And the Channel was narrower now; the rollers that had found ample passage between Ushant and Scilly were feeling the squeeze, and all these factors were evident in their behaviour. *Hotspur* was wet all the time now, and only continuous working of the pumps kept the water down below within bounds — pumps worked by weary men, thirsty men, hungry men, sleepy men, throwing their weight on the long handles each time with the feeling that they could not repeat the effort even once more.

At four in the morning Hornblower was conscious of a shift in the wind, and for a precious hour he was able to order a change of course until a sudden veering of the wind forced them back on the original course again, but he had gained, so his calculations told him, considerably to the northward; there was so much satisfaction in that that he put his forehead down on his forearms on the chart-room table and was surprised into sleep for several valuable minutes before a more extravagant leaping of the ship banged his head upon his arms and awakened him to make his way wearily out upon the quarter-deck again.

"Wish we could take a sounding, sir," shouted Prowse.

"Yes."

Yet now, even in the darkness, Hornblower could feel that the recent gain and the change in the character of the sea made it justifiable to heave to for a space. He could goad his mind to deal with the problem of drift and leeway; he could harden his heart to face the necessity of calling upon the exhausted top-men to make the effort to furl the goose-winged fore-topsail while he stood by, alert, to bring the ship to under the mizzen stay-sail; bring the helm over at the right moment so that she met the steep waves with her bow. Riding to the wind her motion was wilder and more extravagant than ever, but they managed to cast the deep sea lead, with the crew lined up round the ship, calling "Watch! Watch!" as each man let his portion of line loose. Thirty-eight — thirty-seven — thirty-eight fathoms again; the three casts consumed an hour, with everyone wet to the skin and exhausted. It was a fragment more of the data necessary, while heaving-to eased the labour of the worn-out quartermasters and actually imposed so much less strain on the seams that the pumps steadily gained on the water below.

At the first watery light of dawn they set the goose-winged fore-topsail again while Hornblower faced the problem of getting *Hotspur* round with the wind over her quarter without laying her over on her beam ends. Then they were thrashing along in the old way, decks continually under water, rolling until every timber groaned, with Orrock freezing at the fore-topmast-head with his glass. It was noon before he sighted the land; half an hour later Bush returned to the quarter-deck from the ascent he made to confirm Orrock's findings. Bush was more weary than he would ever admit, his dirty hollow cheeks overgrown with a stubble of beard, but he could still show surprise and pleasure.

"Bolt Head, sir!" he yelled. "Fine on the port bow. And I could just make out the Start."

"Thank you."

Even though it meant shouting, Bush wanted to express his feelings about this feat of navigation, but Hornblower had no time for that, nor the patience, nor, for that matter, the strength. There was the question of not being blown too far to leeward at this eleventh hour, of making preparations to come to an anchor in conditions that would certainly be difficult. There was the tide rip off the Start to be borne in mind, the necessity of rounding to as close under Berry Head as possible. There was the sudden inexpressible change in wind and sea as they came under the lee of the Start; the steep chopiness here seemed nothing compared with what *Hotspur* had been enduring five minutes before, and the land took the edge off the hurricane wind to reduce it to the mere force of a full gale that still kept *Hotspur* flying before it. There was the Newstone and the Blackstones — here as well as in the Iroise — and the final tricky moment of the approach to Berry Head.

"Ships of war at anchor, sir," reported Bush, sweeping Tor Bay with his glass as they opened it up. "That's *Dreadnought*. That's *Temeraire*. It's the Channel Fleet. My God! There's one aground in Torquay Roads. Two-decker — she must have dragged her anchors."

"Yes. We'll back the best bower anchor before we let go, Mr Bush. We'll have to use the launch's carronade. You've time to see about that."

"Aye aye, sir."

Even in Tor Bay there was a full gale blowing; where a two-decker had dragged her anchors every precaution must be taken at whatever further cost in effort. The seven hundredweight of the boat carronade, attached to the anchor-cable fifty feet back from the one ton of the best bower, might just save that anchor from lifting and dragging. And so *Hotspur* came in under goose-winged fore-topsail and storm mizzen stay-sail, round Berry Head, under the eyes of the Channel Fleet, to claw her way in towards Brixham pier and to round-to with her weary men furling the fore-topsail and to drop her anchors while with a last effort they sent down the topmasts and Prowse and Hornblower took careful bearings to make sure she was not dragging. It was only then that there was leisure to spare to make her number to the flag-ship.

"Flag acknowledges, sir," croaked Foreman.

"Very well."

It was still possible to do something more without collapsing. "Mr Foreman, kindly make this signal. 'Need drinking water'."

Chapter 14

Tor Bay was a tossing expanse of white horses. The land lessened the effect of the wind to some extent; the Channel waves were hampered in their entry to Berry Head, but all the same the wind blew violently and the waves racing up the Channel managed to wheel leftwards, much weakened, but now running across the wind, and with the tide to confuse the issue Tor Bay boiled like a cauldron. For forty hours after *Hotspur*'s arrival the *Hibernia*, Cornwallis's big three-decker, flew the signal 715 with a negative beside it, and 715 with a negative meant that boats were not to be employed.

Not even the Brixham fishermen, renowned for their small boat work, could venture out into Tor Bay while it was in that mood, so that until the second morning at anchor the crew of the *Hotspur* supported an unhappy existence on two quarts of tainted water a day. And Hornblower was the unhappiest man on board, from causes both physical and mental. The little ship almost empty of stores was the plaything of wind and wave

and tide; she surged about at her anchors like a restive horse. She swung and she snubbed herself steady with a jerk; she plunged and snubbed herself again. With her topmasts sent down she developed a shallow and rapid roll. It was a mixture of motions that would test the strongest stomach, and Hornblower's stomach was by no means the strongest, while there was the depressing association in his memory of his very first day in a ship of war, when he had made himself a laughing stock by being seasick in the old *Justinian* at anchor in Spithead.

He spent those forty hours vomiting his heart out, while to the black depression of sea-sickness was added the depression resulting from the knowledge that Maria was only thirty miles away in Plymouth, and by a good road. Cornwallis's representations had caused the government to cut that road, over the tail end of Dartmoor, so that the Channel Fleet in its rendezvous could readily be supplied from the great naval base. Half a day on a good horse and Hornblower could be holding Maria in his arms, he could be hearing news first-hand about the progress of the child, on whom (to his surprise) his thoughts were beginning to dwell increasingly. The hands spent their free moments on the forecastle, round the knightheads, gazing at Brixham and Brixham Pier; even in that wind with its deluges of rain there were women to be seen occasionally, women in skirts, at whom the crew stared like so many Tantaluses. After one good night's sleep, and with pumping only necessary now for half an hour in each watch, those men had time and energy so that their imaginations had free play. They could think about women, and they could think about liquor — most of them dreamed dreams of swilling themselves into swinish unconsciousness on Brixham's smuggled brandy, while Hornblower could only vomit and fret.

But he slept during the second half of the second night, when the wind not only moderated but backed two points northerly, altering the conditions in Tor Bay like magic, so that after he had assured himself at midnight that the anchors were still holding, his fatigue took charge and he could sleep without moving for seven hours. He was still only half awake when Doughty came bursting in on him.

"Signal from the Flag, sir."

There were strings of bunting flying from the halliards of the *Hibernia*; with the shift of wind they could be read easily enough from the quarter-deck of the *Hotspur*.

"There's our number there, sir," said Foreman, glass at eye. "It comes first."

Cornwallis was giving orders for the victualling and re-watering of the fleet, establishing the order in which the ships were to be replenished, and that signal gave *Hotspur* priority over all the rest.

"Acknowledge," ordered Hornblower.

"We're lucky, sir," commented Bush.

"Possibly," agreed Hornblower. No doubt Cornwallis had been informed about *Hotspur's* appeal for drinking water, but he might have further plans, too.

"Look at that, sir," said Bush. "They waste no time."

Two lighters, each propelled by eight sweeps, and with a six-oared yawl standing by, were creeping out round the end of Brixham Pier.

"I'll see about the fend-offs, sir," said Bush, departing hastily.

These were the water lighters, marvels of construction, each of them containing a series of vast cast-iron tanks. Hornblower had heard about them; they were of fifty-tons' burthen each of them, and each of them carried ten thousand gallons of drinking water, while *Hotspur*, with every cask and hogshead brim full, could not quite store fifteen thousand.

So now began an orgy of freshwater, clear springwater which had not lain in the cast-iron tanks for more than a few days. With the lighters chafing uneasily alongside, a party from *Hotspur* went down to work the beautiful modern pumps which the lighters carried, forcing the water up through four superb canvas hoses passed in through the ports and then down below. The deck scuttle butt, so long empty, was swilled out and filled, to be instantly emptied by the crew and filled again; just possibly at that moment the hands would rather have freshwater than brandy.

It was glorious waste; down below the casks were swilled and scrubbed out with freshwater, and the swillings drained into the bilge whence the ship's pumps would later have to force it overboard at some cost of labour. Every man drank his fill and more; Hornblower gulped down glass after glass until he was full, yet half an hour later found him drinking again. He could feel himself expanding like a desert plant after rain.

"Look at this, sir," said Bush, telescope in hand and gesturing towards Brixham. The telescope revealed a busy crowd at work there, and there were cattle visible.

"Slaughtering," said Bush. "Fresh meat."

Soon another lighter was creeping out to them; hanging from a frame down the midship line were sides of beef, carcasses of sheep and pigs.

"I won't mind a roast of mutton, sir," said Bush.

Bullocks and sheep and swine had been driven over the moors to Brixham, and slaughtered and dressed on the waterfront immediately before shipping so that the meat would last fresh as long as possible.

"Four days' rations there, sir," said Bush making a practiced estimate. "An' there's a live bullock an' four sheep an' four pigs. Excuse me, sir, and I'll post a guard at the side."

Most of the hands had money in their pockets and would spend it freely on liquor if they were given the chance, and the men in the victualling barges would sell to them unless the closest supervision were exercised. The water-lighters had finished their task and were casting off. It had been a brief orgy; from the moment that the hoses were taken in ship's routine would be re-established. One gallon of water per man per day for all purposes from now on.

The place of the watering barges was taken by the dry victualling barge, with bags of biscuit, sacks of dried peas, kegs of butter, cases of cheese, sacks of oatmeal, but conspicuous on top of all this were half a dozen nets full of fresh bread. Two hundred four-pound loaves — Hornblower could taste the crustiness of them in his watering mouth when he merely looked at them. A beneficent government, under the firm guidance of Cornwallis, was sending these luxuries aboard; the hardships of a life at sea were the result of natural circumstances quite as much as of ministerial ineptitude.

There was never a quiet moment all through that day. Here was Bush touching his hat again with a final demand on his attention.

"You've given no order about wives, sir."

"Wives?"

"Wives, sir."

There was an interrogative lift in Hornblower's voice as he said the word; there was a flat, complete absence of expression in Bush's. It was usual in His Majesty's Ships when they lay in harbour for women to be allowed on board, and one or two of them might well be wives. It was some small compensation for the system that forbade a man to set foot on shore lest he desert; but the women inevitably smuggled liquor on board, and the scenes of debauchery that ensued on the lower-deck were as shameless as in Nero's court. Disease and indiscipline were the natural result; it took days or weeks to shake the crew down again into an efficient team. Hornblower did not want his fine ship ruined but if *Hotspur* were to stay long at anchor in Tor Bay he could not deny what was traditionally a reasonable request. He simply could not deny it.

"I'll give my orders later this morning," he said.

It was not difficult, some minutes later, to intercept Bush at a moment when a dozen of the hands were within earshot.

"Oh, Mr Bush!" Hornblower hoped his voice did not sound as stilted and theatrical as he feared. "You've plenty of work to be done about the ship."

"Yes, sir. There's a good deal of standing rigging I'd like set up again. And there's running rigging to be re-rove. And there's the paintwork —"

"Very well, Mr Bush. When the ship's complete in all respects we'll allow the wives on board, but not until then. Not until then, Mr Bush. And if we have to sail before then it will be the fortune of war."

"Aye aye, sir."

Next came the letters; word must have reached the post office in Plymouth of the arrival of *Hotspur* in Tor Bay, and the letters had been sent across overland. Seven letters from Maria; Hornblower tore open the last first, to find that Maria was well and her pregnancy progressing favourably, and then he skimmed through the others to find, as he expected, that she had rejoiced to read her Valiant Hero's Gazette letter although she was perturbed by the risks run by her Maritime Alexander, and although she was consumed with sorrow because the Needs of the Service had denied from her eyes the light of his Countenance. Hornblower was half-way through writing a reply when a midshipman came escorted to his cabin door with a note . . .

HMS *Hibernia*

Tor Bay

Dear Captain Hornblower,

If you can be tempted out of your ship at three o'clock this afternoon to dine in the flagship it would give great pleasure to

Your ob't servant,

Wm. Cornwallis, Vice Ad.

P.S. - An affirmative signal hung out in the *Hotspur* is all the acknowledgement necessary.

Hornblower went out on to the quarter-deck.

"Mr Foreman. Signal '*Hotspur* to Flag. Affirmative'."

"Just affirmative, sir?"

"You heard me."

An invitation from the Commander in Chief was as much a royal command as if it had been signed George R. — even if the postscript did not dictate the reply.

Then there was the powder to be put on board, with all the care and precautions that operation demanded; *Hotspur* had fired away one ton of the five tons of gunpowder that her magazine could hold. The operation was completed when Prowse brought up one of the hands who manned the powder-barge.

"This fellow says he has a message for you, sir."

This was a swarthy gypsy-faced fellow who met Hornblower's eye boldly with all the assurance to be expected of a man who carried in his pocket a protection against impressment.

"What is it?"

"Message for you from a lady, sir, and I was to have a shilling for delivering it to you."

Hornblower looked him over keenly. There was only one lady who could be sending a message.

"Nonsense. That lady promised sixpence. Now didn't she?"

Hornblower knew that much about Maria despite his brief married life.

"Well, yes, sir."

"Here's the shilling. What's the message?"

"The lady said look for her on Brixham Pier, sir."

"Very well."

Hornblower took the glass from its becket and walked forward. Busy though the ship was, there were nevertheless a few idlers round the knightheads who shrank away in panic at the remarkable sight of their captain here. He trained the glass; Brixham Pier, as might be expected, was crowded with people, and he searched for a long time without result, training the glass first on one woman and then on another. Was that Maria? She was the only woman wearing a bonnet and not a shawl. Of course it was Maria; momentarily he had forgotten that this was the end of the seventh month. She stood in the front row of the crowd; as Hornblower watched she raised an arm and fluttered a scarf. She could not see him, or at least she certainly could not recognize him at that distance without a telescope. She must have heard, along with the rest of Plymouth, of the arrival of *Hotspur* in Tor Bay; presumably she had made her way here via Totnes in the carrier's cart — a long and tedious journey.

She fluttered her scarf again, in the pathetic hope that he was looking at her. In that part of his mind which never ceased attending to the ship Hornblower became conscious of the pipes of the bos'n's mate — the pipes had been shrilling one call or another all day long.

"Quarter-boat away-ay-ay!"

Hornblower had never been so conscious of the slavery of the King's service. Here he was due to leave the ship to dine with the Commander-in-Chief, and the Navy had a tradition of punctuality that he could not flout. And there was Foreman, breathless from his run forward.

"Message from Mr Bush, sir. The boat's waiting."

What was he to do? Ask Bush to write Maria a note and send it by a shore boat? No, he would have to risk being late — Maria could not bear to receive second hand messages at this time of all times. A hurried scribble with the left-handed quill.

My own darling,

So much pleasure in seeing you, but not a moment to spare yet. I will write to you at length.

Your devoted husband,

H.

He used that initial in all his letters to her; he did not like his first name and he could not bring himself to sign 'Harry'. Damn it all, here was the half-finished letter, interrupted earlier that day and never completed. He thrust it aside and struggled to apply a wafer to the finished note. Seven months at sea had destroyed every vestige of gum and the wafer would not adhere. Doughty was hovering over him with sword and hat and cloak — Doughty was just as aware of the necessity for punctuality as he was. Hornblower gave the open note to Bush.

"Seal this, if you please, Mr Bush. And send it by shore boat to Mrs Hornblower on the pier. Yes, she's on the pier. By a shore boat, Mr Bush; no one from the ship's to set foot on land."

Down the side and into the boat. Hornblower could imagine the explanatory murmur through the crowd on the pier, as Maria would learn from better informed bystanders what was going on.

"That's the captain going down into the boat." She would feel a surge of excitement and happiness. The boat shoved off, the conditions of wind and current dictating that her bow was pointing right at the pier; that would be Maria's moment of highest hope. Then the boat swung round while the hands hauled at the halliards and the balance-lug rose up the mast. Next moment she was flying towards the flagship, flying away from Maria without a word or a sign, and Hornblower felt a great welling of pity and remorse within his breast.

Hewitt responded to the flagship's hail, turned the boat neatly into the wind, dropped the sail promptly, and with the last vestige of the boat's way ran her close enough to the starboard main-chains for the bowman to hook on. Hornblower judged his moment and went up the ship's side. As his head reached the level of the main-deck the pipes began to shrill in welcome. And through that noise Hornblower heard the three sharp double strokes of the ship's bell. Six bells in the afternoon watch; three o'clock, the time stated in his invitation.

The great stern cabin in the *Hibernia* was furnished in a more subdued fashion than Pellew had affected in the *Tonnant*, more Spartan and less lavish, but comfortable enough. Somewhat to Hornblower's surprise there were no other visitors; present in the cabin were only Cornwallis, and Collins, the sardonic Captain of the Fleet, and the flag lieutenant, whose name Hornblower vaguely heard as one of these new-fangled double barrelled names with a hyphen.

Hornblower was conscious of Cornwallis's blue eyes fixed upon him, examining him closely in a considering, appraising way that might have unsettled him in other conditions. But he was still a little preoccupied with his thoughts about Maria, on the one hand, while on the other seven months at sea, seven weeks of continuous storms, provided all necessary excuse for his shabby coat and his seaman's trousers. He could meet Cornwallis's glance without shyness. Indeed, the effect of Cornwallis's kindly but unsmiling expression was much modified because his wig was slightly awry; Cornwallis still affected a horsehair bobwig of the sort that was now being relegated by fashion to noblemen's coachmen, and today it had a rakish cant that dissipated all appearance of dignity.

Yet, wig or no wig, there was something in the air, some restraint, some tension, even though Cornwallis was a perfect host who did the honours of his table with an easy grace. The quality of the atmosphere was such that Hornblower hardly noticed the food that covered the table, and he felt acutely that the polite conversation was guarded and cautious. They discussed the recent weather; *Hibernia* had been in Tor Bay for several days, having run for shelter just in time to escape the last hurricane.

"How were your stores when you came in, Captain?" asked Collins.

Now here was another sort of atmosphere, something artificial. There was an odd quality about Collins' tone, accentuated by the formal 'Captain', particularly when addressed to a lowly Commander. Then Hornblower

identified it. This was a stilted and prepared speech, exactly of the same nature as his recent speech to Bush regarding the admission of women to the ship. He could identify the tone, but he still could not account for it. But he had a commonplace answer, so commonplace that he made it in a commonplace way.

"I still had plenty, sir. Beef and pork for a month at least."

There was a pause a shade longer than natural, as if the information was being digested, before Cornwallis asked the next question in a single word.

"Water?"

"That was different, sir. I'd never been able to fill my casks completely from the hoys. We were pretty low when we got in. That was why we ran for it."

"How much did you have?"

"Two days at half-rations, sir. We'd been on half-rations for a week, and two-thirds rations for four weeks before that."

"Oh," said Collins, and in that instant the atmosphere changed.

"You left very little margin for error, Hornblower," said Cornwallis, and now he was smiling, and now Hornblower in his innocence realized what had been going on. He had been suspected of coming in unnecessarily early, of being one of those captains who wearied of combating tempests. Those were the captains Cornwallis was anxious to weed out from the Channel Fleet, and Hornblower had been under consideration for weeding out.

"You should have come in at least four days earlier," said Cornwallis.

"Well, sir —" Hornblower could have covered himself by quoting the orders of Chambers of the *Naiad*, but he saw no reason to, and he changed what he was going to say. "It worked out all right in the end."

"You'll be sending in your journals, of course, sir?" asked the flag lieutenant.

"Of course," said Hornblower.

The ship's log would be documentary proof of his assertions, but the question was a tactless, almost an insulting one, impugning of his veracity, and Cornwallis instantly displayed a hot-tempered impatience at this awkwardness on the part of his flag lieutenant.

"Captain Hornblower can do that all in his own good time," he said. "Now, wine with you, sir?"

It was extraordinary how pleasant the meeting had become; the change in the atmosphere was as noticeable as the change in the lighting at this moment when the stewards brought in candles. The four of them were laughing and joking when Newton, captain of the ship, came in to make his report and for Hornblower to be presented to him.

"Wind's steady at west nor'west, sir," said Newton.

"Thank you, captain." Cornwallis rolled his blue eyes on Hornblower. "Are you ready for sea?"

"Yes, sir." There could be no other reply.

"The wind's bound to come easterly soon," meditated Cornwallis. "The Downs, Spithead, Plymouth Sound — all of them jammed with ships outward bound and waiting for a fair wind. But one point's all you need with *Hotspur*."

"I could fetch Ushant with two tacks now, sir," said Hornblower. There was Maria huddled in some lodging in Brixham at this moment, but he had to say it.

"M'm," said Cornwallis, still in debate with himself. "I'm not comfortable without you watching the Goulet, Hornblower. But I can let you have one more day at anchor."

"Thank you, sir."

"That is if the wind doesn't back any further." Cornwallis reached a decision. "Here are your orders. You sail at nightfall tomorrow. But if the wind backs one more point you hoist anchor instantly. That is, with the wind at nor'west by west."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower knew how he liked his own officers to respond to his orders, and he matched his deportment with that mental model. Cornwallis went on, his eye still considering him.

"We took some reasonable claret out of a prize a month ago. I wonder if you would honour me by accepting a dozen, Hornblower?"

"With the greatest of pleasure, sir."

"I'll have it put in your boat."

Cornwallis turned to give the order to his steward, who apparently had something to say in return in a low voice; Hornblower heard Cornwallis reply, "Yes, yes, of course," before he turned back.

"Perhaps your steward would pass the word for my boat at the same time, sir?" said Hornblower, who was in no doubt that his visit had lasted long enough by Cornwallis's standards.

It was quite dark when Hornblower went down the side into the boat, to find at his feet the case that held the wine, and by now the wind was almost moderate. The dark surface of Tor Bay was spangled with the lights of ships, and there were the lights of Torquay and of Paignton and Brixham visible as well. Maria was somewhere there, probably uncomfortable, for these little places were probably full of naval officers' wives.

"Call me the moment the wind comes nor'west by west," said Hornblower to Bush as soon as he reached the deck.

"Nor'west by west. Aye aye, sir. The hands managed to get liquor on board, sir."

"Did you expect anything else?"

The British sailor would find liquor somehow at any contact with the shore; if he had no money he would give his clothes, his shoes, even his earrings in exchange.

"I had trouble with some of 'em, sir, especially after the beer issue."

Beer was issued instead of rum whenever it could be supplied.

"You dealt with 'em?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, Mr Bush."

A couple of hands were bringing the case of wine in from the boat, under the supervision of Doughty, and when Hornblower entered his cabin he found the case lashed to the bulkhead, occupying practically the whole of the spare deck space, and Doughty bending over it, having prized it open with a hand-spike.

"The only place to put it, sir," explained Doughty, apologetically.

That was probably true in two senses; with the ship crammed with stores, even with raw meat hung in every place convenient and inconvenient, there could hardly be any space to spare, and in addition wine would hardly be safe from the hands unless it were here where a sentry constantly stood guard. Doughty had a large parcel in his arms, which he had removed from the case.

"What's that?" demanded Hornblower; he had already observed that Doughty was a little disconcerted, so that when his servant hesitated he repeated the question more sharply still.

"It's just a parcel from the Admiral's steward, sir."

"Show me."

Hornblower expected to see bottles of brandy or some other smuggled goods.

"It's only cabin stores, sir."

"Show me."

"Just cabin stores, sir, as I said." Doughty examined the contents while exhibiting them in a manner which proved he had not been certain of what he would find. "This is sweet oil, sir, olive oil. And here are dried herbs. Marjoram, thyme, sage. And here's coffee — only half a pound, by the look of it. And pepper. And vinegar. And . . ."

"How the devil did you get these?"

"I wrote a note, sir, to the Admiral's steward, and sent it by your cox's'n. It isn't right that you shouldn't have these things sir. Now I can cook for you properly."

"Does the Admiral know?"

"I'd be surprised if he did, sir."

There was an assured superior expression on Doughty's face as he said this, which suddenly revealed to Hornblower a world of which he had been ignorant until then. There might be Flag Officers and Captains, but under that glittering surface was an unseen circle of stewards, with its own secret rites and passwords, managing the private lives of their officers without reference to them.

"Sir!" This was Bush, entering the cabin with hurried step. "Wind's nor'west by west, sir. Looks as if it'll back further still."

It took a moment for Hornblower to re-orient his thoughts, to switch from stewards and dried herbs to ships; and sailing orders. Then he was himself again, rapping his commands.

"Call all hands. Sway the topmasts up. Get the yards crossed. I want to be under way in twenty minutes. Fifteen minutes."

"Aye aye, sir."

The quiet of the ship was broken by the pipes and the curses of the petty officers, as they drove the hands to work. Heads bemused by beer and brandy cleared themselves with violent exercise and the fresh air of the chilly night breeze. Clumsy fingers clutched hoists and halliards. Men tripped and stumbled in the darkness and were kicked to their feet by petty officers goaded on by the master's mates goaded on in turn by Bush and Prowse. The vast cumbersome sausages that were the sails were dragged out from where they had been laid away on the booms.

"Ready to set sail, sir," reported Bush.

"Very well. Send the hands to the capstan. Mr Foreman, what's the night signal for 'Am getting under way'?"

"One moment, sir." Foreman had not learned the night signal book as thoroughly as he should have done in seven months. "One blue light and one Bengal fire shown together, sir."

"Very well. Make that ready. Mr Prowse, a course from the Start to Ushant, if you please."

That would let the hands know what fate awaited them, if they did not guess already. Maria would know nothing at all until she looked out at Tor Bay tomorrow to find *Hotspur's* place empty. And all she had to comfort her was the curt note he had sent before dinner; cold comfort, that. He must not think of Maria, or of the child.

The capstan was clanking as they hove the ship up towards the best bower. They would have to deal with the extra weight of the boat carronade that backed that anchor; the additional labour was the price to be paid for the security of the past days. It was a clumsy, as well as a laborious operation.

"Shall I heave short on the small bower, sir?"

"Yes, if you please, Mr Bush. And you can get under way as soon as is convenient to you."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Make that signal, Mr Foreman."

The quarter-deck was suddenly illuminated, the sinister blue light blending with the equally sinister crimson of the Bengal fire. The last splutterings had hardly died away before the answer came from the flagship, a blue light that winked three times as it was momentarily screened.

"Flagship acknowledges, sir!"

"Very well."

And this was the end of his stay in harbour, of his visit to England. He had seen the last of Maria for months to come; she would be a mother when he saw her next.

"Sheet home!"

Hotspur was gathering way, turning on her heel with a fair wind to weather Berry Head. Hornblower's mind played with a score of inconsequential thoughts as he struggled to put aside his overwhelming melancholy. He remembered the brief private conversation that he had witnessed between Cornwallis and the steward. He was quite sure that the latter had been telling his Admiral about the parcel prepared for transmission to *Hotspur*. Doughty was not nearly as clever as he thought he was. That conclusion called up a weak smile as *Hotspur* breasted the waters of the Channel, with Berry Head looming up on her starboard beam.

Chapter 15

Now it was cold, horribly cold; the days were short and the nights were very, very long. Along with the cold weather came easterly winds — the one involved the other — and a reversal of the tactical situation. For although with the wind in the east *Hotspur* was relieved of the anxiety of being on a lee shore her responsibilities were proportionately increased. There was nothing academic now about noting the direction of the wind each hour, it was no mere navigational routine. Should the wind blow from any one of ten points

of the compass out of thirty-two it would be possible even for the lubberly French to make their exit down the Goulet and enter the Atlantic. Should they make the attempt it was *Hotspur's* duty to pass an instant warning for the Channel Fleet to form line of battle if the French were rash enough to challenge action, and to cover every exit — by the Raz, by the Iroise, by the Four — if, as would be more likely, they attempted merely to escape.

Today the last of the flood did not make until two o'clock in the afternoon, a most inconvenient time, for it was not until then that *Hotspur* could venture in to make her daily reconnaissance at closest range. To do so earlier would be to risk that a failure of the wind, leaving her at the mercy of the tide, would sweep her helplessly up, within range of the batteries on Petit Minou and the Capuchins — the Toulinguet battery; and more assuredly fatal than the batteries would be the reefs, Pollux and the Little Girls.

Hornblower came out on deck with the earliest light — not very early on this almost the shortest day of the year — to check the position of the ship while Prowse took the bearings of the Petit Minou and the Grand Gouin.

"Merry Christmas, sir," said Bush. It was typical of a military service that Bush should have to touch his hat while saying those words.

"Thank you. The same to you, Mr Bush."

It was typical, also, that Hornblower should have been acutely aware that it was December 25th and yet should have forgotten that it was Christmas Day; tide tables made no reference to the festivals of the church.

"Any news of your good lady, sir?" asked Bush.

"Not yet," answered Hornblower, with a smile that was only half-forced. "The letter I had yesterday was dated the eighteenth, but there's nothing as yet."

It was one more indication of the way the wind had been blowing, that he should have received a letter from Maria in six days; a victualler had brought it out with a fair wind. That also implied that it might be six weeks before his reply reached Maria, and in six weeks — in one week — everything would be changed, and the child would be born. A naval officer writing to his wife had to keep one eye on the wind-vane just as the Lords of the Admiralty had to do when drafting their orders for the movements of fleets. New Year's Day was the date Maria and the midwife had decided upon; at that time Maria would be reading the letters he wrote a month ago. He wished he had written more sympathetically, but nothing he could do could recall, alter, or supplement those letters.

All he could do would be to spend some of this morning composing a letter that might belatedly compensate for the deficiencies of its predecessors (and Hornblower realized with a stab of conscience that this was not the first time he had reached that decision) while it would be even more difficult than usual because it would have to be composed with one eye to all eventualities. All eventualities; Hornblower felt in that moment the misgivings of every prospective father.

He spent until eleven o'clock on these unsatisfactory literary exercises and it was with guilty relief that he returned to the quarter-deck to take *Hotspur* up with the last of the tide with the well-remembered coasts closing in upon her on both sides. The weather was reasonably clear; not a sparkling Christmas Day, but with little enough haze at noon, when Hornblower gave the orders to hove *Hotspur* to, as close to Pollux Reef as he dared. The dull thud of a gun from Petit Minou coincided with his orders. The rebuilt battery there was firing its usual range-testing shot in the hope that this time he had come in too far. Did they recognize the ship that had done them so much damage? Presumably.

"Their morning salute, sir," said Bush.

"Yes."

Hornblower took the telescope into his gloved, yet frozen, hands and trained it up the Goulet as he always did. Often there was something new to observe. Today there was much.

"Four new ships at anchor, sir," said Bush.

"I make it five. Isn't that a new one — the frigate in line with the church steeple?"

"Don't think so, sir. She's shifted anchorage. Only four new ones by my count."

"You're right, Mr Bush."

"Yards crossed, sir. And — sir, would you look at those tops'l yards?"

Hornblower was already looking.

"I can't be sure."

"I think those are tops'ls furled over-all, sir."

"It's possible."

A sail furled over-all was much thinner and less noticeable, with the loose part gathered into the bunt about the mast, than one furled in the usual fashion.

"I'll go up to the masthead myself, sir. And young Foreman has good eyes. I'll take him with me."

"Very well. No, wait a moment. Mr Bush. I'll go myself. Take charge of the ship, if you please. But you can send Foreman up."

Hornblower's decision to go aloft was proof of the importance he attached to observation of the new ships. He was uncomfortably aware of his slowness and awkwardness, and it was only reluctantly that he exhibited them to his lightfooted and lighthearted subordinates. But there was something about those ships . . .

He was breathing heavily by the time he reached the fore-topmast-head, and it took several seconds to steady himself sufficiently to fix the ships in the field of the telescope, but he was much warmer. Foreman was there already, and the regular look-out shrank away out of the notice of his betters. Neither Foreman nor the look-out could be sure about those furled top sails.

They thought it likely, yet they would not commit themselves.

"D'you make out anything else about those ships, Mr Foreman?"

"Well, no, sir. I can't say that I do."

"D'you think they're riding high?"

"Maybe, yes, sir."

Two of the new arrivals were small two-deckers — sixty-fours, probably — and the lower tier of gun-ports in each case might be farther above the water line than one might expect. It was not a matter of measurement, all the same; it was more a matter of intuition, of good taste. Those hulls were just not quite right, although, Foreman, willing enough to oblige, clearly did not share his feelings.

Hornblower's glass swept the shores round the anchorage, questing for any further data. There were the rows of hutments that housed the troops. French soldiers were notoriously well able to look after themselves, to build themselves adequate shelter; the smoke of their cooking fires was clearly visible — today, of course, they would be cooking their Christmas dinners. It was from here that had come the battalion that had chased him back to the boats the day he blew up the battery. Hornblower's glass checked itself, moved along, and returned again. With the breeze that was blowing he could not be certain, but it seemed to him that from two rows of huts there was no smoke to be seen. It was all a little vague; he could not even estimate the number of troops those huts would house; two thousand men, five thousand men; and he was still doubtful about the absence of cooking smoke.

"Captain, sir!" Bush was hailing from the deck. "The tide's turned."

"Very well. I'll come down."

He was abstracted and thoughtful when he reached the deck.

"Mr Bush, I'll be wanting fish for my dinner soon. Keep a special look-out for the *Duke's Freers*."

He had to pronounce it that way to make sure Bush understood him. Two days later he found himself in his cabin drinking rum — pretending to drink rum — with the captain of the *Deux Frères*. He had bought himself half a dozen unidentifiable fish, which the captain strongly recommended as good eating. 'Carrelets,' the captain called them — Hornblower had a vague idea that they might be flounders. At any rate, he paid for them with a gold piece which the captain slipped without comment into the pockets of his scale-covered serge trousers.

Inevitably the conversation shifted to the sights to be seen up the Goulet, and from the general to the particular, centring on the new arrivals in the anchorage. The captain dismissed them with a gesture as unimportant.

"*Arme's en flute*," he said, casually.

En flute! That told the story. That locked into place the pieces of the puzzle. Hornblower took an unguarded gulp at his glass of rum and water and fought down the consequent cough so as to display no special interest. A ship of war with her guns taken out was like a flute when her ports were opened — she had a row of empty holes down her side.

"Not to fight," explained the captain. "Only for stores, or troops, or what you will."

For troops especially. Stores could best be carried in merchant ships designed for cargo, but ships of war were constructed to carry large numbers of men — their cooking arrangements and water storage facilities had been built in with that in mind. With only as many seamen on board as were necessary to work the ship there was room to spare for soldiers. Then the guns would be unnecessary, and at Brest they could be immediately employed in arming new ships. Removing the guns meant a vast increase in available deck space into which more troops could be crammed; the more there were the more strain on the cooking and watering arrangements, but on a short voyage they would not have long to suffer. A short voyage. Not the West Indies, nor Good Hope, and certainly not India. A forty-gun frigate armed *en flute* might have as many as a thousand soldiers packed into her. Three thousand men, plus a few hundred more in the armed escorts. The smallness of the number ruled out England — not even Bonaparte, so improvident with human life, would throw away a force that size in an invasion of England where there was at least a small army and a large militia. There was only one possible target; Ireland, where a disaffected population meant a weak militia.

"They are no danger to me, then," said Hornblower, hoping that the interval during which he had been making these deductions had not been so long as to be obvious.

"Not even to this little ship," agreed the Breton captain with a smile.

It called for the exertion of all Hornblower's moral strength to continue the interview without allowing his agitation to show. He wanted to get instantly into action, but he dared not appear impatient; the Breton captain wanted another three-finger glass of rum and was unaware of any need for haste. Luckily Hornblower remembered an admonition from Doughty, who had impressed on him the desirability of buying cider as well as fish, and Hornblower introduced the new subject. Yes, agreed the captain, there was a keg of cider on board the *Deux Frères*, but he could not say how much was left, as they had tapped it already during the day. He would sell what was left.

Hornblower forced himself to bargain; he did not want the Breton captain to know that his recent piece of information was worth further gold. He suggested that the cider, of an unknown quantity, should be given him for nothing extra, and the captain with an avaricious gleam in his peasant's eye, indignantly refused. For some minutes the argument proceeded while the rum sank lower in the captain's glass.

"One franc, then," offered Hornblower at last. "Twenty sous."

"Twenty sous and a glass of rum," said the captain, and Hornblower had to reconcile himself to that much further delay, but it was worth it to retain the captain's respect and to allay the captain's suspicions.

So that it was with his head swimming with rum — a sensation he detested — that Hornblower sat down at last to write his urgent despatch, having seen his guest down the side. No mere signal could convey all that he wanted to say, and no signal would be secret enough, either. He had to choose his words as carefully as the rum would permit, as he stated his suspicions that the French might be planning an invasion of Ireland, and as he gave his reasons for those suspicions. He was satisfied at last, and wrote 'H. Hornblower, Commander,' at the foot of the letter. Then he turned over the sheet and wrote the address: 'Rear Admiral William Parker, Commanding the Inshore Squadron,' on the other side, and folded and sealed the letter. Parker was one of the extensive Parker clan; there were and had been admirals and captains innumerable with that name, none of them specially distinguished; perhaps this letter would alter that tradition.

He sent it off — a long and arduous trip for the boat, and waited impatiently for the acknowledgement.

Sir,

Your letter of this date has been received and will be given my full attention.

Your ob'd serv't,

Wm. Parker.

Hornblower read the few words in a flash; he had opened the letter on the quarter-deck without waiting to retire with it to his cabin, and he put it in his pocket hoping that his expression betrayed no disappointment.

"Mr Bush," he said, "we shall have to maintain a closer watch than ever over the Goulet, particularly at night and in thick weather."

"Aye aye, sir."

Probably Parker needed time to digest the information, and would later produce a plan; until that time it was Hornblower's duty to act without orders.

"I shall take the ship up to the Little Girls whenever I can do so unobserved."

"The Little Girls? Aye aye, sir."

It was a very sharp glance that Bush directed at him. No one in his senses — at least no one except under the strongest compulsion — would risk his ship near those navigational dangers in conditions of bad visibility. True; but the compulsions existed. Three thousand well-trained French soldiers landing in Ireland would set that distressful country in a flame from end to end, a wilder flame than had burned in 1798.

"We'll try it tonight," said Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir."

The Little Girls lay squarely in the middle of the channel of the Goulet; on either side lay a fairway a scant quarter of a mile wide, and up and down those fairways raced the tide; it would only be during the ebb that the French would be likely to come down. No, that was not strictly true, for the French could stem the flood tide with a fair wind — with this chill easterly wind blowing. The Goulet had to be watched in all conditions of bad visibility and *Hotspur* had to do the watching.

Chapter 16

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Bush, lingering after delivering his afternoon report, and hesitating before taking the next step he had clearly decided upon.

"Yes, Mr Bush?"

"You know, sir, you're not looking as well as you should."

"Indeed?"

"You've been doing too much, sir. Day and night."

"That's a strange thing for a seaman to say, Mr Bush. And a King's officer."

"It's true, all the same, sir. You haven't had an hour's sleep at a time for days. You're thinner than I've ever known you, sir."

"I'm afraid I'll have to endure it, nevertheless, Mr Bush."

"I can only say I wish you didn't have to, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Bush. I'm going to turn in now, as a matter of fact."

"I'm glad of that, sir."

"See that I'm called the moment the weather shows signs of thickening."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Can I trust you, Mr Bush?"

That brought a smile into what was too serious a conversation.

"You can, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Bush."

It was interesting after Bush's departure to look into the speckled chipped mirror and observe his thinness, the cheeks and temples fallen in, the sharp nose and the pointed chin. But this was not the real Hornblower. The real one was inside, unaffected — as yet, at least — by privation or strain. The real Hornblower looked out at him from the hollow eyes in the mirror with a twinkle of recognition, a twinkle that brightened, not with malice, but with something akin to that — a kind of cynical amusement — at the sight of Hornblower seeking proof of the weaknesses of the flesh. But time was too precious to waste; the weary body that the real Hornblower had to drag about demanded repose. And, as regards the weaknesses of the flesh, how delightful, how comforting it was to clasp to his stomach the hot-water bottle that Doughty had put into his cot, to feel warm and relaxed despite the clamminess of the bedclothes and the searching cold that pervaded the cabin.

"Sir," said Doughty, coming into the cabin after what seemed to be one minute's interval but which, his watch told him, was two hours. "Mr Prowse sent me. It's snowing, sir."

"Very well. I'll come."

How often had he said those words? Every time the weather had thickened he had taken *Hotspur* up the Goulet, enduring the strain of advancing blind up into frightful danger, watching wind and tide, making the most elaborate calculations, alert for any change in conditions, ready to dash out again at the first hint of improvement, not only to evade the fire of the batteries, but also to prevent the French from discovering the close watch that was being maintained over them.

"It's only just started to snow, sir," Doughty was saying. "But Mr Prowse says it's set in for the night."

With Doughty's assistance Hornblower had bundled himself automatically into his deck clothing without noticing what he was doing. He went out into a changed world, where his feet trod a thin carpet of snow on the deck, and where Prowse loomed up in the darkness shimmering in the white coating of snow on his oilskins.

"Wind's nor' by east, sir, moderate. An hour of flood still to go."

"Thank you. Turn the hands up and send them to quarters, if you please. They can sleep at the guns."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Five minutes from now I don't want to hear a sound."

"Aye aye, sir."

This was only regular routine. The less the distance one could see the readier the ship had to be to open fire should an enemy loom up close alongside. But there was no routine about his own duties; every time he took the ship up conditions were different, the wind blowing from a different compass point and the tide of a different age. This was the first time the wind had been so far round to the north. Tonight he would have to shave the shallows off Petit Minou as close as he dared, and then, close-hauled, with the last of the flood behind him, *Hotspur* could just ascend the northern channel, with the Little Girls to starboard.

There was spirit left in the crew; there were jokes and cries of surprise when they emerged into the snow from the stinking warmth of the 'tween deck, but sharp orders suppressed every sound. *Hotspur* was deadly quiet, like a ghost ship when the yards had been trimmed and the helm orders given and she began to make her way through the impenetrable night, night more impenetrable than ever with the air full of snowflakes silently dropping down upon them.

A shuttered lantern at the taffrail for reading the log, although the log's indications were of minor importance, when speed over the ground could be so different — instinct and experience were more important. Two hands in the port-side main-chains with the lead. Hornblower on the weather side of the quarter-deck could hear quite a quiet call, even though there was a hand stationed to relay it if necessary. Five fathoms. Four fathoms. If his navigation were faulty they would strike before the next cast. Aground under the guns of Petit Minou, ruined and destroyed; Hornblower could not restrain himself from clenching his gloved hands and tightening his muscles. Six and a half fathoms. That was what he had calculated upon, but it was a relief, nevertheless — Hornblower felt a small contempt for himself at feeling relieved, at his lack of faith in his own judgement.

"Full and bye," he ordered.

They were as close under Petit Minou as possible, a quarter of a mile from those well-known hills, but there was nothing visible at all. There might be a solid black wall a yard from Hornblower's eyes whichever way he turned them. Eleven fathoms; they were on the edge of the fairway now. The last of the flood, two days after the lowest neaps, and wind north by east; the current should be less than a knot and the eddy off Mengam non-existent.

"No bottom!"

More than twenty fathoms; that was right.

"A good night this for the Frogs, sir," muttered Bush beside him; he had been waiting for this moment.

Certainly it was a good night for the French if they were determined to escape. They knew the times of ebb and flood as well as he did. They would see the snow. Comfortable time for them to up anchor and get under weigh, and make the passage of the Goulet with a fair wind and ebb tide. Impossible for them to escape by the Four with this wind; the Iroise was guarded — he hoped — by the Inshore Squadron, but on a night as black as this they might try it in preference to the difficult Raz du Sein.

Nineteen fathoms; he was above the Little Girls, and he could be confident of weathering Mengam. Nineteen fathoms.

"Should be slack water now, sir," muttered Prowse, who had just looked at his watch in the light of the shaded binnacle.

They were above Mengam now; the lead should record a fairly steady nineteen fathoms for the next few minutes, and it was time that he should plan out the next move — the next move but one, rather. He conjured up the chart before his mental eye.

"Listen!" Bush's elbow dug into Hornblower's ribs with the urgency of the moment.

"Avast there at the lead!" said Hornblower. He spoke in a normal tone to make sure he was understood; with the wind blowing that way his voice would not carry far in the direction he was peering into.

There was the sound again; there were other noises. A long drawn monosyllable borne by the wind, and Hornblower's straining senses picked it up. It was a Frenchman calling "Seize," sixteen. French pilots still used the old-fashioned *toise* to measure depths, and the *toise* was slightly greater than the English fathom.

"Lights!" muttered Bush, his elbow at Hornblower's ribs again. There was a gleam here and there — the Frenchman had not darkened his ship nearly as effectively as the *Hotspur*. There was enough light to give some sort of indication. A ghost ship sweeping by within biscuit toss. The topsails were suddenly visible — there must be a thin coating of snow on the after surfaces whose gleaming white could reflect any light there was. And then —

"Three red lights in a row on the mizzen tops'l yard," whispered Bush.

Visible enough now; shaded in front, presumably, with the light directed aft to guide following ships.

Hornblower felt a surge of inspiration, of instant decision, plans for the moment, plans for the next five minutes, plans for the more distant future.

"Run!" he snapped at Bush. "Get three lights hoisted the same way. Keep 'em shaded, ready to show."

Bush was off at the last word, but the thoughts had to come more rapidly like lightning. *Hotspur* dared not tack; she must wear.

"Wear ship!" he snapped at Prowse — no time for the politenesses he usually employed.

As *Hotspur* swung round he saw the three separated red lights join together almost into one, and at the same moment he saw a blue glare; the French ship was altering course to proceed down the Goulet and was burning a blue light as an indication to the ships following to up helm in succession. Now he could see the second French ship, a second faint ghost — the blue light helped to reveal it.

Pellew in the old *Indefatigable*, when Hornblower was a prisoner in Ferrol, had once confused a French squadron escaping from Brest by imitating the French signals, but that had been in the comparatively open waters of the Iroise. It had been in Hornblower's mind to try similar tactics, but here in the narrow Goulet there was a possibility of more decisive action.

"Bring her to the wind on the starboard tack," he snapped at Prowse, and *Hotspur* swung round further still, the invisible hands hauling at the invisible braces.

There was the second ship in the French line just completing her turn, with *Hotspur's* bows pointing almost straight at her.

"Starboard a little." *Hotspur's* bows swung away. "Meet her."

He wanted to be as close alongside as he possibly could be without running foul of her.

"I've sent a good hand up with the lights, sir." This was Bush reporting. "Another two minutes and they'll be ready."

"Get down to the guns," snapped Hornblower, and then, with the need for silence at an end, he reached for the speaking-trumpet.

"Main-deck! Man the starboard guns! Run 'em out."

How would the French squadron be composed? It would have an armed escort, not to fight its way through the Channel Fleet, but to protect the transports, after the escape, from stray British cruising frigates. There would be two big frigates, one in the van and one bringing up the rear, while the intermediate ships would be defenceless transports, frigates armed *en flute*.

"Starboard! Steady!"

Yard arm to yard arm with the second ship in the line, going down the Goulet alongside her, ghost ships side by side in the falling snow. The rumble of gun-trucks had ceased.

"Fire!"

At ten guns, ten hands jerked at the lanyards, and *Hotspur's* side burst into flame, illuminating the sails and hull of the Frenchman with a bright glare; in the instantaneous glare snowflakes were visible as if stationary in mid air.

"Fire away, you men!"

There were cries and shouts to be heard from the French ship, and then a French voice speaking almost in his ear — the French captain hailing him from thirty yards away with his speaking-trumpet pointed straight at him. It would be an expostulation, the French captain wondering why a French ship should be firing into him, here where no British ship could possibly be. The words were cut off abruptly by the bang and the flash of the first gun of the second broadside, the others following as the men loaded and fired as fast as they could. Each flash brought a momentary revelation of the French ship, a flickering, intermittent picture. Those nine-pounder balls were crashing into a ship crammed with men. At this very moment, as he stood there rigid on the deck, men were dying in agony by the score just over there, for no more reason than that they had been forced into the service of a continental tyrant. Surely the French would not be able to bear it. Surely they would flinch under this unexpected and unexplainable attack. Ah! She was turning away, although she had nowhere to turn to except the cliffs and shoals of the shore close overside. There were the three red lights on her mizzen topsail yard. By accident or design she had put her helm down. He must make sure of her.

"Port a little."

Hotspur swung to starboard, her guns blazing. Enough.

"Starboard a little. Steady as you go."

Now the speaking-trumpet. "Cease fire!"

The silence that followed was broken by the crash as the Frenchman struck the shore, the clatter of falling spars, the yells of despair. And in this darkness, after the glare of the guns, he was blinder than ever, and yet he must act as if he could see; he must waste no moment.

"Back the main tops'!! Stay by the braces!"

The rest of the French line must be coming down, willy-nilly; with the wind over their quarter and the ebb under their keels and rocks on either side of them they could do nothing else. He must think quicker than they; he still had the advantage of surprise — the French captain in the following ship would not yet have had time to collect his thoughts.

The Little Girls were under their lee; he must not delay another moment.

"Braces, there!"

Here she came, looming up, close, close, yells of panic from her forecastle.

"Hard-a-starboard!"

Hotspur had just enough way through the water to respond to her rudder; the two bows swung from each other, collision averted by a hair's breadth.

"Fire!"

The Frenchman's sails were all a-shiver; she was not under proper control, and with those nine-pounder balls sweeping her deck she would not recover quickly. *Hotspur* must not pass ahead of her; he still had a little time and a little room to spare.

"Main tops'l aback!"

This was a well-drilled crew; the ship was working like a machine. Even the powder-boys, climbing and descending the ladders in pitch darkness, were carrying out their duties with exactitude, keeping the guns supplied with powder, for the guns never ceased from firing, bellowing in deafening fashion and bathing the Frenchman with orange light while the smoke blew heavily away on the disengaged side.

He could not spare another moment with the main topsail aback. He must fill and draw ahead even if it meant disengagement.

"Braces, there!"

He had not noticed until now the infernal din of the quarterdeck carronades beside him; they were firing rapidly, sweeping the transport's deck with grape. In their flashes he saw the Frenchman's masts drawing aft as *Hotspur* regained her way. Then in the next flash he saw something else, another momentary picture — a ship's bowsprit crossing the Frenchman's deck from the disengaged side, and he heard a crash and the screams. The next Frenchman astern had run bows on into her colleague. The first rending crash was followed

by others; he strode aft to try to see, but already the darkness had closed like a wall round his blinded eyes. He could only listen, but what he heard told him the story. The ship that rammed was swinging with the wind, her bowsprit tearing through shrouds and halliards until it snapped against the main-mast. Then the fore-topmast would fall, yards would fall. The two ships were locked together and helpless, with the Little Girls under their lee. Now he saw blue lights burning as they tried to deal with the hopeless situation; with the ships swinging the blue lights and the red lights on the yards were revolving round each other like some planetary system. There was no chance of escape for them, as wind and current carried him away he thought he heard the crash as they struck upon the Little Girls, but he could not be sure, and there was no time — of course there was no time — to think about it. At this stage of the ebb there was an eddy that set in upon Pollux Reef and he must allow for that. Then he would be out in the Iroise, whose waters he used to think so dangerous before he had ventured up the Goulet, and an unknown number of ships was coming down from Brest, forewarned now by all the firing and the tumult that an enemy was in their midst.

He took a hash glance into the binnacle, gauged the force of the wind on his cheeks. The enemy — what there was left of them — would certainly, with this wind, run for the Raz du Sein, and would certainly give the Trepieds shoal a wide berth. He must post himself to intercept them; the next ship in the line must be close at hand in any case, but in a few seconds she would no longer be confined to the narrow channel of the Goulet. And what would the first frigate be doing the one he had allowed to pass without attacking her?

"Main chains, there! Get the lead going."

He must keep up to windward as best he could.

"No bottom! No bottom with this line."

He was clear of Pollux, then.

"Avast, there, with the lead."

They stood on steadily on the starboard-tack; in the impenetrable darkness he could hear Profuse breathing heavily at his side and all else was silence round him. He would have to take another cast of the lead soon enough. What was that? Wind and water had brought a distinctive sound to his ears, a solemn noise, of a solid body falling into the water. It was the sound of a lead being cast — and then followed, at the appropriate interval, the high pitched cry of the leadsman. There was a ship just up there to windward, and now with the distance lessening and with his hearing concentrated in that direction he could hear other sounds, voices, the working of yards. He leaned over the rail and spoke quietly down into the waist.

"Stand by your guns."

There she was, looming faintly on the starboard bow.

"Starboard two points. Meet her."

They saw *Hotspur* at that same moment; from out of the darkness came the hail of a speaking-trumpet, but in the middle of a word Hornblower spoke down into the waist again.

"Fire!"

The guns went off so nearly together that he felt *Hotspur's* light fabric heave a little with the force of the recoil, and there again was the shape of a ship lit up by the glare of the broadside. He could not hope to force her on the shoals; there were too much sea-room for that. He took the speaking-trumpet.

"Elevate your guns! Aim for her spars!"

He could cripple her. The first gun of the new broadside went off immediately after he said the words — some fool had not paid attention. But the other guns fired after the interval necessary to withdraw the coigns, flash after flash, bang after bang. Again and again and again. Suddenly a flash revealed a change in the shape of the illuminated mizzen topsail, and at the same moment that mizzen topsail moved slowly back abaft the beam. The Frenchman had thrown all aback in a desperate attempt to escape this tormentor, risking being raked in the hope of passing under *Hotspur's* stern to get before the wind. He would wear the *Hotspur* round and bring her under the fire of the port broadside and chase her on to the Trepieds; the speaking-trumpet was at his lips when the darkness ahead erupted into a volcano of fire.

Chaos. Out of the black snow-filled night had come a broadside, raking the *Hotspur* from bow to stern. Along with the sound and the flash came the rending crash of splintered woodwork, the loud ringing noise as a cannon-ball hit the breech of a gun, the shriek of the flying splinters, and following on that came the screaming of a wounded man, cutting through the sudden new stillness.

One of the armed frigates of the escort — the leader of the line, most likely — had seen the firing and had been close enough to intervene. She had crossed *Hotspur's* bows to fire in a raking broadside.

"Hard-a-starboard!"

He could not tack, even if he were prepared to take the chance of missing stays with the rigging as much cut up as it must be, for he was not clear of the transport yet. He must wear, even though it meant being raked once more.

"Wear the ship!"

Hotspur was turning even as her last guns fired into the transport. Then came the second broadside from ahead, flaring out of the darkness, a fraction of a second between each successive shot, crashing into *Hotspur's* battered bows, while Hornblower stood, trying not to wince, thinking what he must do next. Was that the last shot? Now there was a new and rending crash forward, a succession of snapping noises, another thundering crash, and cries and shrieks from forward. That must be the foremast fallen. That must be the fore-topsail yard crashing on the deck.

"Helm doesn't answer, sir," called the quartermaster at the wheel.

With the foremast down *Hotspur* would tend to fly up in the wind, even if the wreckage were not dragging alongside to act as a sea-anchor. He could feel the wind shifting on his cheek. Now *Hotspur* was helpless. Now she could be battered to destruction by an enemy twice her size, with four times her weight of metal, with scantlings twice as thick to keep out *Hotspur's* feeble shot. He would have to fight despairingly to the death. Unless . . . The enemy would be putting his helm a-starboard to rake *Hotspur* from astern, or he would be doing so as soon as he could make out in the darkness what had happened. Time would pass very fast and the wind was still blowing, thank God, and there was the transport close on his starboard side still. He spoke loudly into the speaking-trumpet.

"Silence! Silence!"

The bustle and clatter forward, where the hands had been struggling with the fallen spars, died away. Even the groaning wounded fell silent; that was discipline, and not the discipline of the cat o' nine tails. He could just hear the rumble of the French frigate's gun trucks as they ran out the guns for the next broadside, and he could hear shouted orders. The French frigate was turning to deliver the *coup de grace* as soon as she made certain of her target. Hornblower pointed the speaking-trumpet straight upwards as if addressing the sky, and he tried to keep his voice steady and quiet. He did not want the French frigate to hear.

"Mizzen topsail yard! Unmask those lights."

That was a bad moment; the lights might have gone out, the lad stationed on the yard might be dead. He had to speak again.

"Show those lights!"

Discipline kept the hand up there from hailing back, but there they were — one, two, three red lights along the mizzen topsail yard. Even against the wind he heard a wild order being shouted from the French frigate excitement, even panic in the voice. The French captain was ordering his guns not to fire. Perhaps he was thinking that some horrible mistake had already been made; perhaps in the bewildering darkness he was confusing *Hotspur* with her recent victim not so far off. At least he was holding fire; at least he was going off to leeward, and a hundred yards to leeward in that darkness was the equivalent of a mile in ordinary conditions.

"Mask those lights again!"

No need to give the Frenchman a mark for gunfire or an objective to which to beat back when he should clear up the situation. Now a voice spoke out of the darkness close to him.

"Bush reporting, sir. I've left the guns for the moment, if you give me leave, sir. Fore-tops'ls all across the starboard battery. Can't fire those guns in any case yet."

"Very well, Mr Bush. What's the damage?"

"Foremast's gone six feet above the deck, sir. Everything went over the starboard side. Most of the shrouds must have held — it's all trailing alongside."

"Then we'll get to work — in silence, Mr Bush. I want every stitch of canvas got in first, and then we'll deal with the wreckage."

"Aye aye, sir."

Stripping the ship of her canvas would make her far less visible to the enemy's eyes, and would reduce *Hotspur's* leeway while she rode to her strange sea anchor. Next moment it was the carpenter, up from below. "We're making water very fast, sir. Two feet in the hold. My men are plugging one shot hole aft by the magazine but there must be another one for'ard in the cable tier. We'll need hands at the pumps, sir, an' I'd like half a dozen more in the cable tier."

"Very well."

So much to be done in a nightmare atmosphere of unreality, and then came an explanation of some of the unreality. Six inches of snow lay on the decks, piled in deeper drifts against the vertical surfaces, silencing as well as impeding every movement. But most of the sense of unreality stemmed from simple exhaustion, nervous and physical, and the exhaustion had to be ignored while the work went on, trying to think clearly in the numbing darkness, with the knowledge that the Trepieds shoal lay close under their lee, on a falling tide. Getting up sail when the wreckage had been cleared away, and discovering by sheer seaman's instinct how to handle *Hotspur* under sail without her foremast, with only the feel of the wind on his cheeks and the wavering compass in the binnacle to guide him, and the shoals waiting for him if he miscalculated.

"I'd like you to set the sprit-sail, Mr Bush, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

A dangerous job for the hands that had to spread the spritsail under the bowsprit in the dark, with all the accustomed stays swept away by the loss of the foremast, but it had to be done to supply the necessary leverage forward to keep *Hotspur* from turning into the wind. Setting the ponderous main-course, because the main-topmast could not be trusted to carry sail. Then creeping westward, with the pumps clanking lugubriously, and the blackness turning slowly to dark grey, and the dark grey turning slowly to light grey, with the coming of the dawn and the cessation of the snowfall. Then it was light enough to see the disorder of the decks and the trampled snow — snow stained pink here and there, in wide areas. Then at last came the sight of the *Doris*, and help at hand; it might almost be called safety, except that later they would have to beat back against contrary winds and with a jury foremast and in a leaky ship, to Plymouth and refitting.

It was when they saw *Doris* hoisting out her boats, despatching additional manpower, that Bush could turn to Hornblower with a conventional remark. Bush was not aware of his own appearance, his powder-blackened face, his hollow cheeks and his sprouting beard, but even without that knowledge the setting was bizarre enough to appeal to Bush's crude sense of humour.

"A Happy New Year to you, sir," said Bush, with a death's head grin.

It was New Year's Day. Then to the two men the same thought occurred simultaneously, and Bush's grin was replaced by something more serious.

"I hope your good lady . . ."

He was taken unawares, and could not find the formal words.

"Thank you, Mr Bush."

It was on New Year's Day that the child was expected. Maria might be in labour at this moment while they stood there talking.

Chapter 17

"Will you be having dinner on board, sir?" asked Doughty. "No," replied Hornblower. He hesitated before he launched into the next speech that had occurred to him, but he decided to continue. "Tonight Horatio Hornblower dines with Horatio Hornblower."

"Yes, sir."

No joke ever fell as flat as that one. Perhaps — certainly — it was too much to expect Doughty to catch the classical allusion, but he might at least have smiled, because it was obvious that his captain had condescended so far as to be facetious.

"You'll need your oilskins, sir. It's raining heavily still," said Doughty of the almost immovable countenance.

"Thank you."

It seemed to have rained every single day since *Hotspur* had crawled into Plymouth Sound. Hornblower walked out from the dockyard with the rain rattling on his oilskins as if it were hail and not rain, and it continued all the time it took him to make his way to Driver's Alley. The landlady's little daughter opened the door to his knock, and as he walked up the stairs to his lodgings he heard the voice of the other Horatio Hornblower loudly proclaiming his sorrows. He opened the door and entered the small, hot stuffy room where Maria was standing with the baby over her shoulder, its long clothes hanging below her waist. Her face lit with pleasure when she saw him, and she could hardly wait for him to peel off his dripping oilskins before she came to his arms. Hornblower kissed her hot cheek and tried to look round the corner at little Horatio, but the baby only put his face into his mother's shoulder and wailed.

"He's been fractious today, dear," said Maria, apologetically.

"Poor little fellow! And what about you, my dear!" Hornblower was careful to make Maria the centre of his thoughts whenever he was with her.

"I'm well enough now, dear. I can go up and down the stairs like a bird."

"Excellent."

Maria patted the baby's back.

"I wish he would be good. I want him to smile for his father."

"Perhaps I could try?"

"Oh, no!"

Maria was quite shocked at the notion that a man should hold a crying baby, even his own, but it was a delightful kind of shock, all the same, and she yielded the baby to his proffered arms. Hornblower held his child — it was always a slight surprise to find how light that bundle of clothes was — and looked down at the rather amorphous features and the wet nose.

"There!" said Hornblower. The act of transfer had quieted little Horatio for a moment at least.

Maria stood bathed in happiness at the sight of her husband holding her son. And Hornblower's emotions were strangely mixed; one emotion was astonishment at finding pleasure in holding his child, for he found it hard to believe that he was capable of such sentiment. Maria held the back of the fireside armchair so that he could sit down in it, and then, greatly daring, kissed his hair.

"And how is the ship?" she asked, leaning over him.

"She's nearly ready for sea," said Hornblower.

Hotspur had been in and out of dock, her bottom cleaned, her seams recaulked, her shot holes patched. Her new foremast had been put in, and the riggers had set up the standing rigging. She only had to renew her stores.

"Oh dear," said Maria.

"Wind's steady in the west," said Hornblower. Not that that would deter him from beating down Channel if he could once work *Hotspur* down the Sound — he could not think why he had held out this shred of hope to Maria.

Little Horatio began to wail again.

"Poor darling!" said Maria. "Let me take him."

"I can deal with him."

"No. It — it isn't right." It was all wrong, in Maria's mind, that a father should be afflicted by his child's tantrums. She thought of something else. "You wished to see this, dear. Mother brought it in this afternoon from Lockhart's Library."

She brought a magazine from the side table, and gave it in exchange for the baby, whom she clasped once more to her breast.

The magazine was the new number of the *Naval Chronicle*, and Maria with her free hand helped Hornblower to turn the pages.

"There!" Maria pointed to the relevant passage, on almost the last page. "On January 1st last . . ." it began, it was the announcement of little Horatio's birth.

"The Lady of Captain Horatio Hornblower of the Royal Navy, of a son," read Maria. "That's me and little Horatio. I'm — I'm more grateful to you, dear, than I can ever tell you."

"Nonsense," replied Hornblower. That was just what he thought it was, but he made himself look up with a smile that took out any sting from what he said.

"They call you 'Captain'," went on Maria, with an interrogative in the remark.

"Yes," agreed Hornblower. "That's because —"

He embarked once more on the explanation of the profound difference between a Commander by rank (and a Captain only by courtesy) and a Post Captain. He had said it all before, more than once.

"I don't think it's right," Maria.

"Very few things are right, my dear," said Hornblower, a little absently. He was leafing through the other pages of the *Naval Chronicle*, working forward from the back page where he had started. Here was the Plymouth Report, and here was one of the things he was looking for.

'Came in HM Sloop *Hotspur* under jury rig, from the Channel Fleet. She proceeded at once into dock. Captain Horatio Hornblower landed at once with dispatches.' Then came the Law Intelligence, and the Naval Courts Martial, and the Monthly Register of Naval Events, and the Naval Debates in the Imperial Parliament, and then, between the Debates and the Poetry, came the Gazette Letters. And there it was. First, in italics, came the introduction.

Copy of a letter from Vice Admiral Sir William Cornwallis to Sir Evan Nepean, Bart., dated on board of HMS Hibernia, the 2nd instant.

Next came Cornwallis's letter.

Sir,

I herewith transmit for their Lordships' information, copies of letters I have received from Captains Chambers of HMS *Naiad* and Hornblower of HM Sloop *Hotspur*, acquainting me of the capture of the French national frigate *Clorinde* and of the defeat of an attempt by the French to escape from Brest with a large body of Troops. The conduct of both these officers appears to me to be highly commendable. I enclose also a copy of a letter I have received from Captain Smith of HMS *Doris*.

I have the honour to be, with deepest respect,

Your ob'd't serv't,

Wm. Cornwallis.

Chambers' report came next. *Naiad* had caught *Clorinde* near Molene and had fought her to a standstill, capturing her in forty minutes. Apparently the other French frigate which had come out with the transports had escaped by the Raz du Sein and had still not been caught.

Then at last came his own report. Hornblower felt the flush of excitement he had known before on reading his own words in print. He studied them afresh at this interval, and was grudgingly satisfied. They told, without elaboration, the bare facts of how three transports had been run ashore in the Goulet, and of how *Hotspur* while attacking a fourth had been in action with a French frigate and had lost her foremast. Not a word about saving Ireland from invasion; the merest half-sentence about the darkness and the snow and the navigational perils, but men who could understand would understand.

Smith's letter from the *Doris* was brief, too. After meeting *Hotspur* he had pushed in towards Brest and had found a French frigate, armed *en flute*, aground on the Trepieds with shore boats taking off her troops. Under the fire of the French coastal batteries *Doris* had sent in her boats and had burned her.

"There's something more in the *Chronicle* that might interest you, dear," said Hornblower. He proffered the magazine with his finger indicating his letter.

"Another letter from you, dear!" said Maria. "How pleased you must be!"

She read the letter quickly.

"I haven't had time to read this before," she said, looking up. "Little Horatio was so fractious. And — and — I never understand all these letters, dear. I hope you are proud of what you did. I'm sure you are, of course."

Luckily little Horatio set up a wail at that moment to save Hornblower from a specific answer to that speech. Maria pacified the baby and went on.

"The shopkeepers will know about this tomorrow and they'll all speak to me about it."

The door opened to admit Mrs Mason, her pattens clattering on her feet, raindrops sparkling on her shawl. She and Hornblower exchanged 'good evenings' while she took off her outer clothing.

"Let me take that child," said Mrs Mason to her daughter.

"Horry has another letter in the *Chronicle*," countered Maria.

"Indeed?"

Mrs Mason sat down across the fire from Hornblower and studied the page with more care than Maria had done, but perhaps with no more understanding.

"The Admiral says your conduct was 'very Commendable'," she said, looking up.

"Yes."

"Why doesn't he make you a real captain, 'post', as you call it?"

"The decision doesn't lie with him," said Hornblower. "And I doubt if he would in any case."

"Can't admirals make captains?"

"Not in home waters."

The god-like power of promotion freely exercised on distant stations was denied to commanders-in-chief where speedy reference to the Admiralty was possible.

"And what about prize money?"

"There's none for the *Hotspur*."

"But this — this *Clorinde* was captured?"

"Yes, but we weren't in sight."

"But you were fighting, weren't you?"

"Yes, Mrs Mason. But only ships in sight share in prize money. Except for the flag officers."

"And aren't you a flag officer?"

"No. Flag officer means 'Admiral', Mrs Mason."

Mrs Mason sniffed.

"It all seems very strange. So you do not profit at all by this letter?"

"No, Mrs Mason." At least not in the way Mrs Mason meant. "It's about time you made some prize money. I hear all the time about the ships that have made thousands. Eight pounds a month for Maria, and her with a child." Mrs Mason looked round at her daughter. "Threepence a pound for neck of mutton! The cost of things is more than I can understand."

"Yes, mother. Horry gives me all he can, I'm sure."

As captain of a ship below the sixth rate Hornblower's pay was twelve pounds a month, and he still needed those new uniforms. Prices were rising with war-time demand, and the admiralty, despite many promises, had not yet succeeded in obtaining an increase in pay for naval officers.

"Some captains make plenty," said Mrs Mason.

It was prize money, and the possibility of gaining it, that kept the Navy quiet under the otherwise intolerable conditions. The great mutinies at Spithead and the Nore were less than ten years old. But Hornblower felt he would be drawn into a defence of the prize money system shortly if Mrs Mason persisted in talking as she did. Luckily the entrance of the landlady to lay the table for supper changed the subject of conversation. With another person in the room neither Mrs Mason nor Maria would discuss such a low subject as money, and they talked about indifferent matters instead. They sat down to dinner when the landlady brought in a steaming tureen.

"The pearl barley's at the bottom, Horatio," said Mrs Mason, supervising him as he served the food.

"Yes, Mrs Mason."

"And you'd better give Maria that other chop — that one's meant for you."

"Yes, Mrs Mason."

Hornblower had learned to keep a still tongue in his head under the goadings of tyranny when he was a lieutenant in the old *Renown* under Captain Sawyer's command, but he had well-nigh forgotten those lessons by now, and was having painfully to relearn them. He had married of his own free will — he could have said 'no' at the altar, he remembered — and now he had to make the best of a bad business. Quarrelling with his mother-in-law would not help. It was a pity that *Hotspur* had come in for docking at the moment when Mrs

Mason had arrived to see her daughter through her confinement, but he need hardly fear a repetition of the coincidence during the days — the endless days — to come.

Stewed mutton and pearl barley and potatoes and cabbage. It might have been a very pleasant dinner, except that the atmosphere was unfavourable; in two senses. The room, with its sea-coal fire, was unbearably hot. Thanks to the rain no washing could be hung out of doors, and Hornblower doubted if in the vicinity of Driver's Alley washing could be hung out of doors unwatched in any case. So that on a clothes-horse on the other side of the room hung little Horatio's clothing, and somehow nature arranged it that every stitch little Horatio wore had to be washed, as often as several times a day. Hanging on the horse were the long embroidered gowns, and the long flannel gowns with their scalloped borders, and the flannel shirts, and the binders, as well as the innumerable napkins that might have been expected to sacrifice themselves, like a rearguard, in the defence of the main body. Hornblower's wet oilskins and Mrs Mason's wet shawl added variant notes to the smells in the room, and Hornblower suspected that little Horatio, now in the cradle beside Maria's chair, added yet another.

Hornblower thought of the keen clean air of the Atlantic and felt his lungs would burst. He did his best with his dinner, but it was a poor best.

"You're not making a very good dinner, Horatio," said Mrs Mason, peering suspiciously at his plate.

"I suppose I'm not very hungry."

"Too much of Doughty's cooking, I expect," said Mrs Mason.

Hornblower knew already, without a word spoken, that the women were jealous of Doughty and ill at ease in his presence. Doughty had served the rich and the great; Doughty knew of fancy ways of cooking; Doughty wanted money to bring the cabin stores of the *Hotspur* up to his own fastidious standards; Doughty (in the women's minds, at least) was probably supercilious about Driver's Alley and the family his captain had married into.

"I can't abide that Doughty," said Maria — the word spoken now.

"He's harmless enough, my dear," said Hornblower.

"Harmless!" Mrs Mason said only that one word, but Demosthenes could not have put more vituperation into a whole Philippic; and yet, when the landlady came in to clear the table, Mrs Mason contrived to be at her loftiest.

As the landlady left the room Hornblower's instincts guided him into an action of which he was actually unconscious. He threw up the window and drew the icy evening air deep into his lungs.

"You'll give him his death!" said Maria's voice, and Hornblower swung round, surprised.

Maria had snatched up little Horatio from his cradle and stood clasping him to her bosom, a lioness defending her cub from the manifest and well-known perils of the night air.

"I beg your pardon, dear," said Hornblower. "I can't imagine what I was thinking of."

He knew perfectly well that little babies should be kept in stuffy heated rooms, and he was full of genuine contrition regarding little Horatio. But as he turned back and pulled the window shut again his mind was dwelling on the Blackstones and the Little Girls, on bleak harsh days and dangerous nights, on a deck that he could call his own. He was ready to go to sea again.

Chapter 18

With the coming of spring a new liveliness developed in the blockade of Brest. In every French port during the winter there had been much building of flat-bottomed boats. The French army, two hundred thousand strong, was still poised on the Channel coast, waiting for its chance to invade, and it needed gun-boats by the thousand to ferry it over when that chance should come. But the invasion coast from Boulogne to Ostend could not supply one-tenth, one-hundredth of the vessels needed; these had to be built whenever there were facilities, and then had to be moved along the coast to the assembling area.

To Hornblower's mind Bonaparte — the Emperor Napoleon, as he was beginning to call himself — was displaying a certain confusion of ideas in adopting this course of action. Seamen and shipbuilding materials

were scarce enough in France; it was absurd to waste them on invasion craft when invasion was impossible without a covering fleet, and when the French navy was too small to provide such a fleet. Lord St Vincent had raised an appreciative smile throughout the Royal Navy when he had said in the House of Lords regarding the French army, 'I do not say they cannot come. I only say they cannot come by sea.' The jest had called up a ludicrous picture in everyone's mind of Bonaparte trying to transport an invading army by Montgolfier balloons, and the impossibility of such an attempt underlined the impossibility of the French building up a fleet strong enough to command the Channel even long enough for the gun-boats to row across.

It was only by the time summer was far advanced that Hornblower fully understood Bonaparte's quandary. Bonaparte had to persist in this ridiculous venture, wasting the substance of his empire on ships and landing-craft even though a sensible man might well write off the whole project and devote his resources to some more profitable scheme. But to do so would be an admission that England was impregnable, could never be conquered, and such an admission would not only hearten his potential Continental enemies but would have a most unsettling effect on the French people themselves. He was simply compelled to continue along this road, to go on building his ships and his gun-boats to make the world believe there was a likelihood that England would soon be overthrown, leaving him dominant everywhere on earth, lord of the whole human race.

And there was always chance, even if it were not one chance in ten or one chance in a hundred, but one in a million. Some extraordinary, unpredictable combination of good fortune, of British mismanagement, of weather, and of political circumstances might give him the week he needed to get his army across. If the odds were enormous at least the stakes were fantastic. In itself that might appeal to a gambler like Bonaparte even without the force of circumstance to drive him on.

So the flat-bottomed boats were built at every little fishing-village along the coast of France, and they crept from their pieces of origin towards the great military camp of Boulogne, keeping to the shallows, moving by oar more than by sail, sheltering when necessary under the coastal batteries, each boat manned by fifty soldiers and a couple of seamen. And because Bonaparte was moving these craft, the Royal Navy felt bound to interfere with the movement as far as possible.

That was how it came about that *Hotspur* found herself momentarily detached from the Channel Fleet and forming a part of a small squadron under the orders of Chambers of the *Naiad* operating to the northward of Ushant, which was doing its best to prevent the passage of half a dozen gun-boats along the wild and rocky shore of Northern Brittany.

"Signal from the Commodore, sir," reported Foreman.

Chambers spent a great deal of time signalling to his little squadron.

"Well?" asked Hornblower; Foreman was referring to his signal book.

"Take station within sight bearing east nor'east, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Foreman. Acknowledge. Mr Bush, we'll square away."

A pleasant day, with gentle winds from the south east, and occasional white clouds coursing over a blue sky. Overside the sea was green and clear, and two miles off on the beam was the coast with its white breakers; the chart showed strange names, Aber Wrack and Aber Benoit, which told of the relationship between the Breton tongue and Welsh. Hornblower divided his attention between the *Naiad* and the coast as *Hotspur* ran down before the wind, and he experienced something of the miser's feeling at some depletion of his gold. It might be necessary to go off like this to leeward, but every hour so spent might call for a day of beating back to windward. The decisive strategical point was outside Brest where lay the French ships of the line, not here where the little gun-boats were making their perilous passage.

"You may bring-to again, Mr Bush."

"Aye aye, sir."

They were now so far from *Naiad* that it would call for a sharp eye and a good glass to read her signals.

"We're the terrier at the rat hole, sir," said Bush, coming back to Hornblower as soon as *Hotspur* had lain-to with her main-topsail to the mast.

"Exactly," agreed Hornblower.

"Boats are cleared away ready to launch, sir."

"Thank you."

They might have to dash in to attack the gun-boats when they came creeping along, just outside the surf.

"Commodore's signalling, sir," reported Foreman again. "Oh, it's for the lugger, sir."

"There she goes!" said Bush.

The small armed lugger was moving in towards the shore.

"That's the ferret going down the hole, Mr Bush," said Hornblower, unwontedly conversational.

"Yes, sir. There's a gun! There's another!"

They could hear the reports, borne on the wind, and could see the gusts of smoke.

"Is there a battery there, sir?"

"Maybe. Maybe the gun-boats are using their own cannon."

Each gun-boat mounted one or two heavy guns in the bows, but they laboured under the disadvantage that half a dozen discharges racked the little vessels to pieces by the recoil. The theory behind those guns was that they were to be used for clearing the beaches of defending troops where the invasion should take place and the gun-boats should be safely beached.

"Can't make out what's happening," fumed Bush; a low headland cut off their view.

"Firing's heavy," said Hornblower. "Must be a battery there."

He felt irritated; the Navy was expending lives and material on an objective quite valueless, in his opinion. He beat his gloved hands together in an effort to restore their warmth, for there was an appreciable chilliness in the wind.

"What's that?" exclaimed Bush, excitedly training his telescope. "Look at that, sir! Dismasted, by God!"

Just visible round the point now was a shape that could not instantly be recognized. It was the lugger, drifting disabled and helpless. Everything about the situation indicated that she had run into a well-planned ambush.

"They're still firing at her, sir," remarked Prowse. The telescope just revealed the splashes round her as cannonball plunged into the sea.

"We'll have to save her," said Hornblower, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. "Square away, if you please, Mr Prowse, and we'll run down."

It was extremely irritating to have to go into danger like this, to redeem someone else's mismanagement of an expedition unjustified from the start.

"Mr Bush, get a cable out aft ready to tow."

"Aye eye, sir."

"Commodore's signalling, sir." This was Foreman speaking. "Our number. 'Assist damaged vessel'."

"Acknowledge."

Chambers had ordered that signal before he could see that *Hotspur* was already on the move.

Hornblower scanned the shore on this side of the headland. There was no gun-smoke on this side, no sign of any battery. With luck all he would have to do was to haul the lugger round the corner. Down in the waist the voices of Bush and Wise were urging a working party to their utmost efforts as they took the ponderous cable aft. Things were happening fast, as they always did at crises. A shot screamed overhead as Hornblower reached for the speaking-trumpet.

"*Grasshopper*! Stand by to take a line!"

Somebody in the disabled lugger waved a handkerchief in acknowledgement.

"Back the main-tops'l, Mr Prowse, and we'll go down to her."

That was when the *Grasshopper* disintegrated, blew apart, in two loud explosions and a cloud of smoke. It happened right under Hornblower's eyes, as he leaned over with his speaking-trumpet; one second there was the intact hull of the lugger, with living men working on the wreckage, and the next the smoking explosions, the flying fragments, the billowing smoke. It must have been a shell from the shore; there were howitzers or mortars mounted there. Most likely a field howitzer battery, light and easily moved across country, which had been brought up to protect the gunboats. A shell must have dropped into the lugger and burst in the magazine.

Hornblower had seen it all, and when the cloud of smoke dispersed the bow and stern did not disappear from sight. They were floating water-logged on the surface, and Hornblower could see a few living figures as well, clinging to the wreckage among the fragments.

"Lower the quarter-boat! Mr Young, go and pick up those men."

This was worse than ever. Shell fire was a horrible menace to a wooden ship that could so easily be set into an inextinguishable blaze. It was utterly infuriating to be exposed to these perils for no profit. The quarter-boat was on its way back when the next shell screamed overhead. Hornblower recognized the difference in the sound from that of a round-shot; he should have done so earlier. A shell from a howitzer had a belt about it, a thickening in the centre which gave its flight, as it arched across the sky, the peculiarly malevolent note he had already heard.

It was the French army that was firing at them. To fight the French navy was the essence of *Hotspur's* duty, and of his own but to expose precious ships and seamen to the attack of soldiers who cost almost nothing to a government that enforced conscription was bad business, and to expose them without a chance of firing back was sheer folly. Hornblower drummed on the hammock cloths over the netting in front of him with his gloved hands in a fury of bad temper, while Young rowed about the wreckage picking up the survivors. A glance ashore coincided with the appearance of a puff of white smoke. That was one of the howitzers at least — before the wind dispersed it he could clearly see the initial upward direction of the puff; howitzers found their best range at an angle of fifty degrees, and at the end of their trajectory the shells-dropped at sixty degrees. This one was behind a low bank, or in some sort of ditch; his glass revealed an officer standing above it directing the operation of the gun at his feet.

Now came the shriek of the shell, not so far overhead; even the fountain of water that it threw up when it plunged into the sea was different in shape and duration from those flung up by round-shot from a cannon. Young brought the quarter-boat under the falls and hooked on; Bush had his men ready to tail away at the tackles, while Hornblower watched the operation and fumed at every second of delay. Most of the survivors picked up were wounded, some of them dreadfully. He would have to go and see they were properly attended to — he would have to pay a visit of courtesy — but not until *Hotspur* were safely out of this unnecessary peril. "Very well, Mr Prowse. Bring her before the wind."

The yards creaked round; the quartermaster spun the wheel round into firm resistance, and *Hotspur* slowly gathered way, to leave this hateful coast behind her. Next came a sudden succession of noises, all loud, all different, distinguishable even though not two seconds elapsed between the first and the last — the shriek of a shell, a crash of timber aloft, a deep note as the main-topmast backstay parted, a thud against the hammock nettings beside Hornblower, and then a thump three yards from his feet, and there on the deck death, sizzling death, was rolling towards him and as the ship heaved death changed its course with the canting of the deck in a blundering curve as the belt round the shell deflected its roll. Hornblower saw the tiny thread of smoke, the burning fuse one-eighth of an inch long. No time to think. He sprang at it as it wobbled on its belt, and with his gloved hand he extinguished the fuse, rubbing at it to make sure the spark was out, rubbing at it again unnecessarily before he straightened up. A marine was standing by and Hornblower gestured to him.

"Throw the damned thing overboard!" he ordered; the fact that he swore indicated his bad temper.

Then he looked round. Every soul on that crowded little quarter-deck was rigid, posed in unnatural attitudes, as if some Gorgon's head had turned them all into stone, and then with his voice and his gesture they all came back to life again, to move and relax — it was as if time had momentarily stood still for everyone except himself. His bad temper was fanned by the delay, and he lashed out with his tongue indiscriminately.

"What are you all thinking about? Quartermaster, put your helm over! Mr Bush! Just look at that mizzen tops'l yard! Send the hands aloft this minute! Splice that backstay! You, there! Haven't you coiled those falls yet? Move, damn you!"

"Aye aye, sir! Aye aye, sir!"

The automatic chorus of acknowledgements had a strange note, and in the midst of the bustle Hornblower saw first Bush from one angle and then Prowse from another, both looking at him with strange expressions on their faces.

"What's the matter with you?" he blazed out, and with the last word understanding came to him.

That extinguishing of the fuse appeared to them in monstrous disproportion, as something heroic, even perhaps as something magnificent. They did not see it in its true light as the obvious thing to do, indeed the only thing to do; nor did they know of the instinctive flash of action that had followed his observation of that remaining one-eighth of an inch of fuse. All there was to his credit was that he had seen and acted quicker than they. He had not been brave, and most certainly not heroic.

He returned the glance of his subordinates, and with all his senses still keyed up to the highest pitch he realized that this was the moment of the conception of a legend, that the wildest tales would be told later about this incident, and he was suddenly hideously embarrassed. He laughed, and before the laugh was finished he knew it was a self-conscious laugh, the motiveless laugh of an idiot, and he was angrier than ever with himself and with Chambers of the *Naiad* and with the whole world. He wanted to be away from all this, back in the approaches to Brest doing his proper work and not engaged in these hare-brained actions that did not forward the defeat of Bonaparte an iota.

Then another thought struck him, occasioned by the discovery that the fuse had burned a hole in his right hand glove. Those were the gloves Maria had given him on that dark morning when he had walked with her from the George to take *Hotspur* to sea.

Chapter 19

In the Iroise, comfortably sheltered with the wind to the east of south, *Hotspur* was completing her stores again. This was the second time since her refitting in Plymouth that she had gone through this laborious process, refilling her casks from the water-hoys, replacing the empty beef and pork barrels from the victuallers, and coaxing all the small stores she could from the itinerant slop-ship that Cornwallis had put into commission. She had been six months continuously at sea, and was now ready for three more.

Hornblower watched with something of relief the slop-ship bearing away; that six months at sea had barely been sufficient to get his ship clear of all the plagues that had come on board at Plymouth; disease, bed bugs, fleas and lice. The bed bugs had been the worst; they had been hunted from one hiding place in the woodwork to another, scorched with smouldering oakum, walled in with the paint, time after time, and each time that he had thought he had extirpated the pests some unfortunate seaman would approach his division officer and with a knuckling of his forehead would report, "Please, sir, I think I've got 'em this time."

He had seven letters from Maria to read — he had opened the last one already to make sure that she and little Horatio were well — and he had already completed this task when Bush came knocking at his door. Sitting at the chart-table Hornblower listened to what Bush had to report; trifles, only, and Hornblower wondered at Bush disturbing his captain about them. Then Bush produced something from his side pocket, and Hornblower, with a sigh, knew what had been the real object of this visit. It was the latest number of the *Naval Chronicle*, come on board with the mail; the wardroom mess subscribed to it jointly. Bush thumbed through the pages, and then laid the open magazine before him, a gnarled finger indicating the passage he had found. It only took Hornblower a couple of minutes to read it; Chambers' report to Cornwallis on the affray off Aber Wrack, which apparently had been published in the Gazette to inform the public regarding the circumstances in which *Grasshopper* had been lost. Bush's finger pointed again to the last four lines. 'Captain Hornblower informs me that *Hotspur* suffered no casualties although she was struck by a five-inch shell which did considerable damage aloft but which fortunately failed to explode.'

"Well, Mr Bush?" Hornblower put a stern lack of sympathy in his voice to warn Bush as much as he could.

"It isn't right, sir."

This routine of serving so close to home had serious disadvantages. It meant that in only two or three months the fleet would be reading what had appeared in the Gazette and the newspapers, and it was extraordinary how touchy men were about what was written about them. It could well be subversive of discipline, and Hornblower meant to deal with that possibility from the start.

"Would you kindly explain, Mr Bush?"

Bush was not to be deterred. He blunderingly repeated himself. "It isn't right, sir."

"Not right? Do you mean that it wasn't a five-inch shell?"

"No, sir. It . . ."

"Do you imply that it didn't do considerable damage aloft?"

"Of course it did, sir, but . . ."

"Perhaps you're implying that the shell really did explode?"

"Oh no, sir. I . . ."

"Then I fail to see what you are taking exception to, Mr Bush."

It was highly unpleasant to be cutting and sarcastic with Mr Bush, but it had to be done. Yet Bush was being unusually obstinate.

"'T'isn't right, sir. 'T'isn't fair. 'T'isn't fair to you, sir, or the ship."

"Nonsense, Mr Bush. What d'you think we are? Actresses? Politicians? We're King's officers, Mr Bush, with a duty to do, and no thought to spare for anything else. Never speak to me again like this, if you please, Mr Bush."

And there was Bush looking at him with bewildered eyes and still stubborn.

"'T'isn't fair, sir," he repeated.

"Didn't you hear my order, Mr Bush? I want to hear no more about this. Please leave this cabin at once."

It was horrible to see Bush shamle out of the cabin, hurt and depressed. The trouble with Bush was that he had no imagination; he could not envisage the other side. Hornblower could — he could see before his eyes at that moment the words he would have written if Bush had had his way. 'The shell fell on the deck and with my own hands I extinguished the fuse when it was about to explode.' He could never have written such a sentence. He could never have sought for public esteem by writing it. Moreover, and more important, he would scorn the esteem of a public who could tolerate a man who would write such words. If by some chance his deeds did not speak for themselves he would never speak for them. The very possibility revolted him, and he told himself that this was not a matter of personal taste, but a well-weighed decision based on the good of the service; and in that respect he was displaying no more imagination than Bush.

Then he caught himself up short. This was all lies, all self-deception, refusal to face the truth. He had just flattered himself that he had more imagination than Bush; more imagination, perhaps, but far less courage. Bush knew nothing of the sick horror, the terrible moment of fear which Hornblower had experienced when that shell dropped. Bush did not know how his admired captain had had a moment's vivid mental picture of being blown into bloody rags by the explosion, how his heart had almost ceased to beat — the heart of a coward. Bush did not know the meaning of fear, and he could not credit his captain with that knowledge either. And so Bush would never know why Hornblower had made so light of the incident of the shell, and why he had been so irascible when it was discussed. But Hornblower knew, and would know, whenever he could bring himself to face facts.

There were orders being bellowed on the quarter-deck, a rush of bare feet over the planking, a clatter of ropes against woodwork, and *Hotspur* was beginning to lean over on a new course. Hornblower was at the cabin door bent on finding out what was the meaning of this activity which he had not ordered, when he found himself face to face with Young.

"Signal from the Flag, sir. '*Hotspur* report to Commander-in-chief'."

"Thank you."

On the quarter-deck Bush touched his hat.

"I put the ship about as soon as we read the signal, sir," he explained.

"Very good, Mr Bush."

When a commander-in-chief demanded the presence of a ship no time was to be wasted even to inform the captain.

"I acknowledged the signal, sir."

"Very good, Mr Bush."

Hotspur was turning her stern to Brest; with the wind comfortably over her quarter she was running out to sea, away from France. For the commander-in-chief to demand the attendance of his farthest outpost must be of significance. He had summoned the ship, not merely the captain. There must be something more in the wind than this gentle breeze.

Bush called the crew to attention to render passing honours to Parker's flagship, the flagship of the Inshore Squadron.

"Hope he has as good a ship as us to replace us, sir," said Bush, who evidently had the same feeling as Hornblower, to the effect that the departure was only the beginning of a long absence from the Iroise.

"No doubt," said Hornblower. He was glad that Bush was bearing no malice for his recent dressing-down. Of course this sudden break in routine was a stimulant in itself, but Hornblower in a moment of insight realized that Bush, after a lifetime of being subject to the vagaries of wind and weather, could manage to be fatalistic about the unpredictable vagaries of his captain.

This was the open sea; this was the wide Atlantic, and there on the horizon was a long line of topsails in rigid order — the Channel Fleet, whose men and whose guns prevented Bonaparte from hoisting the Tricolor over Windsor Castle.

"Our number from the Commander-in-Chief, sir. 'Pass within hail'."

"Acknowledge. Mr Prowse, take a bearing, if you please."

A pleasant little problem, to set a course wasting as little time as possible, with *Hibernia* close-hauled under easy sail and *Hotspur* running free under all plain sail. It was a small sop to Prowse's pride to consult him, for Hornblower had every intention of carrying out the manoeuvre by eye alone. His orders to the wheel laid *Hotspur* on a steadily converging course.

"Mr Bush, stand by to bring the ship to the wind."

"Aye aye, sir."

A big frigate was foaming along in *Hibernia*'s wake. Hornblower looked and looked again. That was the *Indefatigable*, once Pellew's famous frigate — the ship in which he had served during those exciting years as midshipman. He had no idea she had joined the Channel Fleet. The three frigates astern of *Indefatigable* he knew at once; *Medusa*, *Lively*, *Amphion*, all veterans of the Channel Fleet. Bunting soared up *Hibernia*'s halliards.

"'All captains,' sir!"

"Clear away the quarter-boat, Mr Bush!"

It was another example of how good a servant Doughty was, that he appeared on the quarter-deck with sword and boat cloak within seconds of that signal being read. It was highly desirable to shove off in the boat at least as quickly as the boats from the frigates, even though it meant that Hornblower had to spend longer pitching and tossing in the boat while his betters went up *Hibernia*'s side before him, but the thought that all this presaged some new and urgent action sustained Hornblower in the ordeal.

In the cabin of the *Hibernia* there was only one introduction to be made, of Hornblower to Captain Graham Moore of the *Indefatigable*. Moore was a strikingly handsome burly Scotsman; Hornblower had heard somewhere that he was the brother of Sir John Moore, the most promising general in the army. The others he knew, Gore of the *Medusa*, Hammond of the *Lively*, Sutton of the *Amphion*. Cornwallis sat with his back to the great stern window, with Collins on his left, and the five captains seated facing him.

"No need to waste time, gentlemen," said Cornwallis abruptly. "Captain Moore has brought me despatches from London and we must act on them promptly."

Even though he began with these words he spent a second or two rolling his kindly blue eyes along the row of captains, before he plunged into his explanations.

"Our Ambassador at Madrid —" he went on, and that name made them all stir in their seats; ever since the outbreak of war the Navy had been expecting Spain to resume her old role of ally to France.

Cornwallis spoke lucidly although rapidly. British agents in Madrid had discovered the content of the secret clauses of the treaty of San Ildefonso between France and Spain; the discovery had confirmed long cherished suspicions. By those clauses Spain was bound to declare war on England whenever requested by France, and until that request was made she was bound to pay a million francs a month into the French treasury.

"A million francs a month in gold and silver, gentlemen," said Cornwallis.

Bonaparte was in constant need of cash for his war expenses; Spain could supply it thanks to her mines in Mexico and Peru. Every month waggon-loads of bullion climbed the Pyrenean passes to enter France. Every year a Spanish squadron bore the products of the mines from America to Cadiz.

"The next *flota* is expected this autumn, gentlemen," said Cornwallis. "Usually it brings about four millions of dollars for the Crown, and about the same amount on private account."

Eight millions of dollars, and the Spanish silver dollar was worth, in an England cursed by paper currency, a full seven shillings. Nearly three million pounds.

"The treasure that is not sent to Bonaparte," said Cornwallis, "will largely go towards re-equipping the Spanish navy, which can be employed against England whenever Bonaparte chooses. So you can understand why it is desirable that the *flota* shall not reach Cadiz this year."

"So it's war, sir?" asked Moore, but Cornwallis shook his head.

"No. I am sending a squadron to intercept the *flota*, and I expect you've already guessed that it is your ships that I'm sending, gentlemen. But it is not war. Captain Moore, the senior officer, will be instructed to request the Spaniards to alter course and enter an English port. There the treasure will be removed and the ships set free. The treasure will not be seized. It will be retained by His Majesty's Government as a pledge, to be returned to His Most Catholic Majesty on the conclusion of a general peace."

"What ships are they, sir?"

"Frigates. Ships of war. Three frigates, sometimes four."

"Commanded by Spanish naval officers, sir?"

"Yes."

"They'll never agree, sir. They'll never violate their orders just because we tell 'em to."

Cornwallis rolled his eyes up to the deck-beams above and then down again.

"You will have written orders to compel them."

"Then we'll have to fight them, sir?"

"If they are so foolish as to resist."

"And that will be war, sir."

"Yes. His Majesty's Government is of the opinion that Spain without eight million dollars is less dangerous as an open enemy than she would be as a secret enemy with that money available. Is the situation perfectly clear now, gentlemen?"

It was instantly obvious. It could be grasped even more quickly than the problem in simple mental arithmetic could be solved. Prize money; one-quarter of three million pounds for the captains — something approaching eight hundred thousand pounds each. An enormous fortune; with that sum a captain could buy a landed estate and still have sufficient left over to provide an income on which to live in dignity when invested in the Funds. Hornblower could see that every one of the four other captains was working out that problem too.

"I see you all understand, gentlemen. Captain Moore will issue his orders to you to take effect in case of separation, and he will make his own plans to effect the interception. Captain Hornblower —" every eye came round — "will proceed immediately in *Hotspur* to Cadiz to obtain the latest information from His Britannic Majesty's Consul there, before joining you at the position selected by Captain Moore. Captain Hornblower, will you be kind enough to stay behind after these gentlemen have left?"

It was an extremely polite dismissal of the other four, whom Collins led away to receive their orders, leaving Hornblower face to face with Cornwallis. Cornwallis's blue eyes, as far as Hornblower knew, were always kindly, but apart from that they were generally remarkably expressionless. As an exception, this time they had an amused twinkle.

"You've never made a penny of prize money in your life, have you Hornblower?" asked Cornwallis.

"No, sir."

"It seems likely enough that you will make several pennies now."

"You expect the Dons to fight, sir?"

"Don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Only a fool would think otherwise, and you're no fool, Hornblower."

An ingratiating man would say "Thank you, sir," to that speech, but Hornblower would do nothing to ingratiate himself.

"Can we fight Spain as well as France, sir?"

"I think we can. Are you more interested in the war than in prize money, Hornblower?"

"Of course, sir."

Collins was back in the cabin again, listening to the conversation.

"You've done well in the war so far, Hornblower," said Cornwallis. "You're on the way towards making a name for yourself."

"Thank you, sir." He could say that this time, because a name was nothing.

"You have no interest at Court, I understand? No friends in the Cabinet? Or in the Admiralty?"

"No, sir."

"It's a long, long step from Commander to Captain, Hornblower."

"Yes, sir."

"You've no young gentlemen with you in *Hotspur*, either."

"No, sir."

Practically every captain in the Navy had several boys of good family on board, rated as volunteers or as servants, learning to be sea officers. Most families had a younger son to be disposed of, and this was as good a way as any. Accepting such a charge was profitable to the captain in many ways, but particularly because by conferring such a favour he could expect some reciprocal favour from the family. A captain could even make a monetary profit, and frequently did, by appropriating the volunteer's meagre pay and doling out pocket money instead.

"Why not?" asked Cornwallis.

"When we were commissioned I was sent four volunteers from the Naval Academy, sir. And since then I have not had time."

The main reason why young gentlemen from the Naval Academy — King's Letter Boys — were detested by captains was because of this very matter; their presence cut down on the number of volunteers by whom the captain could benefit.

"You were unfortunate," said Cornwallis.

"Yes, sir."

"Excuse me, sir," said Collins, breaking in on the conversation. "Here are your orders, captain, regarding your conduct in Cadiz. You will of course receive additional orders from Captain Moore."

"Thank you, sir."

Cornwallis still had time for a moment more of gossip.

"You were fortunate the day *Grasshopper* was lost that that shell did not explode, were you not, Hornblower?"

"Yes, sir."

"It is quite unbelievable," said Collins, adding his contribution to the conversation, "what a hot bed of gossip a fleet can be. The wildest tales are circulating regarding that shell."

He was looking narrowly at Hornblower, and Hornblower looked straight back at him in defiance.

"You can't hold me responsible for that, sir," he said.

"Of course not," interposed Cornwallis, soothingly. "Well, may good fortune always go with you, Hornblower."

Chapter 20

Hornblower came back on board *Hotspur* in a positively cheerful state of mind. There was the imminent prospect of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds in prize money. That ought to satisfy Mrs Mason, and Hornblower found it possible not to dwell too long on the picture of Maria as chatelaine of a country estate. He could avoid that subject by thinking about the immediate future, a visit to Cadiz, a diplomatic contact, and then the adventure of intercepting a Spanish treasure fleet in the broad Atlantic. And if that were not sufficiently ample food for pleasant day dreams, he could recall his conversation with Cornwallis. A Commander-in-Chief in home waters had small power of promotion, but surely his recommendations might have weight. Perhaps — ?

Bush, with his hand to his hat, welcoming him aboard again, was not smiling. He was wearing a worried, anxious look.

"What is it, Mr Bush?" asked Hornblower.

"Something you won't like, sir."

Were his dreams to prove baseless? Had *Hotspur* sprung some incurable leak?

"What is it?" Hornblower bit back at the "damn you" that he nearly said.

"Your servant's under arrest for mutiny, sir," Hornblower could only stare as Bush went on. "He struck his superior officer."

Hornblower could not show his astonishment or his distress. He kept his face set like stone.

"Signal from the Commodore, sir!" This was Foreman breaking in. "Our number. 'Send boat'."

"Acknowledge. Mr Orrock! Take the boat over at once."

Moore in the *Indefatigable* had already hoisted the broad pendant that marked him as officer commanding a squadron. The frigates were still hove-to, clustered together. There were enough captains there to constitute a general court martial, with power to hang Doughty that very afternoon.

"Now, Mr Bush, come and tell me what you know about this."

The starboard side of the quarter-deck was instantly vacated as Hornblower and Bush walked towards it.

Private conversation was as possible there as anywhere in the little ship.

"As far as I can tell, sir," said Bush, "it was like this —"

Taking stores on board at sea was a job for all hands, and even when they were on board there was still work for all hands, distributing the stores through the ship. Doughty, in the working-party in the waist, had demurred on being given an order by a bos'n's mate, Mayne by name. Mayne had swung his 'starter', his length of knotted line that petty officers used on every necessary occasion — too frequently, in Hornblower's judgement. And then Doughty had struck him. There were twenty witnesses, and if that were not enough, Mayne's lip was cut against his teeth and blood poured down.

"Mayne's always been something of a bully, sir," said Bush. "But this —"

"Yes," said Hornblower.

He knew the Twenty-Second Article of War by heart. The first half dealt with striking a superior officer; the second half with quarrelling and disobedience. And the first half ended with the words 'shall suffer death'; there were no mitigating words like 'or such less punishment'. Blood had been drawn and witnesses had seen it. Even so, some petty officers in the give and take of heavy labour on board ship might have dealt with the situation unofficially, but not Mayne.

"Where's Doughty now?" he asked.

"In irons, sir." That was the only possible answer.

"Orders from the Commodore, sir!" Orrock was hastening along the deck towards them, waving a sealed letter which Hornblower accepted.

Doughty could wait; orders could not. Hornblower thought of returning to his cabin to read them at leisure, but a captain had no leisure. As he broke the seal Bush and Orrock withdrew to give him what little privacy was possible when every idle eye in the ship was turned on him. The opening sentence was plain enough and definite enough.

'Sir,

You are requested and required to proceed immediately in HM Sloop *Hotspur* under your command to the port of Cadiz.'

The second paragraph required him to execute at Cadiz the orders he had received from the Commander-in-Chief. The third and last paragraph named a rendezvous, a latitude and longitude as well as a distance and bearing from Cape St Vincent, and required him to proceed there 'with the utmost expedition' as soon as he carried out his orders for Cadiz.

He re-read, unnecessarily, the opening paragraph. There was the word 'immediately'.

"Mr Bush! Set all plain sail. Mr Prowse! A course to weather Finisterre as quickly as possible, if you please. Mr Foreman, signal to the Commodore. '*Hotspur* to *Indefatigable*. Request permission to proceed'."

Only time for one pacing of the quarter-deck, up and down, and then "'Commodore to *Hotspur*. Affirmative'."

"Thank you, Mr Foreman. Up helm, Mr Bush. Course sou'west by south."

"Sou'west by south. Aye aye sir."

Hotspur came round, and as every sail began to fill she gathered way rapidly.

"Course sou'west by south, sir," said Prowse, breathlessly returning.

"Thank you, Mr Prowse."

The wind was just abaft the beam, and *Hotspur* foamed along as sweating hands at the braces trimmed the yards to an angle that exactly satisfied Bush's careful eye.

"Set the royals, Mr Bush. And we'll have the stuns'l booms rigged out, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hotspur lay over to the wind, not in any spineless fashion, but in the way in which a good sword-blade bends under pressure. A squadron of ships of the line lay just down to leeward, and *Hotspur* tore past them, rendering passing honours as she did so. Hornblower could imagine the feelings of envy in the breasts of the hands over there at the sight of this dashing little sloop racing off towards adventure. But in that case they did not allow for a year and half spent among the rocks and shoals of the Iroise.

"Set the stuns'ls, sir?" asked Bush.

"Yes, if you please, Mr Bush. Mr Young, what d'you get from the log?"

"Nine, sir. A little more, perhaps — nine an' a quarter."

Nine knots, and the studding sails not yet set. This was exhilarating, marvellous, after months of confinement.

"The old lady hasn't forgotten how to run, sir," said Bush, grinning all over his face with the same emotions; and Bush did not know yet that they were going to seek eight million dollars. Nor — and at that moment all Hornblower's pleasure suddenly evaporated.

He fell from the heights to the depths like a man falling from the main royal yard. He had forgotten until then all about Doughty. That word 'immediately' in Moore's orders had prolonged Doughty's life. With all those captains available, and the Commander-in-Chief at hand to confirm the sentence, Doughty could have been court-martialled and condemned within the hour. He could be dead by now; certainly he would have died tomorrow morning. The captains in the Channel Fleet would be unmerciful to a mutineer.

Now he had to handle the matter himself. There was no desperate emergency; there was no question of a conspiracy to be quelled. He did not have to use his emergency powers to hang Doughty. But he could foresee a dreary future of Doughty in irons and all the ship's company aware they had a man in their midst destined for the rope. That would unsettle everyone. And Hornblower would be more unsettled than anyone else — except perhaps Doughty. Hornblower sickened at the thought of hanging Doughty. He knew at once that he had grown fond of him. He felt an actual respect for Doughty's devotion and attention to duty; along with his tireless attention Doughty had developed skills in making his captain comfortable comparable with those of a tarry-fingered salt making long splices.

Hornblower battled with his misery. For the thousandth time in his life he decided that the King's service was like a vampire, as hateful as it was seductive. He could not think what to do. But first he had to know more about the business.

"Mr Bush, would you be kind enough to order the master-at-arms to bring Doughty to me in my cabin?"

"Aye aye, sir."

The clank of iron; that was what heralded Doughty's arrival at the cabin door, with gyves upon his wrists.

"Very well, master-at-arms. You can wait outside."

Doughty's hard blue eyes looked straight into his.

"Well?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm sorry to put you out like this."

"What the hell did you do it for?"

There had always been a current of feeling — as Hornblower had guessed — between Mayne and Doughty. Mayne had ordered Doughty to do some specially dirty work, at this moment when Doughty wished to preserve his hands clean to serve his captain's dinner. Doughty's protest had been the instant occasion for Mayne to wind his starter.

"I — I couldn't take a blow, sir. I suppose I've been too long with gentlemen."

Among gentlemen a blow could only be wiped out in blood; among the lower orders a blow was something to be received without even a word. Hornblower was captain of his ship, with powers almost unlimited. He could tell Mayne to shut his mouth; he could order Doughty's irons to be struck off, and the whole incident forgotten. Forgotten? Allow the crew to think that petty officers could be struck back with impunity? Allow the crew to think that their captain had favourites?

"Damn it all!" raved Hornblower, pounding on the chartroom table.

"I could train someone to take my place, sir," said Doughty, "before — before . . ."

Even Doughty could not say those words.

"No! No! No!" It was utterly impossible to have Doughty circulating about the ship with every morbid eye upon him.

"You might try Bailey, sir, the gun-room steward. He's the best of a bad lot."

"Yes."

It made matters no easier to find Doughty still so co-operative. And then there was a glimmer of light, the faintest hint of a possibility of a solution less unsatisfactory than the others. They were three hundred leagues and more from Cadiz, but they had a fair wind.

"You'll have to await your trial. Master-at-arms! Take this man away. You needn't keep him in irons, and I'll give orders about his exercise."

"Good-bye, sir."

It was horrible to see Doughty retaining the unmoved countenance so carefully cultivated as a servant, and yet to know that it concealed a dreadful anxiety. Hornblower had to forget about it, somehow. He had to come on deck with *Hotspur* flying along with every inch of canvas spread racing over the sea like a thoroughbred horse at last given his head after long restraint. The dark shadow might not be forgotten, but at least it could be lightened under this blue sky with the flying white clouds, and by the rainbows of spray thrown up by the bows, as they tore across the Bay of Biscay on a mission all the more exciting to the ship's company in that they could not guess what it might be.

There was the distraction — the counter irritation — of submitting to the clumsy ministrations of Bailey, brought up from the gun-room mess. There was the satisfaction of making a neat landfall off Cape Ortegal, and flying along the Biscay coast just within sight of the harbour of Ferrol, where Hornblower had spent weary months in captivity — he tried vainly to make out the Dientes del Diablo where he had earned his freedom — and then rounding the far corner of Europe and setting a fresh course, with the wind miraculously still serving, as they plunged along, close-hauled now, to weather Cape Roca.

There was a night when the wind backed round and blew foul but gently, with Hornblower out of bed a dozen times, fuming with impatience when *Hotspur* had to go on the port tack and head directly out from the land, but then came the wonderful dawn with the wind coming from the south west in gentle puffs, and then from the westward in a strong breeze that just allowed studding sails to be spread as *Hotspur* reached southward to make a noon position with Cape Roca just out of sight to leeward.

That meant another broken night for Hornblower to make the vital chance of course off Cape St Vincent so as to head, with the wind comfortably over *Hotspur's* port quarter and every stitch of canvas still spread, direct for Cadiz. In the afternoon, with *Hotspur* still flying along at a speed often reaching eleven knots, the look-out reported a blur of land, low-lying, fine on the port bow, as the coast-wise shipping — hastily raising neutral Portuguese and Spanish colours at sight of this British ship of war — grew thicker. Ten minutes later another hail from the masthead told that the landfall was perfect, and ten minutes after that Hornblower's telescope, trained fine on the starboard bow, could pick up the gleaming white of the city of Cadiz.

Hornblower should have been pleased at his achievement, but as ever there was no time for self-congratulation. There were the preparations to be made to ask permission of the Spanish authorities to enter the port; there was the excitement of the prospect of getting into touch with the British representative; and — now or never — there was the decision to be reached regarding his plan for Doughty. The thought of Doughty had nagged at him during these glorious days of spread canvas, coming to distract him from his day-dreams of wealth and promotion, to divert him from his plans regarding his behaviour in Cadiz. It was like the bye-plots in Shakespeare's plays, rising continually from the depths to assume momentarily equal importance with the development of the main plot.

Yet, as Hornblower had already admitted to himself, it was now or never. He had to decide and to act at this very minute; earlier would have been premature, and later would be too late. He had risked death often enough in the King's service; perhaps the service owed him a life in return — a threadbare justification, and he forced himself to admit to mere self-indulgence as he finally made up his mind. He shut up his telescope with the same fierce decision that he had closed with the enemy in the Goulet.

"Pass the word for my steward," he said. No one could guess that the man who spoke such empty words was contemplating a grave dereliction from duty.

Bailey, all knees and elbows, with the figure of a youth despite his years, put his hand to his forehead in salute to his captain, within sight, and (more important) within earshot of a dozen individuals on the quarter-deck. "I expect His Majesty's Consul to sup with me tonight," said Hornblower. "I want something special to offer him."

"Well, sir —" said Bailey, which was exactly what, and all, Hornblower had expected him to say.

"Speak up, now," rasped Hornblower.

"I don't exactly know, sir," said Bailey. He had suffered already from Hornblower's irascibility — unplanned, during these last days, but lucky now.

"Damn it, man. Let's have some ideas."

"There's a cut of cold beef, sir —"

"Cold beef? For His Majesty's Consul? Nonsense."

Hornblower took a turn up the deck in deep thought, and then wheeled back again.

"Mr Bush! I'll have to have Doughty released from confinement this evening. This ninny's no use to me. See that he reports to me in my cabin the moment I have time to spare."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Very well, Bailey. Get below. Now, Mr Bush, kindly clear away number one carronade starboard side for the salutes. And isn't that the *guarda costa* lugger lying-to for us there?"

The sun declining towards the west bathed the white buildings of Cadiz to a romantic pink as *Hotspur* headed in, and as health officers and naval officers and military officers came on board to see that Cadiz was guarded against infection and violations of her neutrality. Hornblower put his Spanish to use — rusty now, as he had not spoken Spanish since the last war, and more awkward still because of his recent use of French — but despite its rustiness very helpful during the formalities, while *Hotspur* under topsails glided in towards the entrance to the bay, so well remembered despite the years that had passed since his last visit in the *Indefatigable*.

The evening breeze carried the sound of the salutes round the bay, as *Hotspur's* carronade spoke out and Santa Catalina replied, and while the Spanish pilot guided *Hotspur* between the Pigs and the Sows — Hornblower had a suspicion that the Pigs were Sea Pigs, Porpoises, in Spanish — and the hands stood by to take in sail and drop anchor. There were ships of war lying at anchor already in the bay, and not the Spanish navy, whose masts and yards Hornblower could just make out in the inner harbours.

"Estados Unidos," said the Spanish naval officer, with a gesture towards the nearer frigate. Hornblower saw the Stars and Stripes, and the broad pendant at the main-topmast-head.

"Mr Bush! Stand by to render passing honours."

"*Constitution*. Commodore Preble," added a Spanish officer.

The Americans were fighting a war of their own, at Tripoli far up the Mediterranean; and presumably this Preble — Hornblower could not be sure of the exact name as he heard it — was the latest of a series of American commanders-in-chief. Drums beat and men lined the side and hats were lifted in salute as *Hotspur* wept by.

"French frigate *Félicité*," went on the Spanish officer, indicating the other ship of war.

Twenty-two ports on a side — one of the big French frigates, but there was no need to pay her further attention. As enemies in a neutral harbour they would ignore each other, cut each other dead, as gentlemen would do if by unlucky chance they met in the interval between the challenge and the duel. Lucky that he did not have to give her further thought, too, seeing that the sight of the *Constitution* was causing modification in his other plans — the bye plot was intruding on the main plot again.

"You can anchor here, Captain," said the Spanish officer.

"Helm-a-lee! Mr Bush!"

Hotspur rounded-to, her topsails were taken in with commendable rapidity, and the anchor cable roared out through the hawse. It was as well that the operation went through faultlessly, seeing that it was carried out under the eyes of the navies of three other nations. A flat report echoed round the bay.

"Sunset gun! Take in the colours, Mr Bush."

The Spanish officers were standing formally in line, hats in hand, as they bowed their farewells. Hornblower put on his politest manner and took off his hat with his politest bow as he thanked them and escorted them to the side.

"Here comes your consul already," said the naval officer just before he went down.

In the gathering darkness a rowing skiff was heading out to them from the town, and Hornblower almost cut his final farewell short as he tried to recall what honours should be paid to a consul coming on board after sunset. The western sky was blood red, and the breeze dropped, and here in a bay it seemed breathless and stifling after the airy delights of the Atlantic. And now he had to deal with secrets of state and with Doughty. Recapitulating his worries to himself revived another one. There would now be a break in his letters to Maria; it might be months before she heard from him again, and she would fear the worst. But there was no time to waste in thinking. He had to act instantly.

Chapter 21

With the wind dropping *Hotspur* had swung to her anchors, and now from the stern window of the chart-room USS *Constitution* was visible, revealed by her lights as she rode idly in slack water.

"If you please, sir," asked Doughty, as respectful as ever, "what is this place?"

"Cadiz," replied Hornblower; his surprise was only momentary at the ignorance of a prisoner immured below — it was possible that some even of the crew still did not know. He pointed through the cabin window. "And that's an American frigate, the *Constitution*."

"Yes, sir."

Until Hornblower had seen the *Constitution* at anchor he had been visualizing a drab future for Doughty, as a penniless refugee on the waterfront at Cadiz, not daring to ship as a hand before the mast in some merchant ship for fear of being pressed and recognized, starving at worst as a beggar, at best as a soldier enlisted in the ragged Spanish army. A better future than the rope, all the same. Now there was a better one still. Ships of war never had enough men, even if Preble did not need a good steward.

Bailey came in from the cabin with the last bottle of claret.

"Doughty will decant that," said Hornblower. "And Doughty, see that those glasses are properly clean. I want them to sparkle."

"Yes, sir."

"Bailey, get for'ard to the galley. See that there's a clear fire ready for the marrow bones."

"Aye aye, sir."

It was as simple as that as long as each move was well-timed. Doughty applied himself to decanting the claret while Bailey bustled out.

"By the way, Doughty, can you swim?"

Doughty did not raise his head.

"Yes, sir," his voice was hardly more than a whisper. "Thank you, sir."

Now the expected knock on the door.

"Boat's coming alongside, sir!"

"Very well, I'll come."

Hornblower hurried out on to the quarter-deck and down the gangway to greet the visitor. Darkness had fallen and Cadiz Bay was quite placid, like a dark mirror.

Mr Carron wasted no time; he hurried aft ahead of Hornblower with strides that equalled Hornblower's at his hastiest. When he sat in a chair in the chart-room he seemed to fill the little place completely, for he was a big heavily built man. He mopped his forehead with his handkerchief and then readjusted his wig.

"A glass of claret, sir?"

"Thank you." Mr Carron still wasted no time, plunging into business while Hornblower filled the glasses.

"You're from the Channel Fleet?"

"Yes, sir, under orders from Admiral Cornwallis."

"You know about the situation then. You know about the *flota*?" Carron dropped his voice at the last words.

"Yes, sir. I'm here to take back the latest news to the frigate squadron."

"They'll have to act. Madrid shows no sign of yielding."

"Very well, sir."

"Godoy's terrified of Boney. The country doesn't want to fight England but Godoy would rather fight than offend him."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sure they're only waiting for the *flota* to arrive and then Spain will declare war. Boney wants to use the Spanish navy to help out his scheme for invading England."

"Yes, sir."

"Not that the Dons will be much help to him. There isn't a ship here ready for sea. But there's the *Félicité* here. Forty-four guns. You saw her, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"She'll warn the *flota* if she gets an inkling of what's in the wind."

"Of course, sir."

"My last news is less than three days old. The courier had a good journey from Madrid. Godoy doesn't know yet that we've found out about the secret clauses in the treaty of San Ildefonso, but he'll guess soon enough by the stiffening of our attitude."

"Yes, sir."

"So the sooner you get away the better. Here's the despatch for the officer commanding the intercepting squadron. I prepared it as soon as I saw you coming into the Bay."

"Thank you, sir. He's Captain Graham Moore in the *Indefatigable*."

Hornblower put the despatch into his pocket. He had been aware for some time of sounds and subdued voices from the cabin next door, and he guessed the reason. Now there was a knock and Bush's face appeared round the door.

"One moment, please, Mr Bush. You ought to know I'm busy. Yes, Mr Carron?"

Bush was the only man in the ship who would dare to intrude at that moment, and he only if he thought the matter urgent.

"You had better leave within the hour."

"Yes, sir. I was hoping you might sup with me this evening."

"Duty before pleasure, although I thank you. I'll cross the bay now and make the arrangements with the Spanish authorities. The land breeze will start to make before long, and that will take you out."

"Yes, sir."

"Make every preparation for weighing anchor. You know of the twenty-four hour rule?"

"Yes, sir."

Under the rules of neutrality a ship of one contending nation could not leave a neutral harbour until one whole day after the exit of a ship of another contending nation.

"The Dons may not enforce it on the *Félicité*, but they'll certainly enforce it on you if you give them the opportunity. Two-thirds of *Félicité*'s crew are in the taverns of Cadiz at this moment, so you must take your chance now. I'll be here to remind the Dons about the twenty-four hour rule if she tries to follow you. I might delay her at least. The Dons don't want to offend us while the *flota*'s still at sea."

"Yes, sir. I understand. Thank you, sir."

Carron was already rising to his feet, with Hornblower following his example.

"Call the Consul's boat," said Hornblower as they emerged on to the quarter-deck, Bush still had something to say, but Hornblower still ignored him.

And even when Carron had left there was still an order for Bush with which to distract him.

"I want the small bower hove in, Mr Bush, and heave short on the best bower."

"Aye aye, sir. If you please, sir —"

"I want this done in silence, Mr Bush. No pipes, no orders that *Félicité* can hear. Station two safe men at the capstan with old canvas to muffle the capstan pawls. I don't want a sound."

"Aye aye, sir. But —"

"Go and attend to that yourself personally, if you please, Mr Bush."

No one else dare intrude on the captain as he strode the quarter-deck in the warm night. Nor was it long before the pilot came on board; Carron had certainly succeeded in hastening the slow process of the Spanish official mind. Topsails sheeted home, anchor broken out, *Hotspur* glided slowly down the bay again before the first gentle puffs of the nightly land breeze, with Hornblower narrowly watching the pilot. It might be a solution of the Spaniard's problem if *Hotspur* were to take the ground as she went to sea, and Hornblower determined that should not happen. It was only after the pilot had left them and *Hotspur* was standing out to the south westward that he had a moment to spare for Bush.

"Sir! Doughty's gone."

"Gone?"

It was too dark on the quarter-deck for Hornblower's face to be seen, and he tried his best to make his voice sound natural.

"Yes, sir. He must have nipped out of the stern window of your cabin, sir. Then he could have lowered himself into the water by the rudder-pintles, right under the counter where no-one could see him, and then he must have swum for it, sir."

"I'm extremely angry about this, Mr Bush. Somebody will smart for it."

"Well, sir —"

"Well, Mr Bush?"

"It seems you left him alone in the cabin when the Consul came on board, sir. That's when he took his chance."

"You mean it's my fault, Mr Bush?"

"Well, yes, sir, if you want to put it that way."

"M'm. Maybe you're right, even if I do say it." Hornblower paused, still trying to be natural. "God, that's an infuriating thing to happen. I'm angry with myself. I can't think how I came to be so foolish."

"I expect you had a lot on your mind, sir."

It was distasteful to hear Bush standing up for his captain in the face of his captain's self-condemnation.

"There's just no excuse for me. I'll never forgive myself."

"I'll mark him as 'R' on the ship's muster, sir."

"Yes. You'd better do that."

Cryptic initials in the ship's muster rolls told various stories — 'D' for 'discharged', 'D D' for 'dead', and 'R' for 'run' — deserted.

"But there's some good news, too, Mr Bush. In accordance with my orders I must tell you, Mr Bush, in case of something happening to me, but none of what I'm going to say is to leak out to the ship's company."

"Of course, sir."

Treasure; prize money, doubloons and dollars. A Spanish treasure fleet. If there were anything that could take Bush's mind off the subject of Doughty's escape from justice it was this.

"It'll be millions, sir!" said Bush.

"Yes. Millions."

The seamen in the five ships would share one quarter of the prize money — the same sum as would be divided between five captains — and that would mean six hundred pounds a man. Lieutenants and masters and captains of marines would divide one eighth. Fifteen thousand pounds for Bush, at a rough estimate.

"A fortune, sir!"

Hornblower's share would be ten of those fortunes.

"Do you remember, sir, the last time we captured a *flota*? Back in '99, I think it was, sir. Some our Jacks when they got their prize money bought gold watches an' *fried* 'em on Gosport Hard, just to show how rich they were."

"Well, you can sleep on it, Mr Bush, as I'm going to try to do. But remember, not a word to a soul."

"No, sir. Of course not, sir."

The project might still fail. The *flota* might evade capture and escape into Cadiz; it might have turned back; it might never have sailed. Then it would be best if the Spanish government — and the world at large — did not know that such an attempt had ever been contemplated.

These thoughts, and these figures, should have been stimulating, exciting, pleasant, but tonight, to Hornblower, they were nothing of the sort. They were Dead Sea fruit, turning to ashes in the mouth. Hornblower snapped at Bailey and dismissed him; then he sat on his cot, too low spirited even to be cheered by the swaying of the cot under his seat to tell him that *Hotspur* was at sea again, bound on a mission of excitement and profit. He sat with drooping head, deep in depression. He had lost his integrity, and that meant he had lost his self-respect. In his life he had made mistakes, whose memory could still make him writhe, but this time he had done far more. He had committed a breach of duty. He had connived at — he had actually contrived — the escape of a deserter, of a criminal. He had violated his sworn oath, and he had done so from mere personal reasons, out of sheer self-indulgence. Not for the good of the service, not for his country's cause, but because he was a soft-hearted sentimentalist. He was ashamed of himself, and the shame was all the more acute when his pitiless self-analysis brought up the conviction that, if he could relive those past hours, he would do the same again.

There were no excuses. The one he had used, that the Service owed him a life after all the perils he had run, was nonsense. The mitigating circumstance that discipline would not suffer, thanks to the new exciting mission, was of no weight. He was a self-condemned traitor; worse still, he was a plausible one, who had carried through his scheme with deft neatness that marked the born conspirator. That first word he had thought of was the correct one; integrity, and he had lost it. Hornblower mourned over his lost integrity like Niobe over her dead children.

Chapter 22

Captain Graham Moore's orders for the disposition of the frigate squadron so as to intercept the *flota* were so apt that they received even Hornblower's grudging approval. The five ships were strung out on a line north and south to the limit of visibility. With fifteen miles between ships and with the northernmost and southernmost ships looking out to their respective horizons a stretch of sea ninety miles wide could be covered. During daylight they beat or ran towards America; during the night they retraced their course towards Europe, so that if by misfortune the *flota* should reach the line in darkness the interval during which it could be detected would be by that much prolonged. The dawn position was to be in the longitude of Cape St Vincent — 9° west — and the sunset position was to be as far to the west of that as circumstances should indicate as desirable.

For this business of detecting the needle of the *flota* in the haystack of the Atlantic was a little more simple than might appear at first sight. The first point was that by the cumbrous law of Spain the *flota* had to discharge its cargo at Cadiz, and nowhere else. The second point was that the direction of the wind was a strong indication of the point of the compass from which the *flota* might appear. The third point was that the *flota*, after a long sea passage, was likely to be uncertain of its longitude; by sextant it could be reasonably sure of its latitude, and could be counted on to run the final stages of its course along the latitude of Cadiz — 36° 30' north — so as to make sure of avoiding the Portuguese coast on the one hand and the African coast on the other.

So that in the centre of the British line, squarely on latitude 36° 30' north, lay the Commodore in the *Indefatigable*, with the other ships lying due north and due south of him. A flag signal by day or a rocket by night would warn every ship in the line of the approach of the *flota*, and it should not be difficult for the squadron to concentrate rapidly upon the signalling ship, a hundred and fifty miles out from Cadiz with plenty of time and space available to enforce their demands.

An hour before dawn Hornblower came out on deck, as he had done every two hours during the night — and every two hours during all the preceding nights as well. It had been a clear night and it was still clear now.

"Wind nor'east by north, sir," reported Prowse. "St Vincent bearing due north about five leagues."

A moderate breeze; all sail to the royals could be carried, although the *Hotspur* was under topsails, stealing along close-hauled on the port tack. Hornblower trained his telescope over the starboard beam, due south, in the direction where *Medusa* should be, next in line; *Hotspur*, as befitted her small importance, was the

northernmost ship, at the point where it was least likely for the *flota* to appear. It was not quite light enough yet for *Medusa* to be visible.

"Mr Foreman, get aloft, if you please, with your signal book."

Of course every officer and man in *Hotspur* must be puzzled about this daily routine, this constant surveillance of a single stretch of water. Ingenious minds might even guess the true objective of the squadron. That could not be helped.

"There she is, sir!" said Prowse. "Beating sou' by west. We're a little ahead of station."

"Back the mizzen tops'l, if you please."

They might be as much as a couple of miles ahead of station — not too unsatisfactory after a long night. It was easy enough to drop back to regain the exact bearing, due north from *Medusa*.

"Deck, there!" Foreman was hailing from the main-topmast-head. "*Medusa's* signalling. 'Commodore to all ships'."

Medusa was relaying the signal from *Indefatigable* out of sight to the southward.

"Wear ship," went on Foreman. "Course west. Topsails."

"Mr Cheeseman, kindly acknowledge."

Cheeseman was the second signal officer, learning his trade as Foreman's deputy. "Send the hands to the braces, Mr Prowse."

It must be a gratifying experience for Moore to manoeuvre a line of ships sixty miles long by sending up and hauling down flags.

"Deck!" There was a different tone in Foreman's voice, not the tone of matter of fact routine. "Sail in sight on the port bow, nearly to windward, sir. Coming down before the wind, fast."

Hotspur was still waiting for *Medusa's* signal to come down to indicate the exact moment to wear.

"What do you make of her, Mr Foreman?"

"She's a ship of war, sir. She's a frigate. She looks French to me, sir. She might be the *Félicité*, sir."

She might well be the *Félicité*, coming out from Cadiz. By now word could easily have reached Cadiz regarding the British cordon out at sea. *Félicité* would come out; she could warn, and divert, the *flota*, if she could get past the British line. Or she could hang about on the horizon until the *flota* should appear, and then interfere with the negotiations. Bonaparte could make great play in the *Moniteur* regarding the heroic French navy coming to the aid of an oppressed neutral fleet. And *Félicité's* presence might have great weight in the scale should it come to a fight; a large French frigate and four large Spanish ones against one large British frigate, three small ones, and a sloop.

"I'll get aloft and have a look at her myself, sir." This was Bush, in the right place at the right time as usual. He ran up the ratlines with the agility of any seaman.

"Signal's down, sir!" yelled Foreman.

Hotspur should put up her helm at this moment, for all five ships to wear together.

"No, Mr Prowse. We'll wait."

On the horizon *Medusa* wore round. Now she was before the wind, increasing her distance rapidly from *Hotspur* on the opposite course.

"That's *Félicité* for certain, sir!" called Bush.

"Thank you, Mr Bush. Kindly come down at once. Drummer! Beat to quarters. Clear for action. Mr Cheeseman, send this signal. 'Have sighted French frigate to windward'."

"Aye aye, sir. *Medusa's* going out of sight fast."

"Hoist it, anyway."

Bush had descended like lightning, to exchange glances for one moment with Hornblower before hurrying off to supervise clearing for action. For that moment there was an inquiring look in his eye. He alone in the ship beside Hornblower knew the objective of the British squadron. If *Hotspur* was parted from the other ships when the *flota* should be sighted she would lose her share of the prize money. But prize money was only one factor; the *flota* was a primary objective. *Hotspur* would disregard *Medusa's* signals and turn aside from the objective at her peril — at Hornblower's peril. And Bush knew, too, the disparity of force between *Hotspur* and *Félicité*. A battle broadside to broadside could only end with half *Hotspur's* crew dead and the other half prisoners of war.

"*Medusa*'s out of sight, sir. She hasn't acknowledged." This was Foreman, still aloft.

"Very well, Mr Foreman. You can come down,"

"You can see her from the deck, sir," said Prowse.

"Yes." Right on the horizon the Frenchman's topsails and topgallants were plainly in view. Hornblower found it a little difficult to keep them steady in the field of the telescope. He was pulsing with excitement; he could only hope that his face did not reveal him to be as anxious and worried as he felt.

"Cleared for action, sir," reported Bush.

The guns were run out, the excited guns' crews at their stations.

"She's hauled her wind!" exclaimed Prowse.

"Ah!"

Félicité had come round on the starboard tack, heading to allow *Hotspur* to pass far astern of her. She was declining battle.

"Isn't he going to fight?" exclaimed Bush.

Hornblower's tensions were easing a little with this proof of the accuracy of his judgement. He had headed for *Félicité* with the intention of engaging in a scrambling long range duel. He had hoped to shoot away enough of the *Félicité*'s spars to cripple her so that she would be delayed in her mission of warning the *flota*. And the Frenchman had paralleled his thoughts. He did not want to risk injury with his mission not accomplished.

"Put the ship about, if you please, Mr Prowse."

Hotspur tacked like a machine.

"Full and bye!"

Now she headed to cross *Félicité*'s bows on a sharply converging course. The Frenchman, in declining battle, had it in mind to slip round the flank of the British line so as to escape in the open sea and join the Spaniards ahead of the British, and Hornblower was heading him off. Hornblower watched the topsails on the horizon, and saw them swing.

"He's turning away!"

Much good that would do him. Far, far beyond the topsails was a faint blue line on the horizon, the bold coast of Southern Portugal.

"He won't weather St Vincent on that course," said Prowse.

Lagos, St Vincent, Sagres; all great names in the history of the sea, and that jutting headland would just baulk *Félicité* in her attempt to evade action. She would have to fight soon, and Hornblower was visualizing the kind of battle it would be.

"Mr Bush!"

"Sir!"

"I want two guns to bear directly astern. You'll have to cut away the transoms aft. Get to work at once."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Bush."

Sailing ships were always hampered in the matter of firing directly ahead or astern; no satisfactory solution of the difficult had ever been found. Guns were generally so useful on the broadside that they were wasted on the ends of the ship, and ship construction had acknowledged the fact. Now the cry for the carpenter's crew presaged abandoning all the advantages that had been wrung from these circumstances by shipbuilders through the centuries. *Hotspur* was weakening herself in exchange for a momentary advantage in a rare situation. Under his feet Hornblower felt the crack of timber and the vibration of saws at work.

"Send the gunner aft. He'll have to rig tackles and breechings before the guns are moved."

The blue line of the coast was now much more sharply defined; the towering headland of St Vincent was in plain view. And *Félicité* was hull-up now, the long, long, line of guns along her side clearly visible, run out and ready for action. Her main-topsail was a-shiver, and she was rounding-to. Now she was challenging action, offering battle.

"Up helm, Mr Prowse. Back the main-tops'l."

Every minute gained was of value. *Hotspur* rounded-to as well. Hornblower had no intention of fighting a hopeless battle; if the Frenchman could wait he could wait as well. With this gentle breeze and moderate sea *Hotspur* held an advantage over the bigger French ship which was not lightly to be thrown away. *Hotspur* and

Félicité eyed each other like two pugilists just stepping into the ring. It was such a beautiful day of blue sky and blue sea; it was a lovely world which he might be leaving soon. The rumble of gun trucks told him that one gun-carriage at least was being moved into position, and yet at this minute somehow he thought of Maria and of little Horatio — madness; he put that thought instantly out of his mind.

The seconds crept by; perhaps the French captain was holding a council of war on his quarter-deck; perhaps he was merely hesitating, unable to reach a decision at this moment when the fate of nations hung in the balance.

"Message from Mr Bush, sir. One gun run out ready for action, sir. The other one in five minutes."

"Thank you, Mr Orrock. Tell Mr Bush to station the two best gun-layers there."

Félicité's main-topsail was filling again.

"Hands to the braces!"

Hotspur stood in towards her enemy. Hornblower would not yield an inch of sea room unnecessarily.

"Helm a-weather!"

That was very long cannon shot as *Hotspur* wore round. *Félicité's* bow was pointing straight at her; *Hotspur's* stern was turned squarely to her enemy, the ships exactly in line.

"Tell Mr Bush to open fire!"

Even before the message could have reached him Bush down below had acted. There was the bang-bang of the guns, the smoke bursting out under the counter, eddying up over the quarter-deck with the following wind. Nothing visible to Hornblower's straining eye at the telescope; only the beautiful lines of *Félicité's* bows, her sharply-steeved bowsprit, her gleaming canvas. The rumble of the gun-trucks underfoot as the guns were run out again. Bang! Hornblower saw it. Standing right above the gun, looking straight along the line of flight, he saw the projectile, a lazy pencil mark against the white and blue, up and then down, before the smoke blew forward. Surely that was a hit. The smoke prevented his seeing the second shot.

The long British nine-pounder was the best gun in the service as far as precision went. The bore was notoriously true, and the shot could be more accurately cast than the larger projectiles. And even a nine-pounder shot, flying at a thousand feet a second, could deal lusty blows. Bang! The Frenchman would be unhappy at receiving this sort of punishment without hitting back.

"Look at that!" said Prowse.

Félicité's fore-staysail was out of shape, flapping in the wind; it was hard to see at first glance what had happened.

"His fore-stay's parted, sir," decided Prowse.

That Prowse was correct was shown a moment later when *Félicité* took in the fore-staysail. The loss of the sail itself made little difference, but the fore-stay was a most important item in the elaborate system of checks and balances (like a French constitution before Bonaparte seized power) which kept a ship's masts in position under the pressure of the sails.

"Mr Orrock, run below and say 'Well done' to Mr Bush."

Bang! As the smoke eddied Hornblower saw *Félicité* round-to, and as her broadside presented itself to his sight it vanished in a great bank of leaping smoke. There was the horrid howl of a passing cannon-ball somewhere near; there were two jets of water from the surface of the sea, one on each quarter, and that was all Hornblower saw or heard of the broadside. An excited crew, firing from a wheeling ship, could not be expected to do better than that, even with twenty-two guns.

A ragged cheer went up from *Hotspur's* crew, and Hornblower, turning, saw that every idle hand was craning out of the gun-ports, peering aft at the Frenchman. He could hardly object to that, but when he turned back to look at *Félicité* again he saw enough to set the men hurriedly at work. The Frenchman had not yawed merely to fire her broadside; she was hove-to, mizzen topsail to the mast, in order to splice the fore-stay. Lying like that, her guns would not bear. But not a second was to be lost, with *Hotspur* before the wind and the range increasing almost irretrievably.

"Stand by your guns to port! Hands to the braces! Hard-a-starboard!"

Hotspur wore sweetly round on to the port-tack. She was on *Félicité's* port quarter where not a French gun would bear. Bush came running from aft to keep his eye on the port-side guns; he strode along from gun to gun, making sure by eye that elevation and training were correct as *Hotspur* fired her broadside into her

hapless enemy. Very long range, but some of those shots must have caused damage. Hornblower watched the bearing of *Félicité* altering as *Hotspur* drew astern of her.

"Stand-by to go about after the next broadside!"

The nine guns roared out, and the smoke was still eddying in the waist as *Hotspur* tacked.

"Starboard side guns!"

Excited men raced across the deck to aim and train; another broadside, but *Félicité*'s mizzen topsail was wheeling round.

"Helm a-weather!"

By the time the harassed Frenchman had come before the wind again *Hotspur* had anticipated her; both ships were again in line and Bush was racing aft to supervise the fire of the stern chasers once more. This was revenge for the action with the *Loire* so long ago. In this moderate breeze and smooth sea the handy sloop held every advantage over the big frigate; what had gone on up to now was only a sample of what was to continue all through that hungry weary day of golden sun and blue sea and billowing powder smoke.

The leeward position that *Hotspur* held was a most decided advantage. To leeward over the horizon lay the British squadron; the Frenchman dared not chase her for long in that direction, lest he find himself trapped between the wind and overwhelming hostile strength. Moreover the Frenchman had a mission to perform; he was anxious to find and warn the Spanish Squadron, yet when he had won for himself enough sea room to weather St Vincent and to turn away his teasing little enemy hung on to him, firing into his battered stern, shooting holes in his sails, cutting away his running rigging.

During that long day *Félicité* fired many broadsides, all at long range, and generally badly aimed as *Hotspur* wheeled away out of the line of fire. And during all that long day Hornblower stood on his quarter-deck, watching the shifts of the wind, rapping out his orders, handling his little ship with unremitting care and inexhaustible ingenuity. Occasionally a shot from *Félicité* struck home; under Hornblower's very eyes an eighteen-pounder ball came in through a gun-port and struck down five men into a bloody heaving mass. Yet until long after noon *Hotspur* evaded major damage, while the wind backed round southerly and the sun crept slowly round to the west. With the shifting of the wind his position was growing more precarious, and with the passage of time fatigue was numbing his mind.

At a long three-quarters of a mile *Félicité* at last scored an important hit, one hit out of the broadside she fired as she yawed widely off her course. There was a crash aloft, and Hornblower looked up to see the main yard sagging in two halves, shot clean through close to the centre, each half hanging in the slings at its own drunken angle, threatening, each of them, to come falling like an arrow down through the deck. It was a novel and cogent problem to deal with, to study the dangling menaces and to give the correct helm order that set the sails a-shiver and relieved the strain.

"Mr Wise! Take all the men you need and secure that wreckage!"

Then he could put his glass again to his aching eye to see what *Félicité* intended to do. She could force a close action if she took instant advantage of the opportunity. He would have to fight now to the last gasp. But the glass revealed something different, something he had to look at a second time before he could trust his swimming brain and his weary eye. *Félicité* had filled away. With every sail drawing she was reaching towards the sunset. She had turned tail and was flying for the horizon away from the pest which had plagued all the spirit out of her in nine continuous hours of battle.

The hands saw it, they saw her go, and someone raised a cheer which ran raggedly along the deck. There were grins and smiles which revealed teeth strangely white against the powder blackened faces. Bush came up from the waist, powder blackened like the others.

"Sir!" he said. "I don't know how to congratulate you."

"Thank you, Mr Bush. You can keep your eye on Wise. There's the two spare stuns'l booms — fish the main yard with those."

"Aye aye, sir."

Despite the blackening of his features, despite the fatigue that even Bush could not conceal, there was that curious expression in Bush's face again, inquiring, admiring, surprised. He was bursting with things that he wanted to say. It called for an obvious effort of will on Bush's part to turn away without saying them; Hornblower fired a parting shot at Bush's receding back.

"I want the ship ready for action again before sunset, Mr Bush."

Gurney the Gunner was reporting.

"We've fired away all the top tier of powder, sir, an' we're well into the second tier. That's a ton an' a half of powder. Five tons of shot, sir. We used every cartridge; my mates are sewing new ones now."

The carpenter next, and then Hufnell the purser and Wallis the surgeon; arrangements to feed the living, and arrangements to bury the dead.

The dead whom he had known so well; there was a bitter regret and a deep sense of personal loss as Wallis read the names. Good seamen and bad seamen, alive this morning and now gone from this world, because he had done his duty. He must not think along those lines at all. It was a hard service to which he belonged, hard and pitiless like steel, like flying cannon-shot.

At nine o'clock at night Hornblower sat down to the first food he had eaten since the night before, and as he submitted to Bailey's clumsy ministrations, he thought once more about Doughty, and from Doughty he went on — the step was perfectly natural — to think about eight million Spanish dollars in prize money. His weary mind was purged of the thought of sin. He did not have to class himself with the cheating captains he had heard about, with the peculating officers he had known. He could grant himself absolution; grudging absolution.

Chapter 23

With her battered sides and her fished main yard, *Hotspur* beat her way back towards the rendezvous appointed in case of separation. Even in this pleasant latitude of Southern Europe winter was asserting itself. The nights were cold and the wind blew chill, and *Hotspur* had to ride out a gale for twenty-four hours as she tossed about; St Vincent, bearing north fifteen leagues, was the place of rendezvous, but there was no sign of the frigate squadron. Hornblower paced the deck as he tried to reach a decision, as he calculated how far off to leeward the recent gale might have blown *Indefatigable* and her colleagues, and as he debated what his duty demanded he should do next. Bush eyed him from a distance as he paced; even though he was in the secret regarding the *flota* he knew better than to intrude. Then at last came the hail from the mast-head.

"Sail ho! Sail to windward! Deck, there! There's another. Looks like a fleet, sir."

Now Bush could join Hornblower.

"I expect that's the frigates, sir."

"Maybe." Hornblower hailed the main-topmast-head. "How many sail now?"

"Eight, sir. Sir, they look like ships of the line, some of them, sir. Yes, sir, a three-decker an' some two-deckers." A squadron of ships of the line, heading for Cadiz. They might possibly be French — fragments of Bonaparte's navy sometimes evaded blockade. In that case it was his duty to identify them, risking capture. Most likely they were British, and Hornblower had a momentary misgiving as to what their presence would imply in that case.

"We'll stand towards them, Mr Bush. Mr Foreman! Hoist the private signal."

There were the topsails showing now, six ships of the line ploughing along in line ahead, a frigate out on either flank.

"Leading ship answers 264, sir. That's the private signal for this week."

"Very well. Make our number."

Today's grey sea and grey sky seemed to reflect the depression that was settling over Hornblower's spirits.

"*Dreadnought*, sir. Admiral Parker. His flag's flying."

So Parker had been detached from the fleet off Ushant; Hornblower's unpleasant conviction was growing.

"Flag to *Hotspur*, sir. 'Captain come on board'."

"Thank you, Mr Foreman. Mr Bush, call away the quarter boat."

Parker gave an impression of greyness like the weather when Hornblower was led aft to *Dreadnought's* quarter-deck. His eyes and his hair and even his face (in contrast with the swarthy faces round him) were of a

neutral grey. But he was smartly dressed, so that Hornblower felt something of a ragamuffin in his presence, wishing, too, that this morning's shave had been more effective.

"What are you doing here, Captain Hornblower?"

"I am on the rendezvous appointed for Captain Moore's squadron, sir."

"Captain Moore's in England by this time."

The news left Hornblower unmoved, for it was what he was expecting to hear, but he had to make an answer.

"Indeed, sir?"

"You haven't heard the news?"

"I've heard nothing for a week, sir."

"Moore captured the Spanish treasure fleet. Where were you?"

"I had an encounter with a French frigate, sir."

A glance at *Hotspur* lying hove-to on the *Dreadnought's* beam could take in the fished main-yard and the raw patches on her sides.

"You missed a fortune in prize money."

"So I should think, sir."

"Six million dollars. The Dons fought, and one of their frigates blew up with all hands before the others surrendered."

In a ship in action drill and discipline had to be perfect; a moment's carelessness on the part of a powder boy or a gun loader could lead to disaster. Hornblower's thoughts on this subject prevented him this time from making even a conversational reply, and Parker went on without waiting for one.

"So it's war with Spain. The Dons will declare war as soon as they hear the news — they probably have done so already. This squadron is detached from the Channel Fleet to begin the blockade of Cadiz."

"Yes, sir."

"You had better return north after Moore. Report to the Channel Fleet off Ushant for further orders."

"Aye aye, sir."

The cold grey eyes betrayed not the least flicker of humanity. A farmer would look at a cow with far more interest than this Admiral looked at a Commander.

"A good journey to you, Captain."

"Thank you, sir."

The wind was well to the north of west; *Hotspur* would have to stand far out to weather St Vincent, and farther out still to make sure of weathering Cape Roca. Parker and his ships had a fair wind for Cadiz and although Hornblower gave his orders the moment he reached the deck they were over the horizon almost as soon as *Hotspur* had hoisted in her boat and had settled down on the starboard tack, close-hauled, to begin the voyage back to Ushant. And as she plunged to the seas that met her starboard bow there was something additional to be heard and felt about her motion. As each wave crest reached her, and she began to put her bows down, there was a sudden dull noise and momentary little shock through the fabric of the ship, to be repeated when she had completed her descent and began to rise again. Twice for every wave this happened, so that ear and mind came to expect it at each rise and fall. It was the fished main-yard, splinted between the two spare studding sail booms. However tightly the trapping was strained that held the joint together, a little play remained, and the ponderous yardarms settled backward and forward with a thump, twice with every wave, until mind and ear grew weary of its ceaseless monotony.

It was on the second day that Bailey provided a moment's distraction for Hornblower while *Hotspur* still reached out into the Atlantic to gain her offing.

"This was in the pocket of your nightshirt, sir. I found it when I was going to wash it."

It was a folded piece of paper with a note written on it, and that note must have been written the evening that *Hotspur* lay in Cadiz Bay — Bailey clearly did not believe in too frequent washing of nightshirts.

Sir -

The Cabin Stores are short of Capers and Cayenne.

Thank you, Sir. Thank you, Sir.

Your Humble obedient Servant

Hornblower crumpled the paper in his hand. It was painful to be reminded of the Doughty incident. This must be the very last of it.

"Did you read this, Bailey?"

"No, sir. I'm no scholar, sir."

That was the standard reply of an illiterate in the Royal Navy, but Hornblower was not satisfied until he had taken a glance at the ship's muster rolls and seen the 'X' against Bailey's name. Most Scotsmen could read and write — it was fortunate that Bailey was an exception.

So *Hotspur* continued close-hauled, first on the starboard tack and then on the port, carrying sail very tenderly on her wounded main-yard, while she made her way northward over the grey Atlantic until at last she weathered Finisterre and could run two points free straight for Ushant along the hypotenuse of the Bay of Biscay. It snowed on New Year's Eve just as it had snowed last New Year's Eve when *Hotspur* had balked Bonaparte's attempted invasion of Ireland. It was raining and bleak, and thick weather closely limited the horizon when *Hotspur* attained the latitude of Ushant and groped her way slowly forward in search of the Channel Fleet. The *Thunderer* loomed up in the mist and passed her on to the *Majestic*, and the *Majestic* passed her on until the welcome word "*Hibernia*" came back in reply to Bush's hail. There was only a small delay while the news of *Hotspur*'s arrival was conveyed below to the Admiral before the next hail came; Collins's voice, clearly recognizable despite the speaking-trumpet.

"Captain Hornblower?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you kindly come aboard?"

Hornblower was ready this time, so closely shaved that his cheeks were raw, his best coat on, two copies of his report in his pocket.

Cornwallis was shivering, huddled in a chair in his cabin, a thick shawl over his shoulders and another over his knees, and presumably with a hot bottle under his feet. With his shawls and his wig he looked like some old woman until he looked up with his china blue eyes.

"Now what in the world have you been up to this time, Hornblower?"

"I have my report here, sir."

"Give it to Collins. Now tell me."

Hornblower gave the facts as briefly as he could.

"Moore was furious at your parting company, but I think he'll excuse you when he hears about this. *Medusa* never acknowledged your signal?"

"No, sir."

"You did quite right in hanging on to *Félicité*. I'll endorse your report to that effect. Moore ought to be glad that there was one ship fewer to share his prize money."

"I'm sure he didn't give that a thought, sir."

"I expect you're right. But you, Hornblower. You could have turned a blind eye to the *Félicité* — there's a precedent in the Navy for turning a blind eye. Then you could have stayed with Moore and shared the prize money."

"If *Félicité* had escaped round Cape St Vincent there might not have been any prize money, sir."

"I see. I quite understand." The blue eyes had a twinkle. "I put you in the way of wealth and you disdain it."

"Hardly that, sir."

It was a sudden revelation to Hornblower that Cornwallis had deliberately selected him and *Hotspur* to accompany Moore and share the prize money. Every ship must have been eager to go; conceivably this was a reward for months of vigilance in the Goulet.

Now Collins entered the conversation.

"How are your stores?"

"I've plenty, sir. Food and water for sixty more days on full rations."

"What about your powder and shot?" Collin' tapped his finger on Hornblower's report, which he had been reading.

"I've enough for another engagement, sir."

"And your ship?"

"We've plugged the shot holes, sir. We can carry sail on the main-yard as long as it doesn't blow too strong." Cornwallis spoke again.

"Would it break your heart if you went back to Plymouth?"

"Of course not, sir."

"That's as well, for I'm sending you in to refit."

"Aye aye, sir. When shall I sail?"

"You're too restless even to stay to dinner?"

"No, sir."

Cornwallis laughed outright. "I wouldn't like to put you to the test."

He glanced up at the tell-tale wind-vane in the deck beams above. Men who had spent their whole lives combating the vagaries of the wind all felt alike in that respect; when a fair wind blew it was sheer folly to waste even an hour on a frivolous pretext.

"You'd better sail now," went on Cornwallis. "You know I've a new second in command?"

"No, sir."

"Lord Gardner. Now that I have to fight the Dons as well as Boney I need a vice-admiral."

"I'm not surprised, sir."

"If you sail in this thick weather you won't have to salute him. That will save the King some of his powder that you're so anxious to burn. Collins, give Captain Hornblower his orders."

So he would be returning once more to Plymouth. Once more to Maria.

Chapter 24

"It really was a magnificent spectacle," said Maria

The *Naval Chronicle*, at which Hornblower was glancing while conversing with her, used those identical words 'magnificent spectacle'.

"I'm sure it must have been, dear."

Under his eyes was a description of the landing of the Spanish treasure at Plymouth from the frigates captured by Moore's squadron. Military precautions had of course been necessary when millions of pounds in gold and silver had to be piled into wagons and dragged through the streets up to the Citadel, but the fanfare had exceeded military necessity. The Second Dragoon Guards had provided a mounted escort, the Seventy-First Foot had marched with the wagons, the local militia had lined the streets, and every military band for miles round had played patriotic airs. And when the treasure was moved on to London troops had marched with it and their bands had marched with them, so that every town through which the convoy passed had been treated to the same magnificent spectacle. Hornblower suspected that the government was not averse to calling the attention of as many people as possible to this increase in the wealth of the country, at a moment when Spain had been added to the list of England's enemies.

"They say the captains will receive hundreds of thousands of pounds each," said Maria. "I suppose it will never be our good fortune to win anything like that, dear?"

"It is always possible," said Hornblower.

It was astonishing, but most convenient, that Maria was quite unaware of any connexion between *Hotspur's* recent action with *Félicité* and Moore's capture of the *flota*. Maria was shrewd and sharp, but she was content to leave naval details to her husband, and it never occurred to her to inquire how it had come about that *Hotspur*, although attached to the Channel Fleet off Ushant, had found herself off Cape St Vincent. Mrs Mason might have been more inquisitive, but she, thank God, had returned to Southsea.

"What happened to that Doughty?" asked Maria.

"He deserted," answered Hornblower; luckily, again, Maria was not interested in the mechanics of desertion and did not inquire into the process.

"I'm not sorry, dear," she said. "I never liked him. But I'm afraid you miss him."

"I can manage well enough without him," said Hornblower. It was useless to buy capers and cayenne during this stay in Plymouth; Bailey would not know what to do with them.

"Perhaps one of these days I'll be able to look after you instead of these servants," said Maria.

There was the tender note in her voice again, and she was drawing nearer.

"No one could do that better than you, my darling," answered Hornblower. He had to say it. He could not hurt her. He had entered into this marriage voluntarily, and he had to go on playing the part. He put his arm round the waist that had come within reach.

"You are the kindest husband, darling," said Maria. "I've been so happy with you."

"Not as happy as I am when you say that," said Hornblower. That was the base intriguer speaking again, the subtle villain — the man who had plotted Doughty's escape from justice. No; he must remember that his conscience was clear now in that respect. That self-indulgence had been washed away by the blood that had poured over the decks of *Félicité*.

"I often wonder why it should be," went on Maria, with a new note in her voice. "I wonder why you should be so kind to me, when I think about — you, darling — and me."

"Nonsense," said Hornblower, as bluffly as he could manage. "You must always be sure of my feelings for you, dear. Never doubt me."

"My very dearest," said Maria, her voice changing again, the note of inquiry dying out and the tenderness returning. She melted into his arms. "I'm fortunate that you have been able to stay so long in Plymouth this time."

"That was my good fortune, dear."

Replacing the transoms which Bush had so blithely cut away in *Hotspur's* stern for the fight with *Félicité* had proved to be a laborious piece of work — *Hotspur's* stern had had to be almost rebuilt.

"And the Little One has been sleeping like a lamb all the evening," went on Maria; Hornblower could only hope that this did not involve his crying all night.

A knock at the door made Maria tear herself away from Hornblower's embracing arm.

"Gentleman to see you," said the landlady's voice.

It was Bush, in pea-jacket and scarf, standing hesitating on the threshold.

"Good evening, sir. Your servant, ma'am. I hope I don't intrude."

"Of course not," said Hornblower, wondering what shift of wind or politics could possibly have brought Bush here, and very conscious that Bush's manner was a little odd.

"Come in, man. Come in. Let me take your coat — unless your news is urgent?"

"Hardly urgent, sir," said Bush rather ponderously, allowing himself, with embarrassment, to be relieved of his coat. "But I felt you would like to hear it."

He stood looking at them both, his eyes not quite in focus, yet sensitive to the possibility that Maria's silence might be a sign that to her he was unwelcome; but Maria made amends.

"Won't you take this chair, Mr Bush?"

"Thank you, ma'am."

Seated, he looked from one to the other again; it was quite apparent to Hornblower by now that Bush was a little drunk.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

Bush's face split into an ecstatic grin.

"Droits of Admiralty, sir," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Moore and the frigates — I mean Captain Moore, of course, begging your pardon, sir."

"What about them?"

"I was in the coffee-room of the Lord Hawke, sir — I often go there of an evening — and last Wednesday's newspapers came down from London. And there it was, sir. Droits of Admiralty."

Wrecks; stranded whales; flotsam and jetsam; Droits of Admiralty dealt with things of this sort, appropriating them for the Crown, and, despite the name, they were of no concern to Their Lordships. Bush's grin expanded into a laugh.

"Serves 'em right, doesn't it, sir?" he said.

"You'll have to explain a little further."

"All that treasure they captured in the *flota*, sir. It's not prize money at all. It goes to the Government as Droits of Admiralty. The frigates don't get a penny. You see, sir, it was time of peace."

Now Hornblower understood. In the event of war breaking out with another country, the ships of that country which happened to be in British ports were seized by the Government as Droits of Admiralty; prize money came under a different category, for prizes taken at sea in time of war were Droits of the Crown, and were specifically granted to the captors by an order in Council which waived the rights of the Crown.

The government was perfectly justified legally in its action. And however much that action would infuriate the ships' companies of the frigates, it would make the rest of the navy laugh outright, just as it had made Bush laugh.

"So we didn't lose anything, sir, on account of your noble action. Noble — I've always wanted to tell you it was noble, sir."

"But how could you lose anything?" asked Maria.

"Don't you know about that, ma'am?" asked Bush, turning his wavering gaze upon her. Wavering or not, and whether he was drunk or not, Bush could still see that Maria had been left in ignorance of the opportunity that *Hotspur* had declined, and he still was sober enough to make the deduction that it would be inadvisable to enter into explanations.

"What was it that Captain Hornblower did that was so noble?" asked Maria.

"Least said soonest mended, ma'am," said Bush. He thrust his hand into his side pocket and laboriously fished out a small bottle. "I took the liberty of bringing this with me, ma'am, so that we could drink to the health of Captain Moore an' the *Indefatigable* an' the Droits of Admiralty. It's rum, ma'am. With hot water an' lemon an' sugar, ma'am, it makes a suitable drink for this time o' day."

Hornblower caught Maria's glance.

"It's too late tonight, Mr Bush," he said. "We'll drink that health tomorrow. I'll help you with your coat."

After Bush had left (being helped on with his coat by his captain flustered him sufficiently to make him almost wordless) Hornblower turned back to Maria.

"He'll find his way back to the ship all right," he said.

"So you did something noble, darling," said Maria

"Bush was drunk," replied Hornblower. "He was talking nonsense."

"I wonder," said Maria. Her eyes were shining. "I always think of you as noble, my darling."

"Nonsense," said Hornblower.

Maria came forward to him, putting her hand up to his shoulders, coming close so that he could resume the interrupted embrace.

"Of course you must have secrets from me," she said. "I understand. You're a King's officer, as well as my darling husband."

Now that she was in his arms she had put her head far back to look up at him.

"It's no secret," she went on, "that I love you, my dear, noble love. More than life itself."

Hornblower knew it was true. He felt his tenderness towards her surging up within him. But she was still speaking.

"And something else that isn't a secret," went on Maria. "Perhaps you've guessed. I think you have."

"I thought so," said Hornblower. "You make me very happy, my dear wife."

Maria smiled, her face quite transfigured. "Perhaps this time it will be a little daughter. A sweet little girl."

Hornblower had suspected it, as he said. He did not know if he was happy with his knowledge, although he said he was. It would only be a day or two before he took *Hotspur* to sea again, back to the blockade of Brest, back to the monotonous perils of the Goulet.

Chapter 25

Hotspur lay in the Iroise, and the victualler was heaving-to close alongside, to begin again the toilsome labour of transferring stores. After sixty days of blockade duty there would be much to do, even though the pleasant sunshine of early summer would ease matters a little. The fend-offs were over the side and the first boat was on its way from the victualler bringing the officer charged with initiating the arrangements.

"Here's the post, sir," said the officer, handing Hornblower the small package of letters destined for the ship's company. "But here's a letter from the Commander-in-Chief, sir. They sent it across to me from the *Hibernia* as I passed through the Outer Squadron."

"Thank you," said Hornblower.

He passed the packet to Bush to sort out. There would be letters from Maria in it, but a letter from the Commander-in-Chief took precedence. There was the formal address:

Horatio Hornblower, Esq.
Master and Commander
HM Sloop *Hotspur*

The letter was sealed with an informal wafer, instantly broken.

My dear Captain Hornblower,

I hope you can find it convenient to visit me in *Hibernia*, as I have news for you that would best be communicated personally. To save withdrawing *Hotspur* from her station, and to save you a long journey by boat, you might find it convenient to come in the victualler that brings this letter. You are therefore authorized to leave your First lieutenant in command, and I will find means for returning you to your ship when our business is completed. I look forward with pleasure to seeing you.

Your ob'd't servant,

Wm. Cornwallis

Two seconds of bewilderment, and then a moment of horrid doubt which made Hornblower snatch the other letters back from Bush and hurriedly search through them for those from Maria.

'Best communicated personally' — Hornblower had a sudden secret fear that something might have happened to Maria and that Cornwallis had assumed the responsibility for breaking the news to him. But here was a letter from Maria only eight days old, and all was well with her and with little Horatio and the child to be. Cornwallis could hardly have later news than that.

Hornblower was reduced to re-reading letter and weighing every word like a lover receiving his first love letter. The whole letter appeared cordial in tone, until Hornblower forced himself to admit that if it was summons to a reprimand it might be worded in exactly the same way. Except for the opening word 'My'; that was a departure from official practice — yet it might be a mere slip. And the letter concerned itself with 'news' too. Hornblower took a turn up the deck and forced himself to laugh at himself. He really was behaving like a love-lorn youth. If after all these years of service he had not learned to wait patiently through a dull hour for an inevitable crisis the Navy had not taught him even his first lesson.

The stores came slowly on board; there were the receipts to sign, and of course there were the final hurried questions hurled at him by people afraid of accepting responsibility.

"Make up your own mind about that," snapped Hornblower, and, "Mr Bush'll tell you what to do, and I hope he'll put a flea in your ear."

Then at last he was on a strange deck, watching with vast curiosity the handling of a different ship as the victualler filled away and headed out of the Iroise. The victualler's captain offered him the comfort of his cabin and suggested sampling the new consignment of rum, but Hornblower could not make himself accept either offer. He could only just manage to make himself stand still, aft by the taffrail, as they gradually left the coast behind, and picked their way through the Inshore Squadron and set a course for the distant topsails of the main body of the Channel Fleet.

The huge bulk of the *Hibernia* loomed up before them, and Hornblower found himself going up the side and saluting the guard. Newton, the captain of the ship, and Collins, the Captain of the Fleet, both happened to be on deck and received him cordially enough; Hornblower hoped they did not notice his gulp of excitement as he returned their 'Good afternoons'. Collins prepared to show him to the Admiral's quarters.

"Please don't trouble, sir. I can find my own way," protested Hornblower.

"I'd better see you past all the Cerberuses that guard these nether regions," said Collins.

Cornwallis was seated at one desk, and his flag-lieutenant at another, but they both rose at his entrance, and the flag-lieutenant slipped unobtrusively through a curtained door in the bulkhead while Cornwallis shook Hornblower's hand — it could hardly be a reprimand that was coming, yet Hornblower found it difficult to sit on more than the edge of the chair that Cornwallis offered him. Cornwallis sat with more ease, yet bolt upright with his back quite flat as was his habit.

"Well?" said Cornwallis.

Hornblower realized that Cornwallis was trying to conceal his mood, yet there was — or was there not? — a twinkle in the china blue eyes; all these years as Commander-in-Chief still had not forged the Admiral into the complete diplomat. Or perhaps they had. Hornblower could only wait; he could think of nothing to say in reply to that monosyllable.

"I've had a communication about you from the Navy Board," said Cornwallis at length, severely.

"Yes, sir?" Hornblower could find a reply to this speech; the Navy Board dealt with victualling and supplies and such like matters. It could be nothing vital.

"They've called my attention to the consumption of stores by the *Hotspur*. You appear to have been expensive, Hornblower. Gunpowder, shot, sails, cordage — you've been using up these things as if *Hotspur* were a ship of the line. Have you anything to say?"

"No, sir." He need not offer the obvious defence, not to Cornwallis.

"Neither have I." Cornwallis smiled suddenly, as he said that, his whole expression changing. "And that is what I shall tell the Navy Board. It's a naval officer's duty to shoot and be shot at."

"Thank you, sir."

"I've done all I need to do in transmitting this information."

The smile died away from Cornwallis's face, and was replaced by something bleak, something a little sad. He looked suddenly much older. Hornblower was making ready to rise from his chair; he could see that Cornwallis had sent for him so that this censure from the Navy Board should be deprived of all its sting. In the Service anticipated crises sometimes resolved themselves into anti-climaxes. But Cornwallis went on speaking; the sadness of his expression was echoed in the sadness of the tone of his voice.

"Now we can leave official business," he said, "and proceed to more personal matters. I'm hauling down my flag, Hornblower."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir." Those might be trite, mechanical words, but they were not. Hornblower was genuinely, sincerely sorry, and Cornwallis could hardly think otherwise.

"It comes to us all in time," he went on. "Fifty-one years in the Navy."

"Hard years, too, sir."

"Yes. For two years and three months I haven't set foot on shore."

"But no one else could have done what you have done, sir."

No one else could have maintained the Channel Fleet as a fighting body during those first years of hostilities, thwarting every attempt by Bonaparte to evade its crushing power.

"You flatter me," replied Cornwallis. "Very kind of you, Hornblower. Gardner's taking my place, and he'll do just as well as me."

Even in the sadness of the moment Hornblower's ever observant mind took notice of the use of that name without the formal 'Lord' or 'Admiral'; he was being admitted into unofficial intimacy with a Commander-in-Chief, albeit one on the point of retirement.

"I can't tell you how much I regret it, all the same, sir," he said.

"Let's try to be more cheerful," said Cornwallis. The blue eyes were looking straight through Hornblower, extraordinarily penetrating. Apparently what they observed was specially gratifying. Cornwallis's expression softened. Something appeared there which might almost be affection.

"Doesn't all this mean anything to you, Hornblower?" he asked.

"No, sir," replied Hornblower, puzzled. "Only what I've said. It's a great pity that you have to retire, sir."

"Nothing else?"

"No, sir."

"I didn't know such disinterestedness was possible. Don't you remember what is the last privilege granted a retiring Commander-in-Chief?"

"No, sir." That was true when Hornblower spoke; realization came a second later. "Oh, of course —"

"Now it's beginning to dawn on you. I'm allowed three promotions. Midshipman to Lieutenant. Lieutenant to Commander. Commander to Captain."

"Yes, sir." Hornblower could hardly speak those words; he had to swallow hard.

"It's a good system," went on Cornwallis. "At the end of his career a Commander-in-Chief can make those promotions without fear or favour. He has nothing more to expect in this world, and so he can lay up store for the next, by making his selection solely for the good of the service."

"Yes, sir."

"Do I have to go on? I'm going to promote you to Captain."

"Thank you, sir. I can't —" Very true. He could not speak.

"As I said, I have the good of the service in mind. You're the best choice I can make, Hornblower."

"Thank you, sir."

"Mark you, this is the last service I can do for you. A fortnight from now I'll be nobody. You've told me you have no friends in high places?"

"Yes, sir. No, sir."

"And commands still go by favour. I hope you find it, Hornblower. And I hope you have better luck in the matter of prize money. I did my best for you."

"I'd rather be a captain and poor than anyone else and rich, sir."

"Except perhaps an Admiral," said Cornwallis; he was positively grinning.

"Yes, sir."

Cornwallis rose from his chair. Now he was a Commander-in-Chief again, and Hornblower knew himself dismissed. Cornwallis raised his voice in the high-pitched carrying hail of the Navy.

"Pass the word for Captain Collins!"

"I must thank you, sir, most sincerely."

"Don't thank me any more. You've thanked me enough already. If ever you become an admiral with favours to give you'll understand why."

Collins had entered and was waiting at the door.

"Good-bye, Hornblower."

"Good-bye, sir."

Only a shake of the hand; no further word, and Hornblower followed Collins to the quarter-deck.

"I've a water-hoy standing by for you," said Collins. "In a couple of tacks she'll fetch *Hotspur*."

"Thank you, sir."

"You'll be in the Gazette in three weeks' time. Plenty of time to make your arrangements."

"Yes, sir."

Salutes, the squealing of pipes, and Hornblower went down the side and was rowed across to the troy. It was an effort to be polite to the captain. The tiny crew had hauled up the big lugsails before Hornblower realized that this was an interesting process which he would have done well to watch closely. With the lugsails trimmed flat and sharp the little hoy laid herself close to the wind and foamed forward towards France. Those last words of Collins' were still running through Hornblower's mind. He would have to leave the *Hotspur*; he would have to say good-bye to Bush and all the others, and the prospect brought a sadness that quite took the edge off the elation that he felt. Of course he would have to leave her; *Hotspur* was too small to constitute a command for a Post Captain. He would have to wait for another command; as the junior captain on the list he would probably receive the smallest and least important sixth rate in the navy. But for all that he was a Captain. Maria would be delighted.

Hornblower and the Crisis

An Unfinished Novel
(Published in the US as: "Hornblower during the Crisis")

C. S. Forester
(1967)

CHAPTER ONE

Hornblower was expecting the knock on the door, because he had seen through his cabin window enough to guess what was happening outside.

"Waterhoy coming alongside, sir," reported Bush, hat in hand.

"Very well, Mr Bush." Hornblower was disturbed in spirit and, irritated, had no intention of smoothing Bush's path for him.

"The new captain's on board, sir." Bush was perfectly well aware of Hornblower's mood yet was not ingenious enough to cope with it.

"Very well, Mr Bush."

But that was simple cruelty, the deliberate teasing of a nearly dumb animal; Hornblower realized that such behaviour really gave him no pleasure and only occasioned embarrassment to Bush. He relented to the extent of introducing a lighter touch into the conversation.

"So now you have a few minutes to spare for me, Mr Bush?" he said. "It's a change after your preoccupation of the last two days."

That was neither fair nor kind, and Bush showed his feelings in his face.

"I've had my duties to do, sir," he mumbled.

"Getting *Hotspur* into apple pie order ready for her new captain."

"Y-yes, sir."

"Doesn't matter about me, of course. I'm only a back number now."

"Sir —"

Even though he was not in a smiling mood Hornblower could not help smiling at the misery of Bush's expression.

"I'm glad to see you're only human, Mr Bush, after all. Sometimes I've doubted it. There couldn't be a more perfect First Lieutenant."

Bush needed two or three seconds in which to digest this unexpected compliment.

"That's very good of you, sir. Very kind indeed. But it's been all your doing."

In a moment they would slide down the slippery slopes of sentiment, which would be unbearable.

"Time for me to appear on deck," said Hornblower. "We'd better say goodbye, Mr Bush. The best of luck under your new captain."

He went so far towards yielding to the mood of the moment as to hold out his hand, which Bush took. Luckily Bush's emotions prevented him from saying more than just "Goodbye, sir," and Hornblower hurried out through the cabin door with Bush at his heels.

There was instantly plenty of distraction as the waterhoy was laid alongside the *Hotspur*; the side of the hoy was covered from end to end with old sails in rolls and with substantial fendoffs of sandbags, yet it was a ticklish business, even in the sheltered waters of this little bay, to pass lines between the two ships and draw them together. A gangplank came clattering out from the hoy to bridge the gap between the two decks, and a burly man in full unicorn made the precarious crossing. He was very tall — two or three inches over six feet

and heavily built; a man of middle age or more, to judge by the shock of grey hair revealed when he raised his hat. The boatswain's mates pealed loudly on their calls; the two ship's drummers beat a ragged ruffle.

"Welcome aboard, sir," said Hornblower.

The new captain pulled a paper from his breast pocket, opened it, and began to read. A shout from Bush bared every head so that the function would take place with due solemnity.

"Orders given by us, William Cornwallis, Vice-Admiral of the Red, Knight of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, Commanding His Majesty's Ships and Vessels of the Channel Fleet, to James Percival Meadows, Esquire —"

"D'ye think we have all day?" This was a new stentorian voice from the deck of the hoy. "Stand by to take the hoses, there! Mr Lieutenant, let's have some hands for the pumps."

The voice came, appropriately enough, from the barrel-shaped captain of the hoy. Bush signalled frantically for him to stay quiet until this vital ceremonial was completed.

"Time enough for that tomfoolery when the water's all aboard. The wind'll shift within the hour," roared the barrel-shaped captain quite unabashed. Captain Meadows scowled and hesitated, but for all his vast stature he could do nothing to silence the captain of the hoy. He roared through the rest of his orders at a pace nearer a gallop than a canter, and folded them up with evident relief now that he was legally captain of HMS *Hotspur*.

"On hats," bellowed Bush.

"Sir, I relieve you," said Meadows to Hornblower.

"I much regret the bad manners displayed in the hoy, sir," said Hornblower to Meadows.

"Now let's have some sturdy hands," said the barrel-shaped captain to no one in particular, and Meadows shrugged his vast shoulders with resignation.

"Mr Bush, my first lieutenant — I mean your first lieutenant, sir," said Hornblower, hastily effecting the introduction.

"Carry on, Mr. Bush," said Meadows, and Bush plunged instantly into the business of transferring the fresh water from the hoy.

"Who's that fellow, sir?" asked Hornblower with a jerk of his thumb at the captain of the hoy.

"He's been my cross for the last two days," answered Meadows. Dirty words unnecessary to reproduce interlarded every sentence he uttered. "He's not only captain but he's thirty-seven sixty-fourths owner. Under Navy Office contract — can't press him, can't press his men, as they all have protections. Says what he likes, does what he likes, and I'd give my prize money for the next five years to have him at the gratings for ten minutes."

"M'm," said Hornblower. "I'm taking passage with him."

"Hope you fare better than I did."

"By your leave, sirs." A hand from the hoy came pushing along the gangplank dragging a canvas hose. At his heels came someone carrying papers; there was bustle everywhere.

"I'll hand over the ship's papers, sir," said Hornblower. "Will you come with me? I mean — they are ready in your cabin when you have time to attend to them, sir."

His sea chest and ditty bag lay forlorn on the bare cabin deck, pathetic indications of his immediate departure. It was the work only of a few moments to complete the transfer of command.

"May I request of Mr Bush the loan of a hand to transfer my dunnage, sir?" asked Hornblower.

Now he was nobody. He was not even a passenger; he had no standing at all, and this became more evident still when he returned to the deck to look round for his officers to bid them farewell. They were all engrossed in the business of the moment, with hardly a second to spare for him. Handshakes were hasty and perfunctory; it was with a queer relief that he turned away to the gangplank.

It was a relief that was short lived for, even at anchor, *Hotspur* was rolling perceptibly in the swell that curved in round the point, and the two ships, *Hotspur* and the waterhoy, were rolling in opposite phases, their upper works inclining first together and then away from each other, so that the gangplank which joined them was possessed of several distinct motions — it swung in a vertical plane like a seesaw and in a horizontal plane like a compass needle; it rose and fell bodily, too, but the most frightening motion, instantly obvious as soon as he addressed himself to the crossing, was a stabbing back and forth motion as the ships surged together and apart, the gap bridged by the plank being now six feet and then sixteen. To a barefooted seaman the passage

would be nothing; to Hornblower it was a rather frightening matter — an eighteen-inch plank with no handrail. He was conscious, too, of the barrel-shaped captain watching him, but at least that made him determined to show no hesitation once he decided on the passage — until that moment he studied the motions of the plank out of the tail of his eye while apparently his attention was fully taken up by the various activities in the two ships.

Then he made a rush for it, got both feet on the plank, endured a nightmare interval when it seemed as if, hurry as he would, he made no progress at all, and then thankfully reached the end of the plank and stepped clear of it on to the comparative stability of the deck. The barrel-shaped captain made no move to welcome him and while two hands dumped his baggage on the deck Hornblower had to make the first advance.

"Are you the master of this vessel, sir?" he asked.

"Captain Baddlestone, master of the hoy, *Princess*."

"I am Captain Hornblower, and I am to be given a passage to England," said Hornblower. He deliberately chose that form of words, nettled as he was by Baddlestone's off-hand manner.

"You have your warrant?"

The question and the way in which it was asked rather pricked the bubble of Hornblower's dignity, but he was roused sufficiently by now to feel he would stand no more insolence.

"I have," he declared.

Baddlestone had a large round red face, inclining even to purple; from out of it, from under two thick black eyebrows, two surprisingly bright blue eyes met Hornblower's haughty stare. Hornblower was determined to yield not an inch, and was prepared to continue to meet the head-on assault of those blue eyes indefinitely, but he found his flank neatly turned.

"Cabin food a guinea a day. Or you can compound for the passage for three guineas," announced Baddlestone. It was a surprise to find he had to pay for his subsistence, and Hornblower knew his surprise was apparent in his expression, but he would not allow it to be apparent in his words. He would not even condescend to ask the questions that were on the tip of his tongue. He could be quite sure that Baddlestone had legality on his side. The Navy Office charter of the hoy presumably compelled Baddlestone to give passages to transient officers, but omitted all reference to subsistence. He thought quickly.

"Three guineas, then," he said as loftily as he could, with all the manner of a man to whom the difference between one guinea and three was of no concern. It was not until after he had said the words that he worked out in his mind the deduction that the wind was likely to back round easterly and make a long return passage probable.

During this conversation one pump had been working most irregularly, and now the other one came to a stop; the cessation of the monotonous noise was quite striking. Here was Bush hailing from the *Hotspur*.

"That's only nineteen ton," he said. "We can take two more."

"And two more you won't get," yelled Baddlestone in reply. "We're sucked dry."

It was a strange feeling that this was of no concern to Hornblower; he was free of responsibility, even though his mind automatically worked out that *Hotspur* now had fresh water for forty days. It was Meadows who would have to plan to conserve that supply. And with the wind likely to come easterly *Hotspur* would have to close the mouth of the Goulet as closely as possible — that was Meadow's concern and nothing to do with him, not ever again.

The hands who had been working at the pumps went scuttling back over the gangplank; the two hands from the *Princess* who had been standing by the hoses came back on board dragging their charges. Last came the *Princess's* mate with his papers.

"Stand by the lines, there!" yelled Baddlestone. "Jib halliards, Mister!"

Baddlestone himself went to the wheel, and he made a neat job of getting the hoy away from the *Hotspur's* side. He continued to steer the ship while the half-dozen hands under the supervision of the mate set about the task of lifting and stowing the fendoffs that hung along her side. It was only a matter of seconds before the gap between the two ships was too wide to bridge by voice. Hornblower looked across the sparkling water. It appeared that Meadows was summoning all hands in order to address them in an inaugural speech; certainly no one spared a further glance towards the hoy or towards Hornblower standing lonely on the deck. The

bonds of naval friendship, of naval intimacy, were exceedingly strong, but they could be ruptured in a flash. It was more than likely that he would never see Bush again.

CHAPTER TWO

Life in the waterhoy *Princess* was exceedingly uncomfortable. She was empty of her cargo of drinking water, and there was almost nothing to replace it; the empty casks were too precious to be contaminated by sea water for use as ballast, and only a few bags of sand could be squeezed between the empty casks to confer any stability on her hull. She had been designed with this very difficulty in view, the lines of her dish-shaped hull being such that even when riding light her broad beam made her hard to capsize, but she did everything short of that. Her motion was violent and, to the uninitiated, quite unpredictable, and she was hardly more weatherly than a raft, sagging off to leeward in a spineless fashion that boded ill for any prospect of working up to Plymouth while any easterly component prevailed in the wind.

Hornblower was forced to endure considerable hardship. For two days he lingered on the verge of seasickness as a result of this new motion beneath his feet; he was not actually sick, having had several uninterrupted weeks at sea already, but he told himself that it would be less unpleasant if that were to happen — although in his heart of hearts he knew that was not true. He was allotted a hammock in a compartment six feet square and five feet high; he at least had it to himself and could derive some small comfort from observing that there were arrangements for eight hammocks, in two tiers of four, to be slung there. It had been a long time since he slept in a hammock, and his spine was slow to adjust to the necessary curvature, while the extravagant leaps and rolls of the hoy were conveyed to him through it and made the memory of his cot in *Hotspur* nostalgically luxurious.

The wind stayed northeasterly, bringing clear skies and sunshine but no comfort to Hornblower, save that it was soon evident that he would be eating Baddlestone's 'cabin food' for more than three days — a doubtful source of satisfaction. All he wished to do was to make his way to England, to London, to Whitehall, and to secure his posting as captain before anything could happen to interfere. He watched morosely as the *Princess* lost more and more distance to leeward, more even than the clumsy ships of the line clustered off Ushant. There was nothing to read on board, there was nothing to do, and there was nowhere comfortable where he could do that nothing.

He was coming up through the hatchway, weary of his hammock, when he saw Baddlestone whip his telescope to his eye and stare to windward.

"Here they come!" said Baddlestone, unusually communicative.

With the greatest possible condescension he passed the telescope over to Hornblower; there could be no more generous gesture (as Hornblower well knew) than for a captain to part with his glass even for a moment when something of interest was in sight. It was a veritable fleet bearing down on them, something far more than a mere squadron. Four frigates with every stitch of canvas spread, were racing to take the lead; behind them followed two columns of line-of-battleships, seven in one and six in the other. They were already setting studding sails as they edged into station. With the wind right astern and all sail set they were hurtling down upon the *Princess*. It was a magnificent sight, the commission pennants whipping out ahead, the ensigns flying forward as if in emulation. Under each bluff bow a creamy bow wave mounted and sank as the ships drove on over the blue water. Here was England's naval might seen to its best advantage. The right central frigate came cutting close beside the wallowing waterhoy.

"*Diamond*, 32," said Baddlestone; he had recovered his telescope by some means or other.

Hornblower stared enviously and longingly at her as she passed within long cannon shot. He saw a rush of men up the foremast rigging. The fore topgallant sail was taken in and reset in the brief space while the *Diamond* was passing; a smart ship that — Hornblower had not detected anything wrong with the set of the sail. The mate of the hoy had just managed to hoist a dirty red ensign in time to dip it in salute, and the blue ensign over there dipped in reply. Now came the starboard column of ships of the line, a three decker in the lead,

towering over the waves, her three rows of chequered gunports revealing themselves as she approached, a blue vice-admiral's flag blowing from her fore topgallant mast.

"*Prince of Wales*, 98. Vice-Admiral Sir Robert Calder, baronet," said Baddlestone. "There's two other flags with this lot."

The ensigns dipped in salute and the next of the line came on, plunging before the wind with the spray flying. The flags dipped time and again as the seven ships hurtled by.

"A fair wind for Finisterre," said Baddlestone.

"That looks like their course," said Hornblower.

It seemed obvious that Baddlestone knew as much about fleet movements as he did, and perhaps even more. Less than a week earlier Baddlestone had been in Plymouth with English newspapers to read and all the chatter of the alehouses to listen to. Hornblower himself had heard a good deal of circumstantial gossip from the *Shetland*, the victualler which had come alongside *Hotspur* a couple of days earlier than the *Princess*. The fact that Baddlestone suggested that Calder's destination was merely Finisterre, and not the Straits or the West Indies was nearly convincing proof of the extent of Baddlestone's knowledge. Hornblower asked a testing question.

"Heading for the Strait's mouth, do you think?"

Baddlestone eyed him with a trace of pity.

"No farther than Finisterre," he vouchsafed.

"But why?"

Baddlestone found it clearly hard to believe that Hornblower could be ignorant of what was being discussed throughout the fleet and the dockyard.

"Villain-noove," he said.

That was Villeneuve, the French admiral commanding the fleet that had broken out of the Mediterranean some weeks before and fled across the Atlantic to the West Indies.

"What about him?" asked Hornblower.

"He's heading back again, making for Brest. Going to pick up the French fleet there, so Boney thinks. Then the Channel. Boney's army's waiting at Boulogne, and Boney thinks he'll eat his next dish of frogs in Windsor Castle."

"Where's Nelson?" demanded Hornblower.

"Hot on Villain-noove's trail. If Nelson don't catch him Calder will. Boney's going to wait a long time before he sees French tops'ls in the Channel."

"How do you know this?"

"Sloop came in from Nelson while I was waiting for a wind in Plymouth. The whole town knew in half an hour, bless you."

This was the most vital and the most recent information imaginable, and yet it was common knowledge. Bonaparte at Boulogne had a quarter of a million men trained, equipped, and ready. Transporting them across the Channel might be difficult despite the thousands of flat bottomed boats that crowded the French Channel ports, but with twenty, thirty, possibly forty French and Spanish ships of the line to cover the crossing something might be achieved. In a month Bonaparte might well be eating frogs in Windsor Castle. The destiny of the world, the fate of civilization, depended on the concerted movements of the British fleets. If so much was known in Plymouth last week it would be known in Bonaparte's headquarters today; detailed knowledge of the British movements was vital for the French in executing what appeared to be essentially a plan of evasion.

Baddlestone was watching him curiously; Hornblower must have allowed some of his emotions to show in his expression.

"No good ever came of worrying," said Baddlestone, and now it was Hornblower's turn to return the sharp gaze.

Until this conversation the pair of them had not exchanged twenty words during this two days of waiting for a wind. Baddlestone apparently cherished hard feelings towards naval officers; maybe Hornblower's refusal to make any advances towards intimacy had softened them.

"Worry?" said Hornblower bravely. "Why should I worry? We'll deal with Boney when the time comes."

Already Baddlestone seemed to regret his voluntary loquacity. As every captain should while on deck, he had been darting repeated glances at the leech of the mainsail and now he rounded on the helmsman. "Watch what you're doing, blast you!" he roared, unexpectedly. "Keep her full and by! D'ye want us to end up in Spain? An empty waterhoy and a ham-fisted no-seaman at the wheel letting her box the compass." Hornblower drifted away during this tirade. His feelings were agitated by apprehensions additional to those Baddlestone had hinted at. Here was the crisis of the naval war approaching; there were battles to be fought, and he had no ship. All he had was a promise of one, a promise of being 'made post' when he could call upon the Admiralty to redeem that promise. He had endured two years of hardship and danger, monotony and strain, in the blockade of Brest, and now, at the very moment when the war was reaching a climax, he was unemployed. He would be falling between two stools — the battle might well be fought, the crisis over, before he could get to sea again. Calder might intercept Villeneuve within the week, or Bonaparte might be attempting his crossing within a fortnight. Better to be a mere Commander with a ship than an ungazetted Captain without one. It was enough to drive a man perfectly frantic — and for the last two days the wind had blown steadily from the northeast, keeping him a prisoner in this accursed hoy, while allowing every opportunity to Meadows in the *Hotspur* to distinguish himself. After ten years of experience Hornblower should have had more sense (and he knew it) than to fret himself into a fever over winds, the uncontrollable unpredictable winds that had governed his life since boyhood. But here he was fretting himself into a fever.

CHAPTER THREE

Hornblower was still in his hammock even though it was long after daybreak, even though it was full dawn. He had turned himself over without waking himself up too much — something he had had to relearn now that he was sleeping in a hammock again — and he was determined upon staying where he was, as somnolent as possible, for the longest possible time. In that way he would find the day shorter; his mind, clogged with sleep, would not be working at high tension for so long. Yesterday had been a bad day, when a favourable slant of wind at nightfall had endured just long enough to return the *Princess* to the heart of the blockading squadron before reversing itself maddeningly.

A certain amount of bustle and excitement became audible on the deck over his head, and there was a boat alongside. He snarled to himself and prepared to roll out of his hammock. It would be some trifle of no concern to him, and dull as well most likely, but it was sufficient to put an end to his resolution to stay in his hammock.

He had his feet on deck with his seat still supported by the hammock when the midshipman appeared. Hornblower glowered at him with bleared eyes, observing the trim white breeches and buckled shoes; this must be some pampered pet from a flagship, and he was offering him a letter. Hornblower was instantly fully awake. He broke the wafer that sealed the note.

You are hereby requested and required to attend as a witness, at your peril, upon the court martial to be held at nine in the forenoon of this twentieth day of May 1805 in the Cabin of HMS *Hibernia* to try Captain James Percival Meadows, the officers and ship's company of HM's late sloop *Hotspur* for the loss of the said vessel by stranding during the night of the eighteenth day of May 1805.

Henry Bowden, RA, Captain of the Fleet.

NB. A boat will be sent.

Here was something startling, astonishing; Hornblower gaped at the note while re-reading it, until he remembered the presence of the midshipman and the consequent need to appear imperturbable.

"Very well, thank you," he snapped; the midshipman had hardly turned his back before Hornblower was dragging out his sea chest and trying to make up his mind as to how he could get the creases out of his threadbare fulldress coat.

"HM's *late* sloop." That could only mean that *Hotspur* was a total loss. But Meadows was alive, which implied that few, if any, lives had been lost. Certainly Meadows had wasted no time in putting *Hotspur* ashore. That would be the easiest thing in the world to do, as no one could say with more certainty than he who had never done it.

To shave he had to drag his sea chest under the hatchway and stand on it with his head protruding and his mirror propped up on the deck. He was not quite tall enough to dispense with the sea chest; it crossed his mind that Meadows must have been tall enough to see clear over the coaming without taking steps to add a cubit to his stature.

Baddlestone came up and actually volunteered information as Hornblower stood there balancing precariously; he was still sufficiently unaccustomed to the *Princess's* antics to make it difficult to use his second hand to pull his skin tight while wielding the razor with the other.

"So *Hotspur's* lost on the Black Rock," said Baddlestone.

"I knew she was aground," said Hornblower. "But I didn't know where."

"Do you call being at the bottom of the sea aground? She touched on a falling tide. Holed herself and filled and then rolled off on the flood."

It was remarkable how the fleet auxiliaries picked up the news.

"Any loss of life?" asked Hornblower.

"None that I've heard of," said Baddlestone.

He would certainly have heard if any officers had been drowned. So they were all safe, including Bush.

Hornblower could devote special attention to the tricky area round the left corner of his mouth.

"Giving evidence, I hear?" asked Baddlestone.

"Yes." Hornblower had no desire at all to add to Baddlestone's store of gossip.

"If the wind backs westerly I'll sail without you. I'll put your chest ashore at Plymouth."

"You are exceedingly kind," said Hornblower, and then checked himself. There was nothing to be gained by a quarrel with a man of an inferior social order, and there were other considerations. Hornblower wiped off his face and his razor, pausing to meet Baddlestone's eyes.

"Not many men would have given that answer," said Baddlestone.

"Not many men need their breakfast as much as I do at present," answered Hornblower.

At eight o'clock the boat was alongside, and Hornblower went down into it, wearing the single epaulette on his left shoulder that indicated he had not yet been confirmed in his promotion to captain, and at his side he wore the brass-hilted Langer which was all he could boast as a sword. But he was received with the appropriate ceremony as he went up *Hibernia's* side, following two glittering captains with epaulettes on both shoulders who were obviously going to be members of the Court. Over on the lee side of the quarterdeck he caught a glimpse of Meadows and Bush, pacing up and down deep in conversation. But the midshipman who was his guide led him away; that was proof (if any were needed) that he was being summoned as an expert witness at the request of the Court, and had to be kept away from the defendants to prevent all possibility of either collusion or prejudice.

It was twenty-five minutes after the firing of the gun that indicated the opening of the Court when Hornblower was called into the great cabin, where seven captains glittered at a table under the stern windows. Over at one side sat Meadows and Bush, and Prowse the sailing master and Wise the boatswain. It was distasteful, distressing, uncomfortable, to see the anxiety on those faces.

"The Court wishes to address a few questions to you, Captain Hornblower," said the central figure at the table.

"Later you may be asked by the defendants to explain your answers."

"Yes, sir," said Hornblower.

"You handed over command of the sloop *Hotspur* in the forenoon of the seventeenth, I understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Her material condition was good?"

"Reasonably so, sir." He had to speak the truth.

"By that do you mean in good condition or bad?"

"Good, sir."

"The compass deviation card was accurate as far as you were aware?"

"Yes, sir." He could not possibly admit to any carelessness on that subject.

"You have heard that HMS *Hotspur* went aground on the Black Rock with a falling tide. Have you any comments to make, Captain?"

Hornblower set his teeth.

"It would be an easy thing to do."

"Perhaps you would be good enough to elaborate on that statement, Captain?"

There was plenty he could say, but he had to be careful how he said it. He must not appear to be a windbag. He must lay all necessary stress on the navigational difficulties and yet at the same time he must not rate himself over-highly for having so long evaded them. He must do all he could for the defendants but he must not overplay his hand. At least there were certain obvious points he could make which could be instantly confirmed by a glance at the ship's logs. He talked about the steady westerly wind which had prevailed for some days earlier, and then about the brisk easterly wind which had sprung up that afternoon. In those conditions the ebbtide could be unpredictably fierce. There was likely at the same time to be a disturbing back eddy inside the rocks which could upset all calculations so that the current might reverse itself in a cable's length. From the Black Rock extended a long reef to the southeastward where, except at the very tip, breakers were only visible at low water of spring tides and the lead gave no warning of this. It would be in no way remarkable for a ship keeping close up to the Goulet to be trapped here.

"Thank you, Captain," said the President when Hornblower had finished, and he glanced over to the defendants, "Have you any questions?"

The President's manner indicated that he thought none could be needed, but Meadows rose to his feet. He seemed to be wasted away; perhaps the borrowed clothes he was wearing contributed to the effect, but he was hollow-eyed and his cheeks seemed sunken, the left one twitching at intervals.

"Captain," he asked. "The wind was northeasterly and brisk?"

"It was."

"The best conditions for a sortie by the French?"

"Yes."

"What was *Hotspur*'s proper station in those conditions?"

"As close up to the Goulet as possible."

It was a good point that had needed accentuation.

"Thank you, Captain," said Meadows, sitting down, and Hornblower looked to the President for permission to retire.

But Meadows' question had given rise to another.

"Would you kindly tell the Court, Captain," asked the President, "how long you commanded the *Hotspur* on blockade service?"

"A little over two years, sir." That was the literal answer that had to be given.

"And how much of that time were you close up to the Goulet? A rough estimate is all that is needed, Captain."

"I suppose half the time — one third of the time."

"Thank you, Captain." It was a point tending very much to discount the one Meadows had made. "You may now retire, Captain Hornblower."

He could glance over at Bush and the others, but it had to be a glance of complete indifference; he must not prejudice the Court by a display of sympathy. He made his bow and withdrew.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was less than half an hour after Hornblower returned to the *Princess* that Baddlestone got the news, passed from one auxiliary to another as they wallowed waiting for a wind.

"Guilty," said Baddlestone, turning to Hornblower.

This was one of the moments when Hornblower was most in need of an appearance of stolidity while finding the greatest difficulty in attaining it.

"What about the sentence?" he asked. Tension gave his voice a grating sound which might be interpreted as harsh indifference.

"Reprimand," said Baddlestone, and Hornblower felt the relief flooding into his vitals.

"What kind of a reprimand?"

"Just a reprimand."

Not a severe reprimand, then. After a 'guilty' verdict it was the mildest sentence a court martial could pronounce, save for mere admonishment. But with *Hotspur* lost every officer and warrant officer in the ship would have to apply for re-employment, and the powers that were might still have a word to say. Unless they were vindictive, however, there could be little danger to any of them except possibly Meadows. It was only then that Baddlestone doled out another fragment of information which earlier would have saved Hornblower anxiety.

"They cleared the first lieutenant and the sailing master," he said; Hornblower kept his mouth shut, determined to give no hint of his feelings.

Baddlestone had the telescope to his eye and Hornblower followed his gaze. A ship's longboat under two balance-lugs was running before the wind in their general direction, it took no more than a glance for Hornblower to identify her as belonging to a ship of the line, and as far as he could judge from her fore-shortened length she was of the largest size, belonging to a three decker, likely enough.

"I'll lay guineas to shillings," said Baddlestone, the telescope still clamped to his eye, "more company."

Hornblower's fingers fluttered with the yearning to use the telescope.

"Yes," went on Baddlestone, retaining it with a cruelty possibly unconscious. "It looks like it."

He turned to bellow orders for the hanging of fendoffs on the starboard side, and to bring the hoy to the wind to provide a slight lee on that side. Then there was no need for the telescope; Hornblower with the naked eye could recognize Bush sitting bare-headed in the sternsheets, and then Meadows beside him. On the next thwart forward were the warrant officers of the late *Hotspur*, and forward beyond those was a jumble of figures he could not identify.

The longboat surged round into the-wind and came neatly alongside.

"Boat ahoy!" hailed Baddlestone.

"Party with warrants for passage," came Bush's voice in reply. "We're coming aboard."

Baddlestone gobbled inarticulately for a second or two at this absence of a 'by your leave', but already the longboat had hooked on. At once it became obvious how violently the hoy rolled; the longboat was stable by comparison. There was a moment's delay before Meadows hauled himself on to the hoy's deck, and a further delay before Bush appeared behind him. Hornblower hurried forward to make them welcome; it was obvious that with the loss of the *Hotspur* her officers were being returned to England for other appointments, while presumably the crew had been distributed round the ships of the squadron.

It was only with an effort that Hornblower brought himself to address Meadows first.

"Glad to see you again, Captain Meadows," he said. "And you too, Mr Bush."

Bush had a half-smile for him; Meadows not as much; he was under the shadow of a reprimand. Baddlestone watched the encounter with as much cynical amusement as his bulging red face could convey.

"Perhaps you gentlemen will be good enough to show me your warrants," he said.

Bush thrust his hand into his breast pocket and produced a sheaf of papers.

"Fourteen if you count them," he replied. "And these are ratings I'm not responsible for."

"You'll be at pretty close quarters," said Baddlestone. "Cabin food a guinea a day, or you can compound for three guineas for the passage."

Meadows entered into the conversation not with a word, but with a gesture. He turned a bleak gaze and looked behind him. The warrant officers had begun to arrive on deck, Prowse the master, Cargill and the other mates, Huffnell the purser, the boatswain and sailmaker and carpenter and cooper and cook. They were followed by a number of ratings, one of them — who seemed likely to be Meadows' coxswain — turning to help another on board, the need for this becoming apparent when it was seen that this man had lost a hand at the wrist, presumably in one of the numerous shipboard accidents that eroded the crews of the blockading fleet. Several more men succeeded him; the reason for their return to England was not immediately apparent. Most of them were likely to be ruptured so badly as to rate discharge; possibly one or two others may have

been illegally impressed and fortunate enough to have friends at home with sufficient influence to win their freedom. Altogether it was a large and formidable body of men mustered on the deck of the hoy, crowding it, while the longboat cast off and, with her lugsails hauled as flat as boards, set off on the long beat back to the flagship.

Baddlestone followed Meadows' gaze and ran his eye over the crowd, and Meadows accentuated his earlier glance with a wave of his hand. Hornblower was reminded of the legendary captain of a ship of war who, when asked for his authority for some particular action, pointed to his guns and said "There!"

"By the terms of your contract you victual ratings at sixpence a day," said Meadows, "This voyage you'll victual officers at the same rate, and that's all it's worth."

"Is this piracy?" exclaimed Baddlestone.

"Call it anything you like," answered Meadows.

Baddlestone fell back a step or two, staring round him, to find no comfort in sea or sky, with the nearest ship some cables' lengths away. Meadows' expression was unchanging, bleak and lonely. Whatever had been the terms of the reprimand he had received he obviously felt it severely. Believing himself to be a man without a future he could well be careless about any possible charge of mutiny Baddlestone could bring against him. His officers were sheltered under his authority, while clearly they had lost all they possessed when *Hotspur* sank and were aware that by law they went on half pay from that moment too. They could be dangerous men, and the ratings would obey them without hesitation. The *Princess's* crew in addition to Baddlestone comprised a mate, a cook, four hands, and a boy; the odds were overwhelming if there was no chance of appealing to higher authority, and Baddlestone realized it even though his words still conveyed defiance.

"I'll see you in the dock, Mr Captain Meadows," he said.

"Captain Hornblower travels at the same rate," said Meadows imperturbably.

"I've paid my three guineas," interposed Hornblower.

"Better still. That'll be — a hundred and twenty-six sixpences already paid. Am I right, Mr Baddlestone?"

CHAPTER FIVE

In the *Princess* conditions were intolerably crowded. Where Hornblower's hammock had been slung there were now seven more, so that each of the eight officers occupied no more space than might be found inside a coffin. They were packed together in an almost solid mass, but not quite solid; as the *Princess* leaped and bounded there was just enough play for everyone to bump against his neighbour or against a bulkhead, maddeningly, every second or two. Hornblower in the lower tier (which he had selected sensibly enough to avoid the poisonous upper air) had Meadows above him, a bulkhead on one side and Bush on the other. Sometimes the weight of the three bodies to his left compressed him against the bulkhead, and sometimes he swayed the other way and thumped Bush in the ribs; sometimes the deck below rose up to meet him and sometimes Meadows' vast bulk above came down to impress itself on him — Meadows was an inch or two longer than the cabin and lay in a pronounced curve. Hornblower's restless mind deduced that these latter contacts were proof of how much the *Princess* 'worked' — the cabin was pulled out of shape when she rolled, diminishing its height by an inch or two, as was confirmed by the creaking and crackling that went on all round him. Long before midnight Hornblower wriggled with difficulty out of his hammock and then, snaking along on his back under the lower tier, crawled out of the cabin to where the purer air outside fluttered his shirt tails. After the first night common sense dictated another arrangement whereby the passengers, officers and ratings alike, slept 'watch and watch', four hours in bed and four hours squatting in sheltered corners on deck. It was a system to which they were all inured, and was extended, naturally and perforce, to cooking and meals and every other activity. Even so, the *Princess* was not a happy ship, with the passengers likely to snarl at each other at small provocation, and potential trouble on a far greater scale only a hair's breadth away as the experts with whom the hoy swarmed criticized Baddlestone's handling of her. For the persistent summer breezes still blew from between north and east, and she lost distance to leeward in a manner perfectly infuriating to men who for months and years had not seen homeland or family. That wind meant sparkling and

delightful weather; it might mean a splendid harvest in England, but it meant irritation in the *Princess*, where bitter arguments developed between those who advocated that Baddlestone should reach to the westward, into the Atlantic, in the hope of finding a favourable slant of wind there, and those who still had sufficient patience to recommend beating about where they were — but both schools were ready to agree that the trim of the sails, the handling of the helm, the course set when under way, and the tack selected when lying to could and should be improved upon.

Hope came timorously to life one noontime; there had been disappointments before and, despite all the previous discussions, hardly a soul dared speak a word when, after a period of almost imperceptible easterly airs something a trifle more vigorous awoke, with a hint of south in it, backing and strengthening so that the sheets could be hauled in, with Baddlestone bellowing at the hands and the motion of the *Princess* changing from spiritless wallowing to a flat-footed advance, an ungainly movement over the waves like a cart horse trying to canter over wet furrow.

"What's her course, d'you think?" asked Hornblower.

"Nor'east, sir," said Bush, tentatively, but Prowse shook his head as his natural pessimism asserted itself.

"Nor'east by east, sir," he said.

"A trifle of north in it, anyway," said Hornblower.

Such a course would bring them no nearer Plymouth, but it might give them a better chance of catching a westerly slant outside the mouth of the Channel.

"She's making a lot of leeway," said Prowse, gloomily, his glance sweeping round from the set of the sails to the barely perceptible wake.

"We can always hope," said Hornblower. "Look at those clouds building up. We've seen nothing like that for days."

"Hope's cheap enough, sir," said Prowse gloomily.

Hornblower looked over towards Meadows, standing at the mainmast. His face bore that bleak expression still unchanged; he stood solitary in a crowd, yet even he was impelled to study wake and sail trim and rudder, until Hornblower's gaze drew his glance and he looked over at them, hardly seeing them.

"I'd give something to know what the glass is doing," said Bush. "Maybe it's dropping, sir."

"Shouldn't be surprised," said Hornblower.

He could remember so acutely running for Tor Bay in a howling gale. Maria was in Plymouth, and the second child was on the way.

Prowse cleared his throat; he spoke unwillingly, because he had something cheerful to say.

"Wind's still veering, sir," he said at length.

"Freshening a trifle, too, I fancy," said Hornblower. "Something may come of this."

In those latitudes heavy weather was likely at that time of year when the wind veered instead of backing, when it swung towards south from northeast, and when it freshened as it undoubtedly was doing, and when dark clouds began to build up as they were doing at the moment. The mate was marking up the traverse board.

"What's the course, Mister?" asked Hornblower.

"Nor' by East half North."

"Just another point or two's all we need," said Bush.

"Got to give Ushant a wide berth anyway," said Prowse.

Even on this course they were actually lessening the distance that lay between them and Plymouth; it was in a quite unimportant fashion, but it was a comforting thought. The horizon was closing in on them a little with the diminishing visibility. There was still a sail or two in sight, all towards the east, for no vessel made as much leeway as the *Princess*. But it was indication of the vastness of the ocean that there were so few sails visible although they were in the immediate vicinity of the Channel Fleet.

Here came a much stronger gust of wind, putting the *Princess* over on her lee side with men and movables cascading across the deck until the helmsman allowed her to pay off a point.

"She steers like a dray," commented Bush.

"Like a wooden piggin," said Hornblower. "Sideways as easily as forwards."

It was better when the wind veered still farther round, and then came the moment when Bush struck one fist into the palm of the other hand.

"We're running a point free!" he exclaimed.

That meant everything in the world. It meant that they were not running on a compromise course where as much might be lost or gained. It meant that they were steering a course direct for Plymouth, or as direct as Baddlestone's calculations indicated; if they were correct leeway had now become a source of profit instead of loss. It meant that the wind was a trifle on the *Princess's* quarter, and that would almost certainly be her best point of sailing, considering her shape. It meant that they were getting finally clear of the coast of France. Soon they would be well in the mouth of the Channel with considerable freedom of action. Finally it had to be repeated that they were running free, a fantastic, marvellous change for men who had endured for so long the depressing alternatives of lying to or sailing close hauled.

Someone near at hand raised his voice; Hornblower could tell that he was not hailing, or quarrelling, but singing, going through an exercise incomprehensible and purposeless for the sake of some strange pleasure it gave. 'From Ushant to Scilly is thirty-five leagues.' That was perfectly true, and Hornblower supposed that circumstances justified making this sort of noise about it. He steeled himself to a stoical endurance as others joined in, 'Farewell and adieu to you, Spanish ladies'. It was very noticeable that the atmosphere in the *Princess* had changed metaphorically as well as actually; spirits had risen with the fall in the barometer. There were smiles, there were grins to be seen. With the wind veering another couple of points, as it did, there was a decided probability that the evening of next day would see them into Plymouth. As if she had caught the prevailing infection the *Princess* began to leap over the waves; in her clumsiness there was something almost lewd, like a tubby old lady showing her legs in a drunken attempt to dance.

Yet over there Meadows did not share in the mirth and the excitement. He was isolated and unhappy; even the two officers who had been next senior to him in the *Hotspur* — his first lieutenant and his sailing master — were over here chatting with Hornblower instead of keeping him company. Hornblower began to make his way over to him, at the same moment as a rain squall came hurtling down upon the *Princess* to cause sudden confusion while the weaker spirits rushed forward and aft for shelter.

"Plymouth tomorrow, sir," said Hornblower conversationally when he reached Meadows' side.

"No doubt, sir," said Meadows.

"We're in for a bit of a blow, I think," said Hornblower gazing upwards into the rain. He knew he was being exaggerated in the casual manner he was trying to adopt, but he could not modify it.

"Maybe," said Meadows.

"Likely enough we'll have to make for Tor Bay instead," suggested Hornblower.

"Likely enough," agreed Meadows — although agreement was too strong a word for that stony indifference. Hornblower would not admit defeat yet. He struggled on trying to make conversation, feeling a little noble — more than a little — at standing here growing wet to the skin in an endeavour to relieve another man's troubles. It was some small comfort when the rain squall passed on over the *Princess's* lee bow, but it was a much greater relief when one of the seamen forward hailed loudly.

"Sail ho! Two points on the weather bow!"

Meadows came out of his apathy sufficiently to look forward along with Hornblower in the direction indicated. With the sudden clearing of the weather the vessel was no more than hull-down at this moment of sighting, no more than five or six miles away and in plain view, close hauled on the port tack on the *Princess's* starboard bow, on a course that would apparently come close to intercepting the course of the *Princess* within the hour. "Brig," commented Hornblower, making the obvious conversational remark, but he said no more as his eye recorded the other features that made themselves apparent.

There was that equality between the fore- and main-topmasts; there was that white sheen about her canvas; there was even something about the spacing of those masts — everything was both significant and dangerous. Hornblower felt Meadows' hand clamp round his arm like a ring of iron.

"Frenchman!" said Meadows, with a string of oaths.

"May well be," said Hornblower.

The spread of her yards made it almost certain that she was a ship of war, but even so there was a considerable chance that she was British, one of the innumerable prizes captured from the French and taken into the service recently enough to have undergone little alteration.

"Don't like the looks of her!" said Meadows.

"Where's Baddlestone?" exclaimed Hornblower turning to look aft.

He tore himself from Meadows' grasp when he perceived Baddlestone, newly arrived on deck, with his telescope trained on the brig; the two of them at once started to push towards him.

"Come about, damn you!" yelled Meadows, but at that very same second Baddlestone had begun to bellow orders. There was a second or two of wild and dangerous confusion as the idle passengers attempted to aid, but they were all trained seamen. With the sheets hauled in against the violent pressure of the wind the helm was put over. *Princess* gybed neatly enough; the big lugsails flapped thunderously for a moment and then as the sheets were eased off she lay over close hauled on the other tack. As she did so, she lifted momentarily on a wave and Hornblower, his eyes still on the brig, saw the latter lift and heel at the same time. For half a second — long enough — he could see a line of gunports, the concluding fragment of evidence that she was a ship of war.

Now *Princess* and brig were close hauled on the same tack, with the brig on *Princess*'s quarter. Despite the advantage of her fore and aft rig it seemed to the acute eye that *Princess* lay a trifle farther off the wind than did the brig. She was nothing like as weatherly and far slower; the brig would headreach and weather on her. Hornblower's calculating eye told him that it would be only a question of hours before *Princess* would sag down right in to the brig's gaping jaws; should the wind veer any farther the process would be correspondingly accelerated.

"Take a pull on that foresheet," ordered Meadows, but before he could be obeyed the hands he addressed were checked by a shout from Baddlestone.

"Avast there!" Baddlestone turned on Meadows. "I command this ship and don't you meddle!"

The barrel-shaped merchant captain, his hands belligerently on his hips, met the commander's gaze imperiously. Meadows turned to Hornblower.

"Do we have to put up with this, Captain Hornblower?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Hornblower.

That was the legal position. Fighting men and naval officers though they were, they were only passengers, subject to the captain's command. Even if it should come to a fight that rule held good; by the laws of war a merchant ship was entitled to defend herself, and in that case the captain would still be in command as he would be in going about or laying a course or in any other matter of ship-handling.

"Well I'm damned," said Meadows.

Hornblower might not have answered quite so sharply and definitely if his curious mind had not taken note of one particular phenomenon. Just before Meadows had issued his order Hornblower had been entranced in close observation of the relative trim of the two big lugsails. They were sheeted in at slightly different angles, inefficiently to the inexperienced eye. Analysis of the complicated — and desperately interesting — problem in mechanics suggested significantly that the setting was correct; with one sail slightly diverting the wind towards the other the best results could be expected with the sails as they were trimmed at present. Hornblower had been familiar with the fascinating problem ever since as a midshipman he had had charge of a ship's longboat. Meadows must have forgotten about it, or never studied it. His action would have slightly cut down the speed; Baddlestone could be expected to know how to get the best out of a ship he had long commanded and a rig he had sailed in all his life.

"There's her colours," said Baddlestone. "Frenchy, of course."

"One of those new fast brigs they've been building," said Hornblower. "Bricks, they call 'em. Worth two of ours."

"Are you going to fight her?" demanded Meadows.

"I'm going to run as long as I can," answered Baddlestone.

That was so obviously the only thing to do.

"Two hours before dark. Nearer three," said Hornblower. "Maybe we'll be able to get away in a rain squall."

"Once he gets up to us —" said Baddlestone, and left the sentence unfinished. The French guns could pound the hoy to pieces at close range; the slaughter in the crowded little craft would be horrible.

They all three turned to stare at the brig; she had gained on them perceptibly already, but all the same —

"It'll be pretty well dark before she's in range," said Hornblower. "We've a chance."

"Small enough," said Meadows. "Oh, God —"

"D'ye think I want to rot in a French gaol?" burst out Baddlestone. "All I have is this hoy. Wife and children'll starve."

What about Maria, with one child born and another on the way? And — and — what about that promised post rank? Who would lift a finger for a forgotten near-captain in a French prison?

Meadows was blaspheming, emitting a stream of senseless oaths and insane filth.

"We've thirty men," said Hornblower. "They won't think we've more than half a dozen —"

"By God, we could board her!" exclaimed Meadows, the filth ending abruptly.

Could they? Could they get alongside? No French captain in his right mind would allow it, would risk damage to his precious ship in the strong breeze that was blowing. A spin of the wheel at the last moment, an order to luff in the last minute, and *Princess* would scrape by. A salvo of grape and the *Princess* would be a wreck; moreover the attempt would convey its own warning — the French captain and the French crew could anticipate trouble. The brig would have a crew of ninety at least, most likely more; unless there was total surprise thirty men would not have a chance against them. And Hornblower's vivid imagination conjured up a mental picture of the *Princess*, with all the good fortune in the world, alongside the brig and rolling wildly as she undoubtedly would. There could be no wild rush; the thirty odd men would reach the brig's deck in twos and threes, without a chance. It had to be complete, total surprise to stand the slightest chance of success. With these considerations racing through his mind he looked from one to the other, watching their expressions change from momentary excitement and hope to uneasy doubt. Something else came up in his mind that called for rapid action, and he turned away to bellow in his loudest and most penetrating voice to the groups clustered about the deck.

"Get down out of sight, all of you! I don't want a single man to show himself! Get down out of sight!"

He turned back to meet a stony gaze from both Baddlestone and Meadows.

"I thought we'd better not show our hand until it's played out," he said. "With a glass the brig'll soon be able to see we're crowded with men, and it might be as well if she didn't know."

"I'm the senior," snapped Meadows. "If anyone gives orders it's me."

"Sir —" began Hornblower.

"Commander May eighteen hundred," said Meadows. "You're not in the Gazette yet. You've not read yourself in."

It was an important point, a decisive point. Hornblower's appointment as Commander dated back only to April 1803.

Until his promised captaincy was actually official he must come under Meadows' orders. That was something of a set-back. His polite attempts at conversation earlier with Meadows must have appeared as deferential currying for favour instead of the generous condescension he had intended. And it was irritating not to have thought of all this before. But that irritation was nothing compared with that roused by the realization that he was a junior officer again, forced to proffer advice instead of giving orders — and this after two years of practically independent command. It was a pill to swallow; oddly, as the metaphor occurred to him, he was actually swallowing hard to contain his annoyance, and the coincidence diverted him sufficiently to cut off the angry answer he might have made. They were all three of them tense, even explosive. A quarrel among them might well be the quickest way to a French prison.

"Of course, sir," said Hornblower, and went on — if a thing was worth doing it was worth doing well — "I must beg your pardon. It was most thoughtless of me."

"Granted," said Meadows, only slightly grudgingly.

It was easy enough to change the subject — a glance towards the brig set the other two swinging round to look as well.

"Still headreaching on us, blast her!" said Baddlestone. "Weathering on us too."

Obviously she was nearer, yet the bearing was unchanged; the chase would end with the brig close up to the *Princess* without any alteration of course — and the infuriating corollary was that any other action the *Princess* might take would only shorten the chase.

"We've no colours hoisted," said Meadows.

"Not yet," replied Baddlestone.

Hornblower caught his eye and stared hard at him. It was inadvisable to speak or even for Hornblower to shake his head, even a trifle, but somehow the message reached Baddlestone, perhaps by telepathy.

"No need to hoist 'em yet," went on Baddlestone. "It leaves our hands free."

There was no need to take the smallest action that might commit them. There was not the least chance that the Frenchman would take the *Princess* to be anything other than a fleet auxiliary, but still . . . Things looked differently in a report, or even in a ship's log. If the Frenchman tired of the chase, or was diverted somehow from it, it would be well to offer him a loophole excusing him; he could say he believed the *Princess* to be a Dane or a Bremener. And until the colours had been hoisted and hauled down again *Princess* was free to take any action that might become possible.

"It's going to be dark before long," said Hornblower.

"She'll be right up to us by then," snarled Meadows, and the filthy oaths streamed from his mouth as ever.

"Cornered like rats."

That was a good description; they were cornered, hemmed in by the invisible wall of the wind. Their only line of retreat was in the direction of the brig, and the brig was advancing remorselessly up that line, actually as well as relatively. If the *Princess* was a rat, the brig was a man striding forward club in hand. And being cornered meant that even in darkness there would be no room to escape, no room for any evasive manoeuvre, right under the guns of the brig. But like a rat they might still fly at their assailant with the courage of desperation.

"I wish to God," said Meadows, "we'd run down on her when we sighted her. And my damned sword and pistols are at the bottom of the sea. What arms d'you have on board?"

Baddlestone listed the pitiful contents of the arms chest; even a waterhoy carried cutlasses and pistols for defence against hostile rowing boats, which were well known to push out from the French shore to snap up unarmed prizes in a calm.

"We could get a few more," interposed Hornblower. "They're bound to send a boat and a prize crew. And in the dark —"

"By God, you're right!" shouted Meadows, and he turned on Baddlestone. "Don't hoist those colours! We'll get out of this! By God, we'll take her!"

"We could try," said Baddlestone.

"And by God, I'm the senior naval officer!" said Meadows.

A man returning to England under a cloud would be rehabilitated almost automatically if he brought a prize in with him. Meadows might possibly reach the captains' list before Hornblower.

"Come on," said Meadows. "Let's get the hands told off."

They were entering upon the wildest, the most reckless enterprise that could ever be imagined, but they were desperate men. Hornblower himself was desperate, although he told himself during the bustle of preparation that he was a man under orders with no alternative except to obey. He would not go so far as to point out to himself that they were carrying out the plan he himself had devised — and on which he would have acted, danger or no danger, had he been in command.

CHAPTER SIX

Princess was lying hove-to in the darkness. The mere fact of being hove-to could be construed by the enemy as an admission of surrender — but not by a legalistic mind. From her fore-stay flickered a lighted lantern, trimmed right down. That would give least chance of the brig observing what would be going on aft in the waist, and yet that tiny dot of light was visible in the total blackness to the brig a cable's length — a cable and

a half — to leeward, where the four bright lanterns hoisted in the fore — and main — rigging not only revealed her position but provided light for the business of hoisting out her boat.

"They're coming," growled Meadows, crouching at the gunwale. "Remember, cold steel."

In the strong breeze that was blowing confused noises would pass unnoticed in the brig, but a shot would be heard clearly enough downwind. Now the crouching men could see a solid nucleus tossing in the darkness. Now they could hear the grind of oars; now they could hear French voices. Hornblower was waiting. He threw them a line as they hooked on.

"Montez," he said; it was an effort to keep his voice from cracking with excitement. His was the only white face in the hoy; the others were painted black.

Princess was heaving on the agitated sea in as lively a fashion as ever. It was several seconds before the first Frenchman boarded, cutlass and pistols at his belt, a midshipman arriving to take possession of the prize. Hornblower heard the dull thump when they struck him down. He was disposed of before the next man could make the leap. So was the next man, and the next, and the next. It was all horribly, repulsively easy to men who were prepared to be utterly ruthless.

Hornblower from his point of vantage could just determine when the last man had boarded; he could see that the boat's crew was preparing to hand up the prize crew's gear.

"Right!" he called, sharply.

Meadows and his allocated group were crouched and ready, and hurled themselves down in a torrent of falling bodies into the boat. An oar clattered and rattled; Hornblower could hear belaying pins striking against skulls. There was only one astonished outcry and no more. Hornblower could not hear the dead or unconscious bodies being dropped into the sea, but he knew that was being done.

"We've arms for seven," came Meadows' voice. "Come on, longboat party. Hornblower, get started."

There had been two hours in which to organize the attack; everybody knew what part he had to play. Hornblower ran aft and a group of almost invisible blackfaced figures loomed up at his side. It reminded him to dip his hand into the paint bucket that stood there and hastily smear his forehead and cheeks before making the next move. The hoy's boat was towing under the quarter; they hauled it in and scrambled down.

"Cast off!" said Hornblower, and a desperate shove with the port side oars got them clear. "Easy all!"

Tiller in hand, Hornblower stared through the darkness from under the stern. It had taken longer to man the brig's longboat; only now was it beginning to head back to the brig. As it rose on a wave Hornblower caught sight of it silhouetted against the light from the brig's lanterns. He must wait for several more seconds; if the brig's crew were to see two boats returning where one had set out the alarm might possibly be given.

It was a bad business that the French boat's crew had all been dropped into the sea; necessary act of war or not, the French could say they had been murdered. They would give no quarter to any survivors on the brig's deck if the attack were to fail; this was going to be the most desperate battle of his life — victory or death with no compromise possible.

There was the longboat approaching the brig's side, clearly visible in the light of the lanterns.

"Give way, port side!" The boat swung round as the oars bit. "Give way, starboard side!"

The boat began to move through the water, and the tiller under Hornblower's hand came to life. He set his course; there was no need to call upon the oarsmen to pull with all their strength, as they were well aware of the details of the situation. Hornblower had read somewhere a fragment of English history, about a Saxon over-king who, in token of his pre-eminence, had been rowed on the river Dee by eight under-kings. Most of the oars in this boat were being pulled by officers — Bush was pulling bow oar starboard side, seconding the efforts of Wise the boatswain and Wallis the surgeon and two or three master's mates, and the master and purser and gunner were packed in here and there with a seaman or two. The boat was crammed with men and low in the water, but every fighting man was needed.

She lurched and rolled over the dark water, the brig's lanterns growing steadily nearer. There was still no sound of trouble from the brig — she was expecting the return of her boat and until it was actually alongside she would suspect nothing. It was too much to expect that Meadows would be granted the opportunity to get comfortably alongside to launch a simultaneous rush, so that the French crew would be confronted in a second by twenty furious enemies where they had looked for half a dozen friends, but it was possible.

There it was. A pistol shot, the sound coming up wind. Further shots. It had been settled that Meadows' party should use their pistols as soon as they reached the deck. It would be necessary to shock and bewilder the surprised Frenchmen and get them into a panic; the arrival on deck of twenty men firing pistols right and left would be likely a means to bring this about.

"Easy all! Bowman!"

The boat surged alongside the brig, under her forechains, diametrically opposite to where an outburst of yelling and screaming indicated where Meadows was fighting. A dozen hands were reaching for the shrouds, Hornblower's among them. It was a miracle the boat did not capsize — warrant officers could be as hare-brained and excitable as young seamen if the occasion were desperate enough.

"Go on!" yelled Hornblower.

To the devil with formality; these were not men who needed leading. The boat lightened as the blackfaced mob sprang up into the chains; Hornblower was not the first, but the fifth or sixth to reach the deck. There was no opposition, even though there were a good many figures hurrying about the dimly lighted deck.

Here they were beside the hatchway and a whitefaced figure was just emerging, waist level with the deck. A blackfaced figure swung an axe and the Frenchman went tumbling down again.

Now a hurrying figure cannoned into him and flung him aside, nearly knocking him off his feet. But there was no immediate danger to him; the hurrying Frenchman was intent only on descending, flinging himself bodily down the hatchway followed by a dozen other panic-stricken figures, a terrified herd pursued by two cutlass-swinging men with black faces. When the rush ended Hornblower leaned over the hatchway and fired his pistol down into the mass below; that was probably the most effective use for the single round which was all he had, for it would scare away from the hatchway those other Frenchmen who were trying to ascend.

"Get the hatch cover on!" said Hornblower. "Wise, get it battened down! Master's mates, stay with Wise. Others follow me!"

He hurried aft, his brass-hilted Langer in his hand. Two or three distracted figures came rushing towards them. They had white faces, and they were struck down; it was no time for sentiment. Hornblower suddenly remembered to yell; if there were any real opposition aft it would be likely to dissolve at the sound of a hostile battle cry in the rear. What he saw was a sudden rectangle of light and a white figure, white shirt, white breeches, and white face coming through it; presumably the French captain emerging from his cabin, to be met by a huge figure rushing at him cutlass in air. Hornblower saw the French captain extend arm and knee in the classic lunge; he saw the cutlass come whirling down and then both figures tumbled out of sight. The battle, if such it could be called, was almost over. The Frenchmen, unarmed, taken utterly by surprise, could do nothing except to try to save their lives. But every figure with a white face was hunted round the deck to be slaughtered pitilessly by men mad with excitement, except for one group that flung themselves grovelling on the deck screaming for mercy — the killing of one or two of them sated the bloodlust and the survivors were jostled into a corner by the taffrail. Hornblower had a feeling that a few men had dashed up the rigging and were sheltering there; they could be dealt with later.

He looked round the deck; to the eerie illumination afforded by the lanterns swinging in the shrouds was added, periodically, the light from the cabin door, coming and going as the door swayed open and shut with the rolling of the ship. It was grotesque as well as horrible, the deck littered with corpses. Was that a dead man coming to life? Someone recovering consciousness? Certainly it was a body heaving upward but in a way no living man would get to his feet. Anything was possible in these hideous surroundings. No! That man was dead and being shoved up from below. He must have fallen across the after scuttle and the crew below the deck was getting him out of the way. As Hornblower looked the dead body rolled and fell with a thump on to the deck and there was the scuttle with two hands uplifted through it. Hornblower leaped, slashing with his sword, and the hands disappeared to the accompaniment of a yell from below. Hornblower drew the sliding cover across and found the bolt and shot it. That would make things momentarily secure.

Hornblower straightened himself up to find himself face to face with another figure that had come forward to take the same precaution, and idiotically he tightened his grip on his sword hilt — he was not ready for a black face so close to his.

"We've settled it," said Baddlestone's voice — Hornblower recognized the silhouette at once, now.

"Where's Meadows?" croaked Hornblower, his throat still dry with tension.

"He's a goner," answered Baddlestone, with a wave of his arm.

The cabin door swung open again as if in response, throwing an arc of light over the deck, and Hornblower remembered. On the far side of the scuttle lay two corpses. That one must be Meadows, lying half on his side, arms and legs asprawl. Standing out from his chest was the handle of a rapier, and it became apparent that two feet of the blade stuck out through his back so as to maintain him in that position. In the black face the teeth shone whitely, as Meadows had bared them in the ferocity of his attack; the swaying lights made his mouth look as if his lips were still going through contortions of rage. Beyond him lay the French captain in white shirt and breeches — only partly white now — but where face and head should be there was only something horrible. On the deck lay the cutlass which had dealt the shattering blow, wielded in one final explosion of Meadows' vast strength as the rapier went through his heart. Years ago the émigré French nobleman who had given Hornblower fencing lessons had spoken of the 'coup des deux veuves', the reckless attack that made two widows — here was an example of it.

"Any orders, sir?" Here was Bush recalling him to reality.

"Ask Captain Baddlestone," replied Hornblower.

A touch of formality would clear the nightmares from his mind, but at the same instant something else occurred to remind him that action was still instantly demanded. There was a crashing sound beside him and a jarring shock felt in the soles of his feet told him that the Frenchmen below were battering at the scuttle. From forward there came similar noises and a voice hailed.

"Cap'n, sir! They're trying to bash up the hatch cover!"

"There was a whole watch below when we boarded," said Baddlestone.

Of course, that would help to account for the comparative ease of the victory — thirty armed men attacking fifty men surprised and unarmed. But it meant that fifty enemies — more, including idlers — were below and refusing to be subdued.

"Get for'rard and deal with it, Bush," said Hornblower — it was only when Bush had departed that Hornblower realized that he had omitted the vital 'Mr'. He must be quite unstrung.

"We can keep 'em down all right," said Baddlestone.

It would hardly be possible for the men below to force their way to the deck through a hatchway or scuttle efficiently guarded, even if the covers were to be pounded to fragments as was clearly happening at the moment. But to maintain guards every moment, over the scuttle and the hatchway and the prisoners aft by the taffrail, and at the same time to provide crews to handle the brig and the *Princess* meant a good deal of strain.

The light was playing strange tricks; the unmanned wheel seemed to be turning of its own volition.

Hornblower stepped across to it. There was not the easy feel to it which might be expected of it with the ship hove-to, and then it suddenly spun free.

"They've cut the tiller ropes down belong," he reported to Baddlestone.

At that moment there was a sledgehammer blow on the deck under their feet, which made them leap in surprise.

Hornblower felt his feet tingling as though from a violent impact.

"What the devil — ?" he asked.

Before he could answer there was another enormous blow against the underside of the deck, and, staring downwards, he could see a tiny glimmer of light some inches from his right foot; there was a small jagged hole there.

"Come away!" he said to Baddlestone and retreated to the scuppers. "They're firing muskets down there!"

A one ounce musket ball fired at a range of no more than an inch or two would strike the deck with the force of twenty sledgehammers, and it would pierce the one inch plank-with residual velocity sufficient, doubtless, to shatter a leg or two or take a life.

"They guessed there'd be someone standing near the wheel," said Baddlestone.

Splintering crashes forward told how the Frenchmen were destroying the hatchcover there, and now there began a similar noise from the scuttle aft; it sounded as if they had found an axe down below and were using it.

"It's not going to be easy to sail her home," said Baddlestone; the whites of his eyes indicated that he was turning an inquiring gaze on Hornblower.

"If they won't surrender it's going to be damned difficult," said Hornblower.

Often when the deck of a ship was carried by a rush the survivors below were demoralized sufficiently to yield, but should they determine on resistance the situation became complicated, especially when, as in the present case, the numbers below were far greater than the numbers above and were apparently being led by someone of energy and courage. Hornblower had once or twice envisaged such a situation, but even his imagination had not gone as far as picturing musket balls being fired up through the deck.

"If we get the brig underway," he said, "there's the relieving tackles —"

"And Hell to pay," said Baddlestone.

It was possible to steer a ship after a fashion by adroit handling of the sails if the rudder were useless, but down below there were the relieving tackles, and half a dozen sturdy men heaving on them could drag the rudder round, not merely nullifying the efforts of the men on deck but actually imperilling the ship by laying her unexpectedly aback.

"We'll have to bolt for it," said Hornblower; it was an irritating, an infuriating suggestion to have to make, and Baddlestone reacted with a string of oaths worthy of the dead Meadows.

"No doubt you're right," he said at the end of it. "Ten thousand pounds apiece! We'll burn her — set her on fire before we go."

"We can't do that!" Hornblower's reply was jerked from him even before he had time to think.

Fire in a wooden ship was the deadliest of enemies; if they left the brig well alight on their departure no efforts on the part of the Frenchmen left behind would extinguish the flames. Fifty — sixty — seventy Frenchmen would burn to death if they did not leap overboard to drown. He could not do it — at least he would not do it in cold blood: the alternative was already forming in his mind.

"We can leave her a wreck," he said. "Cut the jeers, cut the halliards — cut the forestay, for that matter. Five minutes' work and it'll take 'em the best part of a day before they can get sail on her again."

Perhaps it was the appeal to the demon of destruction that made up Baddlestone's mind for him.

"Come on!" he said. "Let's get 'em to work."

It called for only the smallest amount of organization; the men they commanded were many of them trained officers who could grasp the situation with the briefest explanation. There were plenty of men to mount guard at the scuttle and at the hatch (whose cover was rapidly disintegrating under the force of axe-blows from beneath) while the party to wreak destruction was told off and sent on its mission. It was as the turmoil began that Hornblower remembered one of the important duties of a King's officer in a captured ship; his mind seemed to be working jerkily, with flashes of clarity like lightning through the sombre cloud that oppressed it. He dashed into the captain's cabin; as he expected, there stood the captain's desk, and as he should have expected, it was locked. He fetched a handspike from the nearest gun, and it was only a minute's work with the aid of its powerful leverage to wrench the desk open. There were the ship's papers, letter book and fair log and all. Here was something unusual, too, which he found when he began to gather them up. Something flat, rectangular, and heavy — a sheet of lead bound with tarred twine, at first sight. A further glance showed that it was actually a sandwich of lead, with papers enclosed. Undoubtedly those papers were unusually important dispatches, probably, or, if not, they would be additions and changes in the signal book. The leaden casing told its own story — it was to be thrown overboard if the ship were to be in danger of capture; a blow from Meadows' cutlass had put an end to that scheme.

A tremendous crash outside on the deck told him that the work of dismantling the brig was proceeding already. He looked round him and dragged a blanket from the cot, dumped all the ship's papers into it, and twisted it into a bag which he slung over his shoulder as he hurried out. The crash had been caused by the fall of the mainyard, as a result of the cutting of the jeers. It lay across the deck in a tangle of rigging which did not obscure the fact that the fall had sprung it — half broken it — in the centre. Five minutes' work by a gang of men who knew exactly what to do had left the brig a wreck.

Forward Baddlestone and others were on guard over the hatchway, whose cover was disintegrating into its constituent planks as the frantic Frenchmen below battered at it with axes and levers. There was already a jagged hole visible.

"We've fired every shot we have down at 'em," said Baddlestone. "When we go we'll have to run for it." His words were underlined by a bang and a flash from down below, and a musket bullet sang through the air between them.

"Wish we had —" began Baddlestone, and checked himself; the same idea had occurred to Hornblower in the same second.

Just at darkness, the brig, closing up on the *Princess*, had fired a shot across her bows, and in response the *Princess* hove-to in apparent surrender. The gun that fired that shot would almost certainly be ready for action still. Baddlestone rushed over to one battery, Hornblower to the other.

"There's a charge here!" yelled Baddlestone "Here, Jenkins, Sansome! Bear a hand!"

Hornblower searched along the shot garlands and found eventually what he sought.

"It's canister that'll do the trick," he said, bringing it over to the labouring group.

Baddlestone and the others were working like madmen with handspikes to swing the gun round to point at the hatchway. It called for vast effort; the trucks of the carriage groaned and shrieked as they scraped sideways on the deck. Baddlestone took the powder charge in its serge bag from out of the carrying bucket which had stood by the gun ready for use. They rammed it home, and then against the charge they rammed in the canister — a cylindrical box of thin metal containing a hundred and fifty bullets. Gurney the gunner pierced the serge through the touch hole with the pricker, and primed with the fine powder from the horn. Then he began to force in the quoin; the breech of the gun rose and the muzzle began to point with infinite menace down the hatchway. Baddlestone glowered round, turning his black face this way and that.

"Get down in the boats, all of you," he said.

"I'd better stay with you," said Hornblower.

"Get down into your boat with your party," countered Baddlestone.

It was the sensible thing to do; this was a rearguard action, and the covering force should be reduced to the absolute minimum. Hornblower herded his party down into the *Princess's* boat, and most of Baddlestone's went down into the brig's. Hornblower stood for a moment on tiptoe, with the sea surging round, holding on to the forechains with one hand while the other still retained its grip on the blanket-bundle of books. He could just see from here; there was the swaying deck, with the dead men tumbled over it and the incredible confusion of the dismantling. Yet two lanterns still burned in the shrouds, and the light from the cabin still waxed and waned with the swinging of the door. Gurney had apparently forced a second quoin under the breech of the gun, so that it pointed down at a steep angle into the hatchway. He and Baddlestone stood clear, and then he jerked at the lanyard. A bellowing roar, a blinding flash, a billow of smoke; yells and screams from down below, distinctly heard where Hornblower was standing. Then the Englishmen came running across the deck, Baddlestone and Gurney, the guards at the scuttle and the hatchway, the guards over the prisoners. Hornblower watched them scrambling down into the boat, Baddlestone last, turning to yell defiance before he disappeared down into his boat. Hornblower released his hold on the chains and sat down in the sternsheets. "Shove off!" he said.

Over there that tiny pinpoint of dancing light showed where *Princess* still lay-to. In five minutes they would be under way again, free from pursuit, with the wind fair for Plymouth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hornblower wrote the final lines of his letter, rapidly checked it through, from 'My dear Wife' to 'Your loving husband, Horatio Hornblower', and folded the sheet and put it in his pocket before going up on deck. The last turn was being taken round the last bollard, and *Princess* was safely alongside the quay in the victualling yard in Plymouth.

As always, there was something unreal, a sort of nightmare clarity in this first contact with England. The people, the sheds, the houses, seemed to stand out with unnatural sharpness; voices sounded different with the land to echo them; the wind was vastly changed from the wind he knew at sea. The passengers were already stepping ashore, and a crowd of curious onlookers had assembled; the arrival of a waterhoy from the

Channel fleet was of interest enough because she might have news, but a waterhoy which had actually captured, and for a few minutes had held possession of, a French brig of war was something very new. There were farewells to say to Baddlestone; besides making arrangements to land his sea chest and ditty bag there was something else to discuss.

"I have the French ship's papers here," said Hornblower, indicating the bundle.

"What of them?" countered Baddlestone.

"It's your duty to hand them over to the authorities," said Hornblower. "In fact I'm sure you're legally bound to do that. Certainly as a King's officer I must see that is done."

Baddlestone seemed to be in a reserved mood; he seemed as anxious as Hornblower not to betray himself.

"Then why not do it?" he said at length, after a long hard look at Hornblower.

"It's prize of war and you're the captain."

Baddlestone voiced his contempt for prize of war that consisted solely of worthless papers.

"You'd better do it, Captain," he said, after the oaths and obscenities. "They'll be worth something to you."

"They certainly may be," agreed Hornblower.

Baddlestone's reserve was replaced now by a look of inquiring puzzlement. He was studying Hornblower as if seeking to ascertain some hidden motive behind the obvious ones.

"It was you who thought of taking them," he said, "and you're ready to hand them over to me?"

"Of course. You're the captain."

Baddlestone shook his head slowly as if he was giving up a problem; but what the problem was Hornblower never did discover.

Next there was the strange sensation of feeling the unmoving earth under his feet as he stepped ashore; there was the silence that fell on the two groups of passengers — officers and ratings — as he approached them. He had to take a formal farewell of them — it was only thirty hours since he and they had fought their way along the French brig's deck, swinging their cutlasses. There was a brotherhood in arms — one might almost say a brotherhood of blood — between them, something that divided them off sharply into a caste utterly different from the ignorant civilians here.

But the very first thing to deal with on shore was his letter. There was a skinny and bare-footed urchin hanging on the fringe of the crowd.

"You boy!" called Hornblower. "D'you want to earn a shilling?"

"Iss, that do I." The homely accent was accompanied by an embarrassed grin.

"D'you know Driver's Alley?"

"Iss, sir."

"Here's sixpence and a letter. Run all the way and take this letter to Mrs Hornblower. Can you remember that name? Let's hear you say it. Very well. She'll give you the other sixpence when you give her the letter. Now — run."

Now for the goodbyes.

"I said goodbye to most of you gentlemen only a few days back, and now I have to do so again. And a good deal has happened since then."

"Yes, sir!" an emphatic agreement, voiced by Bush as the only commissioned officer present.

"Now I'm saying goodbye once more. I said before that I hoped we'd meet again, and I say it now. And I say 'thank you', too. You know I mean both those."

"It's us that have to thank you, sir," said Bush, through the inarticulate murmurs uttered by the others.

"Goodbye, you men," said Hornblower to the other group. "Good luck."

"Goodbye and good luck, sir."

He turned away; there was a dockyard labourer available to wheel away his gear on a barrow, on which he could also lay the blanket-bundle which swung from his hand; it might be vastly precious but it would not be out of his sight, and he had his dignity as a captain to consider. That dignity Hornblower felt imperilled enough as it was by the difficulty he experienced in walking like a landsman; the cobbles over which he was making his way seemed as if they could not remain level. He knew he was rolling in his gait like any Jack Tar, and yet, try as he would, he could not check the tendency while the solid earth seemed to seesaw under his feet.

The labourer — as might have been expected — had no knowledge of where the admiral commanding the port was to be found; he did not know even his name, and a passing clerk had to be stopped and questioned. "The port admiral?" The lard-faced clerk who repeated Hornblower's words was haughty, and Hornblower was battered and dishevelled, his hair long and tousled, his clothes rumpled, all as might be expected after nearly two weeks of crowded life in a waterhoy. But there was an epaulette, albeit a shabby one, on his left shoulder, and when the clerk noticed it he added a faint "Sir".

"Yes, the port admiral."

"You'll find him in his office in the stone building over there."

"Thank you. Do you know his name?"

"Foster. Rear-Admiral Harry Foster."

"Thank you."

That must be Dreadnought Foster. He had been one of the board of captains who had examined Hornblower for Lieutenant all those years ago in Gibraltar, the night the Spaniards sent the fireships in.

The marine sentry at the outer gate presented arms to the epaulette, but he was not so wooden as to allow to pass unnoticed the blanket-bundle that Hornblower took from the labourer; his eyes swivelled round to stare at it even while his neck stayed rigid. Hornblower took off his battered hat to return the salute and passed through. The flag-lieutenant who interviewed him next noticed the bundle as well, but his expression softened when Hornblower explained he was carrying captured documents.

"From the *Guèpe*, sir?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes," answered Hornblower in surprise.

"The Admiral will see you, sir."

It was only yesterday, when Hornblower had examined the log more carefully in the troy, that he had discovered the French brig's name. It was only an hour ago that the *Princess* had made contact with the land, and yet the story was already known in the Admiral's office; at least it would save a little time — Maria would be waiting at the dockyard gate.

Dreadnought Foster was just as Hornblower remembered him, swarthy, with an expression of sardonic humour. Luckily he appeared to have no recollection of the nervous midshipman whose examination had been fortunately interrupted that evening in Gibraltar. Like his flag-lieutenant he had heard something of the story of the capture of the brig already — one more example of the speed with which gossip can fly — and he grasped the details, as Hornblower supplied them, with professional ease.

"And those are the documents?" he asked, when Hornblower reached that point in his sketchy narrative.

"Yes, sir."

Foster reached out a large hand for them.

"Not everyone would have remembered to bring them away, Captain," he said, as he began to turn them over.

"Log. Day book. Station bill. Quarter bill. Victualling returns."

He had noticed the lead covered dispatch first of all, naturally, but he had laid it aside to examine last.

"Now what do we have here?" He studied the label. "What does 'S.E.' mean?"

"Son Excellence — His Excellency, sir."

"His Excellency the Captain General of — what's this, Captain?"

"Windward Isles, sir."

"I might have guessed that seeing it says 'Martinique'," admitted Foster. "But I never had a head for French. Now —"

He fingered the penknife on his desk. He studied the tarred twine that bound the leaden sandwich. Then he put the knife down reluctantly and looked up at Hornblower.

"I don't think I'd better meddle," he said. "This'll be best left for Their Lordships."

Hornblower had had the same thought although he had not ventured to voice it. Foster was looking at him searchingly.

"You intend going to London, of course, Captain?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Naturally. You want a ship, I think."

"Yes, sir. Admiral Cornwallis named me for promotion last month."

"Well — This —" Foster tapped the dispatch. "This will save you time and money. Flags!"

"Sir!" The flag-lieutenant was instantly in attendance.

"Captain Hornblower will need a post-chaise."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Have it at the gate immediately."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Have a travel warrant made out for London."

"Aye aye, sir."

Foster turned his attention once more to Hornblower and smiled sardonically at the bewilderment and surprise he saw in his face. For once Hornblower had been caught off his guard and had allowed his emotions to show.

"Seventeen guineas that will cost King George, God bless him," said Foster. "Aren't you grateful for his bounty?"

Hornblower had regained control over himself; he was even able to conceal his irritation at his lapse.

"Of course, sir," he said, in almost an even tone and with an expressionless face.

"Every day — ten times a day sometimes," said Foster, "I have officers coming in here, even admirals sometimes, trying to get travel warrants to London. The excuses I've heard! And here you don't care."

"Of course I'm delighted, sir," said Hornblower. "And greatly obliged, too."

Maria would be waiting at the gate, but he was too proud to show any further weakness under Foster's sardonic gaze. A King's officer had his duty to do. And it was less than three months since he had last seen Maria; some officers had been parted from their wives since the outbreak of war more than two years ago.

"No need to be obliged to me," said Foster. "This is what decided me."

'This' was of course the dispatch which he tapped again.

"Yes, sir."

"Their Lordships should think it's worth seventeen guineas. I'm not doing it for your sweet sake."

"Naturally, sir."

"Oh yes. And I'd better give you a note to Marsden. It will get you past the doorkeeper."

"Thank you, sir."

Those last two speeches — Hornblower digested them while Foster scribbled away at the letter — were hardly tactful when considered in relation to each other. They implied a certain lack of charm. Marsden was the Secretary to the Lords of the Admiralty, and the suggestion that Hornblower needed a note to gain admittance was an unexpressed but disparaging comment on his appearance.

"Chaise will be at the gates, sir," announced the flag-lieutenant.

"Very well." Foster sanded his letter and poured the sand back into the caster, folded the letter and addressed it, sanded it once more, and once more returned the sand. "Seal that, if you please."

As the flag-lieutenant busied himself with candle and wax and seal Foster folded his hands and looked over again at Hornblower.

"You're going to be pestered for news at every relay," he said. "The country can't think about anything except 'What's Nelson doing?' and 'Has Boney crossed yet?'. They'll discuss Villain-noove and Calder the way they used to discuss Tom Cribb and Jem Belcher."

"Indeed, sir? I fear I know nothing about any of them."

Tom Cribb and Jem Belcher were disputing the heavyweight championship of England at this period.

"Just as well."

"Ready, sir," said the flag-lieutenant, handing the sealed letter to Hornblower, who held it for an embarrassed second before putting it in his pocket — it seemed rather cavalier treatment for a dispatch to the Secretary of the Admiralty.

"Goodbye captain," said Foster, "and a pleasant journey."

"I've had your baggage put in the chaise, sir," said the flag-lieutenant on the way to the gate.

"Thank you," said Hornblower.

Outside the gate there was the usual small crowd of labourers waiting to be hired, of anxious wives, and of mere sightseers. Their attention was at this moment taken up by the post-chaise which stood waiting with the postilion at the horses' heads.

"Well, goodbye, sir, and a pleasant journey," said the flag-lieutenant, handing over the blanket-bundle. From outside the gate came a well-remembered voice.

"Horry! Horry!"

Maria in bonnet and shawl stood there by the wicket gate, with little Horatio in her arms.

"That's my wife and my child," said Hornblower abruptly. "Goodbye, sir."

He strode out through the gate and found himself clasping Maria and the child in the same embrace.

"Horry, darling. My precious," said Maria. "You're back again. Here's your son — look how he's growing up. He runs about all day long. There, smile at your daddy, poppet."

Little Horatio did indeed smile, for a fleeting instant, before hiding his face in Maria's bosom.

"He looks well indeed," said Hornblower. "And how about you, my dear?"

He stood back to look her over. There was no visible sign at present of her pregnancy, except perhaps in the expression in her face.

"To see you is to give me new life, my loved one," said Maria.

It was painful to realize that what she said was so close to the truth. And it was horribly painful to know that he had next to tell her that he was leaving her in this very moment of meeting.

Already, and inevitably, Maria had put out her right hand to twitch at his coat, while holding little Horatio in her left arm.

"Your clothes look poorly, Horry darling," she said. "How crumpled this coat is. I'd like to get at it with an iron."

"My dear —" said Hornblower.

This was the moment to break the news, but Maria anticipated him.

"I know," she said, quickly. "I saw your chest and bag being put into the chaise. You're going away."

"I fear so."

"To London?"

"Yes."

"Not one little moment with me — with us?"

"I fear not, my dear."

Maria was being very brave. She held her head back and looked straight at him unflinchingly; there was just the tiniest quiver of her lips to indicate the stresses within.

"And after that, darling?" asked Maria; when she spoke her tone gave a further hint of those stresses.

"I hope to get a ship. I shall be a captain, remember dear."

"Yes." Just the one word, of heartbroken acquiescence.

Perhaps it was fortunate then that Maria noticed something that distracted her, but Hornblower was inclined to believe that Maria deliberately and bravely distracted herself. She lifted her hand to his cheek, to his jawbone, below his left ear.

"What's this?" she asked. "It looks like paint. Black paint. You haven't looked after yourself very well, dear."

"Very likely it's paint," agreed Hornblower.

He had repressed the almost automatic reaction to draw back from a public caress, before he realized what it was that Maria had observed. Now there was a flood of recollection. The night before last he had stormed on to the deck of the *Guèpe* with a gang of yelling madmen with blackened faces. He had heard a cutlass blade crunch on bone, he had heard screams for mercy, he had seen nine pounds of canister fired down into a crowded 'tweendecks. Only the night before last, and here was Maria, simple and innocent and ignorant, and his child, and the staring onlookers, in the English sunshine. It was only a step out of one world into another, but it was a step infinitely long, over a bottomless chasm.

"Horry, darling?" said Maria, inquiringly, and broke the spell.

She was looking at him anxiously, studying him and frightened by what she saw; he felt he must have been scowling, even snarling, as his expression revealed the emotions he was re-experiencing. It was time to smile.

"It wasn't easy to clean up in *Princess*," he said. It had been hard to apply turpentine to his face before a mirror in the leaping waterhoy with the wind on the quarter.

"You must do it as soon as ever you can," said Maria. She was scrubbing at his jaw with her handkerchief. "It won't come off for me."

"Yes, dear."

He realized that what had been a death's head grin was softening into something more natural, and this was the moment, with reassurance restored to Maria's face, to tear himself from her.

"And now goodbye, dear," he said gently.

"Yes, dear."

She had learned her lesson well during half a dozen farewells since their marriage. She knew that her incomprehensible husband disliked any show of emotion even in private, and disliked it twenty times as much with a third party present. She had learned that he had moments of withdrawal which she should not resent because he was sorry for them afterwards. And above all that she had learned that she weighed in the scale nothing, nothing at all, against his duty. She knew that if she were to pit herself and her child against this it would only end in a terrible hurt which she could not risk because it would hurt him as much or more.

It was only a few steps to the waiting chaise; he took note that his sea chest and ditty bag were under the seat on which he put his precious bundle, and turned back to his wife and child.

"Goodbye, son," he said. Once more he was rewarded with a smile instantly concealed. "Goodbye my dear. I shall write to you, of course."

She put up her mouth for kissing, but she held herself back from throwing herself into his arms, and she was alert to terminate the kiss at the same moment as he saw fit to withdraw. Hornblower climbed up into the chaise, and sat there, feeling oddly isolated. The postilion mounted and looked back over his shoulder.

"London," said Hornblower.

The horses moved forward and the small crowd of onlookers raised something like a cheer. Then the hoofs clattered on the cobbles and the chaise swung round the corner, abruptly cutting Maria off out of his sight.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"This'll do," said Hornblower to the landlady.

"Bring 'em up, 'Arry," yelled the landlady over her shoulder, and Hornblower heard the heavy feet of the idiot son on the uncarpeted stairs as he carried up his sea chest.

There was a bed and a chair and a wash-hand stand; a mirror on the wall; all a man could need. These were the cheap lodgings recommended to him by the last postilion; there had been a certain commotion in the frowsy street when the post-chaise had turned into it from the Westminster Bridge Road and had pulled up outside the house — it was not at all the sort of street where post-chaises could be expected to be seen. The cries of the children outside who had been attracted by the sight could still be heard through the narrow window.

"Anything you want?" asked the landlady.

"Hot water," said Hornblower.

The landlady looked a little harder at the man who wanted hot water at nine in the morning.

"Or right. I'll get you some," she said.

Hornblower looked round him at the room; it seemed to his disordered mind that if he were to relax his attention the room would have revolved round him on its own. He sat down in the chair; his backside felt as if it were one big bruise, as if it had been beaten with a club. It would have been far more comfortable to stretch out on the bed, but that he dared not do. He kicked off his shoes and wriggled out of his coat, and became aware that he stank.

"'Ere's your 'ot water," said the landlady, re-entering.

"Thank you."

When the door closed again Hornblower pulled himself wearily to his feet and took off the rest of his clothes. That was better; he had not had them off for three days, and this room was sweltering hot with the June sun blazing down on the roof above. Stupid with fatigue, he more than once had to stop to think what he should

do next, as he sought out clean clothing and unrolled his housewife. The face he saw in the mirror was covered with hair on which the dust lay thick and he turned away from it in disgust.

It was a grisly and awkward business to wash himself inch by inch in the wash basin, but it was restorative in some small degree. Everything he had been wearing was infiltrated with dust, which had penetrated everywhere — some had even seeped into his sea chest and pattered out when he lifted out his clothes. With his final pint of hot water he applied himself to shave.

That brought about a decided improvement in his appearance although even now the face that looked out at him from the mirror was drawn very fine and with a pallor that made his tan look as if it were something painted on — that reminded him to look closely at his left jaw. Wear and tear as well as the shave had removed the paint that Maria had noticed. He put on clean clothes — of course they were faintly damp as always when newly come from the sea and would stay so until he could get them washed in fresh water. Now he was ready; he had consumed exactly the hour he had allowed himself. He picked up his bundle of papers and walked stiffly down the stairs.

He was still incredibly stupid with fatigue. During the last hours in the post-chaise he had nodded off repeatedly while sitting up and lurching over the rutted roads. To travel post-haste had a romantic sound but it was utterly exhausting. When changing horses he had allowed himself sometimes half an hour — ten minutes in which to eat and twenty in which to doze with his head pillowed on his arms resting on the table. Better to be a sea officer than a courier, he decided. He paid his halfpenny toll on the bridge; normally he would have been greatly interested in the river traffic below him, but he could not spare it a glance at present. Then he turned up Whitehall and reached the Admiralty.

Dreadnought Foster had displayed good sense in giving him that note; the doorkeeper eyed him and his bundle with intense suspicion when he first applied himself to him — it was not only cranks and madmen that he had to turn away, but the naval officers who came to pester Their Lordships for employment.

"I have a letter for Mr Marsden from Admiral Foster," said Hornblower, and was interested to see the doorkeeper's expression soften at once.

"Would you please write a note to that effect on this form, sir?" he asked.

Hornblower wrote 'Bringing a message from Rear-Admiral Harry Foster' and signed it, along with his boarding-house address.

"This way, sir," said the doorkeeper. Presumably — certainly, indeed — the Admiral commanding at Plymouth would have the right of immediate access, personally or through an emissary, to Their Lordships' Secretary. The doorkeeper led Hornblower into a waiting room and bustled off with the note and the letter; in the waiting room there were several officers sitting in attitudes of expectancy or impatience or resignation, and Hornblower exchanged formal 'good mornings' with them before sitting down in a corner of the room. It was a wooden chair, unfriendly to his tormented sitting parts, but it had a high back with wings against which it was comfortable to lean.

Somehow Frenchmen had boarded the *Princess* by surprise, in the darkness. Now they were raging through the little ship, swinging cutlasses. Everything on board was in a turmoil while Hornblower struggled to free himself from his hammock to fight for his life. Someone was shouting 'Wake up, sir!' which was the very thing he wanted to do but could not. Then he realized that the words were being shouted into his ear and someone was shaking him by the shoulder. He blinked twice and came back to life and consciousness.

"Mr Marsden will see you now, sir," said the unfamiliar figure who had awakened him.

"Thank you," replied Hornblower, seizing his bundle and getting stiffly to his feet.

"Fair off you was, sir," said the messenger. "Come this way, sir, please sir."

Hornblower could not remember whether the other individuals waiting were the same as he had first seen or had changed, but they eyed him with envious hostility as he walked out of the room.

Mr Marsden was a tall and incredibly elegant gentleman of middle age, old-fashioned in that his hair was tied at the back with a ribbon, yet elegant all the same because the style exactly suited him. Hornblower knew him to be already a legendary figure. His name was known throughout England because it was to him that dispatches were addressed ('Sir, I have the honour to inform you for the further information of Their Lordships that —') and printed in the newspapers in that form. First Lords might come and First Lords might go — as Lord Barham had just come and Lord Melville had just gone — and so might Sea Lords, and so might Admirals, but

Mr Marsden remained the Secretary. It was he who handled all the executive work of the greatest navy the world had ever seen. Of course he had a large staff, no fewer than forty clerks, so Hornblower had heard, and he had an assistant secretary, Mr Barrow, who was almost as well known as he was, but even so out of everybody in the world Mr Marsden could most nearly be described as the one who was fighting single-handed the war to the death against the French Empire and Bonaparte.

It was a lovely elegant room looking out on to the Horse Guards Parade, a room that exactly suited Mr Marsden, who was seated at an oval table. At his shoulder stood an elderly clerk, gray-haired and lean, of an obviously junior grade, to judge by his threadbare coat and frayed linen.

Only the briefest salutations were exchanged while Hornblower put his bundle down on the table.

"See what there is here, Dorsey," said Marsden over his shoulder to the clerk, and then, to Hornblower, "How did these come into your possession?"

Hornblower told of the momentary capture of the *Guèpe*; Mr Marsden kept his grey eyes steadily on Hornblower's face during the brief narrative.

"The French captain was killed?" asked Marsden.

"Yes."

There was no need to tell about what Meadows' cutlass had done to the French captain's head.

"That indicates that this may be genuine," decided Marsden, and Hornblower was puzzled momentarily until he realized that Marsden meant that there had been no ruse-de-guerre and that the papers had not been deliberately 'planted' on him.

"Quite genuine, I think, sir. You see —" he said, and went on to point out that the French brig could not have expected for one moment that the *Princess* would launch a counter-attack on her.

"Yes," agreed Marsden; he was a man of icy-cold manner, speaking in a tone unchangingly formal. "You must understand that Bonaparte would sacrifice any man's life if he could mislead us in exchange. But, as you say, Captain, these circumstances were completely unpredictable. What have you found, Dorsey?"

"Nothing of great importance except this, sir."

'This' was of course the leaden covered dispatch. Dorsey was looking keenly at the twine which bound up the sandwich.

"That's not the work of Paris," he said. "That was tied in the ship. This label was probably written by the captain, too. Pardon me, sir."

Dorsey reached down and took a penknife from the tray in front of Marsden, and cut the twine, and the sandwich fell apart.

"Ah!" said Dorsey.

It was a large linen envelope, heavily sealed in three places, and Dorsey studied the seals closely before looking over at Hornblower.

"Sir," said Dorsey. "You have brought us something valuable. Very valuable, I should say, sir. This is the first of its kind to come into our possession."

He handed it to Marsden, and tapped the seals with his finger.

"Those are the seals of this newfangled Empire of Bonaparte's, sir," he said. "Three good specimens."

It was only a few months before, as Hornblower realized, that Bonaparte had proclaimed himself Emperor and the Republican Consulate had given place to the Empire. When Marsden permitted him to look closely, he could see the imperial eagle with its thunderbolt, but to his mind not quite as dignified a bird as it might be, for the feathers that sheathed its legs offered a grotesque impression of trousers.

"I would like to open this carefully, sir," said Dorsey.

"Very well. You may go and attend to it."

Fate hung in the balance for Hornblower at that moment; somehow Hornblower was aware of it, with uneasy premonition, while Marsden kept his cold eyes fixed on his face, apparently as a preliminary to dismissing him. Later in his life — even within a month or two — Hornblower could look back in perspective at this moment as one in which his destiny was diverted in one direction instead of in another, dependent on a single minute's difference in timing. He was reminded, when he looked back, of the occasions when musket balls had missed him by no more than a foot or so; the smallest, microscopic correction of aim on the part of the marksman would have laid Hornblower lifeless, his career at an end. Similarly at this moment a few seconds' delay along

the telegraph route, a minute's dilatoriness on the part of a messenger, and Hornblower's life would have followed a different path.

For the door at the end of the room opened abruptly and another elegant gentleman came striding in. He was some years younger than Marsden, and dressed soberly but in the very height of fashion, his lightly starched collar reaching to his ears, and a white waistcoat picked out with black calling unobtrusive attention to the slenderness of his waist. Marsden looked round with some annoyance at this intrusion, but restrained himself when he saw who the intruder was, especially when he saw a sheet of paper fluttering in his hand.

"Villeneuve's in Ferrol," said the newcomer. "This has just come by telegraph. Calder fought him off Finisterre and was given the slip."

Marsden took the dispatch and read it with care.

"This will be for His Lordship," he said, calmly, rising with deliberation from his chair. Even then he did not noticeably hurry. "Mr Barrow, this is Captain Hornblower. You had better hear about his recent acquisition."

Marsden went out through a hardly perceptible door behind him, bearing news of the most vital, desperate importance. Villeneuve had more than twenty ships of the line, French and Spanish — ships which could cover Bonaparte's crossing of the Channel — and he had been lost to sight for the last three weeks since Nelson had pursued him to the West Indies. Calder had been stationed off Finisterre to intercept and destroy him and had apparently failed in his mission.

"What is this acquisition, Captain?" asked Barrow, the simple question breaking into Hornblower's train of thought like a pistol shot.

"Only a dispatch from Bonaparte, sir," he said. He used the 'sir' deliberately, despite his confusion — Barrow was after all the Second Secretary, and his name was nearly as well known as Marsden's.

"But that may be of vital importance, Captain. What was the purport of it?"

"It is being opened at the present moment, sir. Mr Dorsey is attending to that."

"I see. Dorsey in forty years in this office has become accustomed to handling captured documents. It is his particular department."

"I fancied so, sir."

There was a moment's pause, while Hornblower braced himself to make the request that was clamouring inside him for release.

"What about this news, sir? What about Villeneuve? Could you tell me, sir?"

"No harm in your knowing," said Barrow. "A Gazette will have to be issued as soon as it can be arranged. Calder met Villeneuve off Finisterre. He was in action with him for the best part of two days — it was thick weather — and then they seem to have parted."

"No prizes, sir?"

"Calder seems to have taken a couple of Spaniards."

Two fleets, each of twenty ships or more, had fought for two days with no more result than that. England would be furious — for that matter England might be in very serious peril. The French had probably employed their usual evasive tactics, edging down to leeward with their broad sides fully in action while the British tried to close and paid the price for the attempt.

"And Villeneuve broke through into Ferrol, sir?"

"Yes."

"That's a difficult place to watch," commented Hornblower.

"Do you know Ferrol?" demanded Barrow, sharply.

"Fairly well, sir."

"How?"

"I was a prisoner of war there in '97, sir."

"Did you escape?"

"No, sir, they set me free."

"By exchange?"

"No, sir."

"Then why?"

"I helped to save life in a shipwreck."

"You did? So you know about conditions in Ferrol?"

"Fairly well, sir, as I said."

"Indeed. And you say it's a difficult to watch. Why?"

Sitting in a peaceful office in London a man could experience as many surprises as on the deck of a frigate at sea. Instead of a white squall suddenly whipping out of an unexpected quarter, or instead of an enemy suddenly appearing on the horizon, here was a question demanding an immediate answer regarding the difficulty of blockading Ferrol. This was a civilian, a landsman, who needed the information, and urgently. For the first time in a century the First Lord was a seaman, an Admiral — it would be a feather in the Second Secretary's cap if in the next, immediate conference he could display familiarity with conditions in Ferrol. Hornblower had to express in words what up to that moment he had only been conscious of as a result of his seaman's instinct. He had to think fast to present an orderly statement.

"First of all it's a matter of distance," he began. "It's not like blockading Brest."

Plymouth would be the base in each case; from Plymouth to Brest was less than fifty leagues, while from Plymouth to Ferrol was nearly two hundred — communication and supply would be four times as difficult, as Hornblower pointed out.

"Even more with prevailing westerly winds," he added.

"Please go on, Captain," said Barrow.

"But really that is not as important as the other factors, sir," said Hornblower.

It was easy to go on from there. A fleet blockading Ferrol had no friendly refuge to leeward. A fleet blockading Brest could run to Tor Bay in a westerly tempest — the strategy of the past fifty years had been based on that geographical fact. A fleet blockading Cadiz could rely on the friendly neutrality of Portugal, and had Lisbon on one flank and Gibraltar on the other. Nelson watching Toulon had made use of anchorages on the Sardinian coast. But off Ferrol it would be a different story. Westerly gales would drive a blockading fleet into the cul-de-sac of the Bay of Biscay whose shores were not merely hostile but wild and steep-to, with rain and fog. To keep watch over Villeneuve in Ferrol, particularly in winter, would impose an intolerable strain on the watcher, especially as the exits from Ferrol were far easier and more convenient than the single exit from Brest — the largest imaginable fleet could sortie from Ferrol in a single tide, which no large French fleet had ever succeeded in doing from Brest. He recalled what he had observed in Ferrol regarding the facilities for the prompt watering of a fleet, for berthing, for supply; the winds that were favourable for exit and the winds that made exit impossible; the chances of a blockader making furtive contact with the shore — as he himself had later done off Brest — and the facilities to maintain close observation over a blockaded force.

"You seem to have made good use of your time in Ferrol, Captain," said Barrow.

Hornblower would have shrugged his shoulders, but restrained himself in time from indulging in so un-English a gesture. The memory of that desperately unhappy time came back to him in a flood and he was momentarily lost in retrospective misery. He came back into the present to find Barrow's eyes still fixed on him with curiosity, and he realized, selfconsciously, that for a moment he had allowed Barrow a glimpse into his inner feelings.

"At least I managed to learn to speak a little Spanish," he said; it was an endeavour to bring a trace of frivolity into the conversation, but Barrow continued to treat the subject seriously.

"Many officers would not have taken the trouble," he commented.

Hornblower shied away from this personal conversation like a skittish horse.

"There's another aspect to the question of Ferrol," he said, hurriedly.

"And what is that?"

"The town and its facilities as a naval base lay at the far end of long and difficult roads over mountain passes, whether by Betanzos or Villalba. To support a fleet there under blockade, to keep it supplied by road with the hundreds of tons of necessary stores, might be more than the Spaniards could manage."

"You know something of these roads, Captain?"

"I was marched over them when I was a prisoner."

"Boney's Emperor now and the Dons are his abject slaves. If anyone could compel them to attend to their business it would be Boney."

"That's very likely, sir." This was more a political question than a naval one, and it would be presumption on his part to make further comment.

"So we're back," said Barrow, half to himself, "to where we've been ever since '95, waiting for the enemy to come out and fight, and in your opinion in a worse situation than usual, Captain."

"That's only my opinion, sir," said Hornblower hastily.

These were questions for Admirals, and it was not healthy for junior officers to become involved in them.

"If only Calder had thrashed Villeneuve thoroughly!" went on Barrow. "Half our troubles would be over."

Hornblower had to make some reply or other, and he had to think fast for non-committal words that would not imply a criticism of an Admiral by a junior officer.

"Just possibly, sir," he said.

He knew that as soon as the news of the battle of Cape Finisterre was released the British public would boil with rage. At Camperdown, at the Nile, and at Copenhagen victories of annihilation had been gained. The mob would never be satisfied with this mere skirmish, especially with Bonaparte's army poised for embarkation on the Channel coast and Britain's fate dependent on the efficient handling of her fleets. Calder might well experience the fate of Byng; he could be accused, like Byng, of not having done his utmost to destroy the enemy. A political upheaval might easily occur in the near future.

That led to the next thought; a political upheaval would sweep away the Cabinet, including the First Lord, and possibly even the Secretariat — this very man to whom he was talking might be looking for new employment (with a black mark against his name) within a month. It was a tricky situation, and Hornblower suddenly felt overwhelmingly desirous that the interview should be ended. He was horribly hungry and desperately fatigued. When the door opened to admit Dorsey he looked up with relief.

Dorsey halted at sight of Barrow.

"The Secretary is with His Lordship," explained the latter. "What is it, Mr Dorsey?"

"I've opened the dispatch that Captain Hornblower captured, sir. It's — it's important, sir."

Dorsey's glance wavered over to Hornblower and back again.

"I think Captain Hornblower is entitled to see the results of his efforts," said Barrow, and Dorsey came forward with relief and laid on the table the objects he was carrying.

First there were half a dozen discs of white wax laid out on a tray.

"I've reproduced the seals," explained Dorsey. "Two copies of each. That seal-cutter in Cheapside can cut a seal from these so that Boney himself couldn't tell the difference. And I've managed to lift the originals without damaging them too much — the hot knife method, you understand, sir."

"Excellent," said Barrow, examining the results. "So these are the new seals of the new Empire?"

"Indeed they are, sir. But the dispatch — It's the greatest of prizes. See here, sir! And here!"

He stabbed excitedly at the paper with a gnarled finger. At the foot of the sheet, which was covered with paragraphs of careful handwriting, there was a crabbed signature. It had been written by a careless hand, and was surrounded by little ink blots as a result of the spluttering of a protesting pen. It was not really legible; Hornblower could read the first letters, 'Nap—' but the remainder was only a jagged line and a flourish.

"That's the first signature of this sort which has come into our possession, sir," explained Dorsey.

"Do you mean he has always signed 'N. Bonaparte' before?" asked Hornblower.

"Just 'Bonaparte'," said Dorsey. "We have a hundred, a thousand specimens, but not one like this."

"He hasn't adopted the Imperial style, all the same," said Barrow, examining the letter. "Not yet at least. He calls himself 'I' and not 'we'. See here, and here."

"I'm sure you're right, sir," said Dorsey, "not that I'm familiar with French. But here's something else, sir. And here."

The superscription said 'Palais des Tuileries' and 'Cabinet Impériale'.

"These are new?" asked Barrow.

"Yes, indeed, sir. Until now he did not call it a palace, and it was the 'Cabinet of the First Consul'."

"I wonder what the letter says?" interposed Hornblower. So far only the technical details had occupied their attention, like people judging a book by its binding without a thought for its contents. He took it from Dorsey's hand and began to read.

"You read French, sir?" asked Barrow.

"Yes," said Hornblower, a little off-handedly as he concentrated on his reading. He had never read a letter from an Emperor before.

Monsieur le Général Lauriston, the letter began. The first paragraph was taken up with allusions to the instructions already sent by the Ministries of Marine and of War. The second dealt with the relative seniority of General Lauriston and of various subordinates. The final one was more flamboyant.

"Hoist my flags over that beautiful continent, and if the British attack you, and you experience some bad luck, always remember three things, activity, concentration of forces, and the firm resolution to die with glory. These are the great principles of war which have brought me success in all my operations. Death is nothing, but to live defeated and without glory is to die every day. Do not worry about your family. Think only about that portion of my family which you are going to reconquer."

"It reads like a counsel of despair, sir," said Hornblower. "Telling him to fight to the last."

"No mention of sending him reinforcements," agreed Barrow. "Quite the opposite, in fact. A pity."

To reinforce the West Indies would necessitate risking some of Bonaparte's naval forces at sea.

"Boney needs a victory here first, sir," suggested Hornblower.

"Yes."

Hornblower found his own bitter smile repeated by Barrow. A victory won by Bonaparte in home waters would mean the conquest of England, the automatic fall of West Indies and East Indies, of Canada and the Cape, of the whole Empire; it would mean an alteration in the destiny of all mankind.

"But this —" said Barrow with a wave of the dispatch. "This may play its part."

Hornblower had already learned the importance of negative information, and he nodded agreement. And it was at that moment that Marsden returned to the room, with a fistful of papers.

"Oh, you're here, Dorsey," he said. "That's for His Majesty at Windsor. See that the courier leaves within fifteen minutes. That's for the telegraph to Plymouth. So's that. That's for Portsmouth. Have the copying begun immediately."

It was interesting to watch Marsden in action; there was no trace of excitement in his voice, and although the successive sentences followed each other without a pause they did not come tumbling out. Each was clearly enunciated in a tone of apparent indifference. The papers Marsden brought in might be of vital importance — most certainly were — but Marsden acted as if he were handing out blank sheets in some meaningless ceremony. On their way to Barrow the cold eyes passed over Hornblower without affording him an opportunity of taking his leave.

"No further messages, Mr Barrow?"

"None, Mr Marsden."

"There will be no confirmation from Plymouth before eight o'clock tomorrow morning," remarked Marsden looking at the clock.

The telegraph in clear weather and daylight could transmit a message from Plymouth in fifteen minutes — Hornblower had noticed several of the huge semaphore standards during his recent journey; last year he had landed outside Brest and burned a similar machine. But a written message, carried by relays of mounted couriers (some of them riding through darkness) would take twenty-three hours to make the journey. On wheels in his post-chaise he himself had taken forty; it seemed now as if it were weeks, and not hours.

"This captured dispatch of Captain Hornblower's is of interest, Mr Marsden," said Barrow; the tone of his voice seemed to echo Marsden's apparent indifference. It was hard for Hornblower to decide whether it was imitation or parody.

Yet it was only a matter of moments for Marsden to read the dispatch and to grasp the important features of the writing of it.

"So now we might imitate a letter from His Imperial and Royal Majesty the Emperor Napoleon," commented Marsden; the smile that accompanied the words was just as inhuman as the tone of his voice.

Hornblower was experiencing an odd reaction, possibly initialed by this last remark of Marsden's. His head was swimming with hunger and fatigue; he was being projected into a world of unreality, and the unreality was being made still more unreal by the manner of these two cold-blooded gentlemen with whom he was closeted. There were stirrings in his brain. Wild — delirious — ideas were forming there, but no wilder than this world in which he found himself, where fleets were set in motion by a word and where an Emperor's

dispatches could be the subject of a jest. He condemned his notions to himself as lunatic nonsense, and yet even as he did so he found additions making their appearance in his mind, logical contributions building up into a fantastic whole.

Marsden was looking at him — through him — with those cold eyes

"You may have done a great service for your King and Country," said Marsden; the words might be interpreted as words of praise, perhaps, but the manner and expression would call for no modification if Marsden were a judge on the bench condemning a criminal.

"I hope I have done so, sir," replied Hornblower.

"Exactly why do you hope that?"

It was a bewildering question, bewildering because its answer was so obvious.

"Because I am a King's officer, sir," said Hornblower.

"And not, Captain, because you expect any reward?"

"I had not thought of it, sir. It was only the purest chance," answered Hornblower.

This was verbal fencing, and faintly irritating. Perhaps Marsden enjoyed the game. Perhaps years of having to throw cold water on the hopes of innumerable ambitious officers demanding promotion and employment had made the process habitual to him.

"A pity it is not a dispatch of real importance," he said. "This only makes clear what we already could guess that Boney does not intend to send reinforcements to Martinique."

"But with that for a model —" began Hornblower. The he stopped, angry with himself. His tumultuous thought would make greater nonsense still expressed in words.

"With this as a model?" repeated Marsden.

"Let us have your suggestion, Captain," said Barrow.

"I can't waste your time, gentlemen," stammered Hornblower; he was on the verge of the abyss and striving unavailingly to draw back.

"You have given us an inkling, Captain," said Barrow. "Please continue."

There was nothing else to be done. An end to discretion.

"An order from Boney to Villeneuve, telling him to sail from Ferrol at all costs. It would have to give a reason — say that Décrès has escaped from Brest and will await him at a rendezvous off Cape Clear. So that Villeneuve must sail instantly — weigh, cut, or slip. A battle with Villeneuve is what England needs most — that would bring it about."

Now he had committed himself. Two pairs of eyes were staring at him fixedly.

"An ideal solution, Captain," said Marsden. "If only it could be done. How fine it would be if such an order could be delivered to Villeneuve."

The Secretary to the Board of Admiralty probably received crackpot schemes for the destruction of the French Navy every day of the week.

"Boney will be sending orders from Paris, often enough," went on Hornblower. He was not going to give up.

"How often do you transmit orders from this office to Commanders-in-Chief, sir? To Admiral Cornwallis, for instance? Once a week, sir? Oftener?"

"At least," admitted Marsden.

"Boney would write more often than that, I think."

"He would," agreed Barrow.

"And those orders would come by road. Of course Boney would never trust the Spanish postal services. An officer — a French officer, one of the Imperial aides-de-camp — would ride with the orders through Spain, from the French frontier to Ferrol."

"Yes?" said Marsden. He was at least interested enough to admit an interrogative note into the monosyllable.

"Captain Hornblower has been engaged on gathering information from the French coast for the last two years," interposed Barrow. "His name was always appearing in Cornwallis' dispatches, Mr Marsden."

"I know that, Mr Barrow," said Madden; there might even be a testy note in his voice at the interruption.

"The dispatch is forged," said Hornblower, taking the final plunge. "A small party is landed secretly with it at a quiet spot on the Spanish Biscay coast, posing as French officials, or Spanish officials, and they travel slowly towards the frontier along the highroad. A succession of couriers is coming in the opposite direction, bearing

orders for Villeneuve. Seize one of them — kill him, perhaps — or perhaps with the best of luck substitute the forged order for the one he is carrying. Otherwise one of the party turns back, posing as a French officer, and delivers the false letter to Villeneuve."

There was the whole plan, fantastic and yet — and yet — at least faintly possible. At least not demonstrably impossible.

"You say you've seen these Spanish roads, Captain?" asked Barrow.

"I saw something of them, sir."

Hornblower turned back from addressing Barrow to find Marsden's gaze still unwavering, fixed on his face.

"Haven't you any more to say, Captain? Surely you have."

This might be irony; it might be intended to lure him into making a greater and greater fool of himself. But there was so much that was plainly obvious and which he had forborne to mention. His weary mind could still deal with such points, with a moment to put them in order.

"This is an opportunity, gentlemen. A victory at sea is what England needs more than anything else at this moment. Could we measure its value? Could we? It would put an end to Boney's schemes. It would ease the strain of blockade beyond all measure. What would we give for the chance?"

"Millions," said Barrow.

"And what do we risk? Two or three agents. If they fail, that is all we have lost. A penny ticket in a lottery. An infinite gain against an inconsiderable loss."

"You are positively eloquent, Captain," said Marsden, still without any inflexion in his voice.

"I had no intention of being eloquent, sir," said Hornblower, and was a little taken aback at realizing how much truth there was in such a simple statement.

He was suddenly annoyed both with himself and with the others. He had allowed himself to be drawn into indiscretions, to appear as one of the feather-brained crackpots for whom Marsden must have so much contempt. He rose in irritation from his chair, and then restrained himself on the verge of being still more indiscreet by displaying irritation. A stiffly formal attitude would be better; something that would prove that his recent speeches had been mere polite and meaningless conversation. Moreover he must forestall the imminent and inevitable dismissal if he were going to preserve any of his self-respect.

"I have consumed a great deal of your very valuable time, gentlemen," he said.

There was a sudden sharp pleasure, despite his weariness, in thus being the first to make a move, to volunteer to quit the company of the Secretary to the Board, and of the Second Secretary, while dozens of junior officers were prepared to wait hours and days for an interview. But Marsden was addressing Barrow.

"What's the name of that South American fellow who's haunting every ante-room at present, Mr Barrow? You meet him everywhere — he was even dining at White's last week with Camberwell."

"The fellow who wants to start a revolution, sir? I've met him a couple of times myself. It's — it's Miranda, or Mirandola, something like that, sir."

"Miranda! That's the name. I suppose we can lay hands on him if we want him."

"Easily enough, sir."

"Yes. Now there's Claudius in Newgate Gaol. I understand he was a friend of yours, Mr Barrow."

"Claudius, sir? I met him, as everyone else did."

"He'll be coming up for trial within the week, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. He'll swing next Monday. But why are you asking about him, Mr Marsden?"

There was some faint pleasure in seeing one of those two, even though it was only the Second Secretary, so bewildered, and at the moment he was given no satisfaction.

"So there is no time to waste." Marsden turned to Hornblower, who was standing uncomfortably aware that most of the drama of his exit had fallen a little flat with this delay. "The doorkeeper has your address, Captain?"

"Yes."

"Then I shall send for you very shortly."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower had shut the door before he experienced any qualm regarding using this purely naval expression towards a civilian, nor did it linger, with so much else for his weary brain to think about. He wanted food; he

was desperately in need of sleep. He hardly cared about the unknown Miranda, this mysterious Claudius in Newgate Gaol. What he must do was to eat himself into a torpor, and then sleep, and sleep, and sleep. But also he must write to Maria.

CHAPTER NINE

Hornblower awoke in an overheated condition. The sunshine was blazing through the window, and his little attic was like an oven. Sleep had overcome him in the end while he lay under a blanket, and he was sweating profusely. Throwing off the blanket brought some relief, and he cautiously began to straighten himself out; apparently he had slept without a change of position, literally like a log. There was still an ache or two to be felt, which served to recall to mind where he was and how he came to be there. His formula for inducing sleep had worked after a long delay. But it must be well after sunrise; he must have slept for ten or perhaps twelve hours.

What day of the week was it? To answer that question called for a plunge into the past. It had been a Sunday that he had spent in the post-chaise — he could remember the church bells sounding across the countryside and the church-goers gathering round the post-chaise in Salisbury. So that he had arrived in London on Monday morning — yesterday, hard to believe though that was — and today was Tuesday. He had left Plymouth — he had last seen Maria — on Saturday afternoon. Hornblower felt his pleasant relaxation replaced by tension; he actually felt his muscles tightening ready for action as he went back from there — it was during the small hours of Friday morning that the *Princess* had headed away from the disabled *Guèpe*. It was on Thursday evening that he had climbed on to the deck of the *Guèpe* to conquer or die, with death more probable than conquest. Last Thursday evening, and this was only Tuesday morning.

He tried to put the uncomfortable thoughts away from him; there was a momentary return of tension as an odd thought occurred to him. He had left behind in the Admiralty — he had completely forgotten until now — the French captain's blanket in which he had bundled the ship's papers. Presumably some indigent clerk in the Admiralty had gladly taken it home last night, and there was nothing to be tense about — nothing, provided he did not allow himself to think about the French captain's head shattered like a cracked walnut.

He made himself listen to the street cries outside, and to the rumbling of cart wheels; the diversion allowed him to sink back again into quiescence, into semi-consciousness. It was not until some time later that he drowsily noted the sound of a horse's hoofs outside in the street, a trotting horse, with no accompanying sound of wheels. He raised himself when the clatter stopped under his window. He could guess what it was. But he had progressed no further than to be standing in his shirt when steps on the stairs and a thumping on his door checked him.

"Who is it?"

"Admiralty messenger."

Hornblower slid the bolt back in the door. The messenger was there, in blue coat and leather breeches and high boots, under his arm a billycock hat with a black cockade. From behind peered the stupid face of the idiot son.

"Captain Hornblower?"

"Yes."

The captain of a ship of war was accustomed to receiving messages in his shirt. Hornblower signed the receipt with the proffered pencil and opened the note.

The Secretary to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty would be greatly obliged if Captain Horatio Hornblower would attend at the Admiralty at eleven o'clock AM today, Tuesday.

"What's the time now?" asked Hornblower.

"Not long past eight, sir."

"Very well." Hornblower could not resist continuing with a question. "Does the Admiralty send all its messages out on horseback?"

"Only those over a mile, sir." The messenger allowed himself the faintest hint of what he thought of naval officers who lodged on the wrong side of the river.

"Thank you. That will be all."

There was no need for a reply. An affirmative could be taken quite for granted when the Secretary expressed himself as likely to be greatly obliged. Hornblower proceeded to shave and dress.

He took the boat across the river, despite the additional three ha'pence that it cost, first telling himself that he had to go to the post office to hand in his letter to Maria, and then amusedly admitting that it was a temptation to find himself afloat again after three days on land.

"That Calder has let the Frenchies give him the slip, Captain," said the wherryman between leisurely pulls at his sculls.

"We'll know more about it in a day or two," replied Hornblower mildly.

"He caught 'em and let 'em go. Nelson wouldn't 'a done that."

"There's no knowing what Lord Nelson would have done."

"Boney on our doorstep, an' Villain-noove at sea. That Calder! 'E ought to be ashamed. I've 'eard about Admiral Byng an' 'ow they shot 'im. That's what they ought to do with Calder."

That was the first sign Hornblower observed of the storm of indignation roused by the news of the battle off Cape Finisterre. The landlord of the Saracen's Head when Hornblower went in to breakfast was eager with questions, and the two maids stood anxiously listening to the discussion until their mistress sent them about their business.

"Let me see a newspaper," said Hornblower.

"Newspaper, sir? Yes, certainly, sir."

Here was the Gazette Extraordinary, in the place of honour on the front page, but it hardly merited the lofty title, for it consisted of no more than eight lines, and was only a resumé of the first telegraphic dispatch; the full report from Calder, carried up to London by relays of couriers riding ten-mile stages at full speed, would only now be arriving at the Admiralty. It was the editorial comment which was significant, for the *Morning Post* clearly held the same views as the wherryman and the innkeeper. Calder had been stationed to intercept Villeneuve, and the interception had taken place, thanks to good planning by the Admiralty. But Calder had failed in his particular task, which was to destroy Villeneuve once the Admiralty had brought about the meeting.

Villeneuve had arrived from the West Indies, evading Nelson who had followed him there, and had broken through the barrier England had endeavoured to interpose. Now he had reached Ferrol, where he would be able to land his sick, and renew his fresh water, ready to issue forth again to threaten the Channel. Viewed in this light it could be reckoned as a decided French success; Hornblower had no doubt that Bonaparte would represent it as a resounding victory.

"Yes, sir. What do you think, sir?" asked the innkeeper.

"Look out of your door and tell me if Boney's marching down the street," said Hornblower.

It was indicative of the innkeeper's state of mind that he actually made a move towards the door before realization came to him.

"You are pleased to jest, sir."

There was really nothing to do except to jest. These discussions of naval strategy and tactics by ignorant civilians reminded Hornblower a little of the arguments of the citizens of Gibbon's declining Rome regarding the nature of the Trinity. Yet it was popular clamour that had compelled the death sentence on Byng to be carried out. Calder might be in serious danger of his life.

"The worst thing Boney's done today is to keep me from my breakfast," said Hornblower.

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir. This minute, sir."

It was as the innkeeper bustled away that Hornblower caught sight of another name on the front page of the *Morning Post*. It was a paragraph about Doctor Claudius, and as Hornblower read he remembered why the name had been vaguely familiar to him when Marsden mentioned it. There had been references to him in earlier newspapers, old copies which he had seen even during the blockade of Brest. Claudius was a

clergyman, a genuine Doctor of Divinity, and the centre of the most resounding scandal, both social and financial, in English history. He had entered into London society to gain a bishopric for himself, but, while achieving considerable popularity or notoriety, he had failed in his object. Despairing of preferment he had plunged into crime. He had built up an extensive organization specializing in the forging of bills of exchange. So perfect were his forgeries, and so cunning was his marketing of them, that he had long gone undetected. The world wide commerce of England was conducted largely by bills of exchange. Claudius had taken advantage of the long intervals necessary between drawing and presentation to insert his forgeries into the stream, and only an error by a confederate had exposed him. Bills drawn in Beyrout and in Madras, so perfect that the very victims found it hard to dishonour them, were still coming in, and the financial world was shaken to its foundations, and, judging by this paragraph, the world of high society which had accepted him was similarly rent. Now Claudius was lodged in Newgate Gaol and his trial was imminent. Was it significant that Marsden had expressed interest in this fellow? Hornblower found it hard to believe it.

At that moment his attention was caught by the sight of his own name in another paragraph. It was headed 'Plymouth' and after mentions of the comings and goings of ships came 'Captain Horatio Hornblower, late of HM Sloop *Hotspur*, landed this morning from the waterhoy *Princess* and immediately took post to London'. It was quite ridiculous that such a triviality should improve the flavour of the gammon and spinach and fried eggs that the innkeeper set before him, but it was indeed the case. It put him in a good humour as he walked towards Whitehall. Marsden must be ready to discuss with him his promotion to Captain and to find a ship for him — the sooner this vital business was settled the better. He had no friends in high places now that Cornwallis had hauled down his flag, and Cornwallis' recommendation could easily be shelved or even forgotten in order to make room for a favourite.

It was inconceivable in the clear light of day, after a good night's rest and with a full stomach, that Marsden could have in mind to take any further action on the wild plan to send false orders to Villeneuve. And yet — It was not so inconceivable; nor was it such a wild plan. The forgery would have to be very good, the substitution undetected. As Ferrol was at least ten days by courier from Paris there would be no chance of Villeneuve referring back for confirmation. And because it was inconceivable that the British government should do such a thing its success would be all the more likely if it were attempted.

Here was the Admiralty. This morning he could say with assurance to the doorkeeper "I have an appointment with Mr Marsden" to the vast envy of a couple of suppliants who were seeking admission, and he could write 'by appointment' on the form on which he stated his business, and he was not left more than ten minutes in the waiting room, not more than three minutes after the clock had chimed eleven, before he was summoned into Marsden's presence. Barrow was there as well and Dorsey too, and the sight of them warned Hornblower that the agenda of the meeting might include the inconceivable.

But it was interesting to find that the First Secretary was human enough to spend a little time on preliminaries before plunging into business.

"I'm sure you'll be flattered to hear, Captain, that His Lordship holds practically identical opinions regarding Ferrol as you do."

"I'm very flattered, sir." Lord Barham was not only First Lord, but he had been Comptroller of the Navy for many years and an Admiral commanding a fleet before that. He must have been responsible for the orders that had placed Calder across Villeneuve's path.

"His Lordship was both surprised and gratified at Mr Barrow's familiarity with local conditions there," went on Marsden. "Naturally Mr Barrow did not see fit to tell him he had just finished discussing them with you."

"Naturally not, sir," agreed Hornblower. Then he braced himself; to speak called for resolution. "But perhaps in that case His Lordship would give favourable consideration to Admiral Cornwallis' recommendation of me to post rank?"

Now it was said. But not a flicker of expression was observable on the faces of the two Secretaries.

"There is more urgent business at present," said Marsden. "We are keeping someone waiting. Dorsey, kindly bring in the parson."

Dorsey walked across and opened the door, and after a moment a short square figure came waddling in; Hornblower had a glimpse of a uniformed marine outside before the door closed. The newcomer wore a black clerical gown and a clerical wig; but his clerical clothing was at variance with his bristling unshaven cheeks

which bore half an inch of black stubble. It called for a second glance to see that his wrists wore handcuffs, and that a chain ran from the handcuffs to his waist.

"This is the Reverend Doctor Claudius," said Marsden. "Newly arrived from Newgate. His services have been lent to us by the courtesy of the Secretary of State for Home Affairs. Temporarily, at least."

Claudius looked round at them all with a varying expression which would offer an interesting study in psychology. He had bold black eyes, yet they were cunning and sly. There was fear in his pudgy face, yet there was defiance as well, and, besides, most interesting of all, there was curiosity, irrepressible even in the shadow of death. But Marsden wasted no time.

"Claudius, you've been brought here to execute a forgery, if you can."

The pudgy face showed a sudden flash of understanding, and then instantly settled into an immobility which called forth Hornblower's admiration.

"Both politeness and convention," said Claudius, "suggest that you address me as 'Doctor'. I have not yet been unfrocked, and I am still a Doctor of Divinity."

"Rubbish, Claudius," said Marsden.

"I shouldn't have expected politeness from underlings."

Claudius' voice was an unpleasant one, harsh and grating, which might explain the ill success of his quest for a bishopric. But on the other hand Claudius had taken the offensive in this very first exchange — that letter from Bonaparte which Dorsey held recommended an unexpected counter-attack vigorously carried out even with an inferior force. But here in the Admiralty the enemy was commanded by a master of tactics.

"Very well, Doctor," said Marsden. "The dignity of a Doctor of Divinity demands all the respect we can accord it. Mr Dorsey, hand that document to the Doctor with the compliments of Their Lordships of the Admiralty, and ask the Doctor if as a result of his vast experience he thinks himself capable of making anything similar."

Claudius took the thing in his manacled hands, and his black eyebrows came together as he studied it.

"Of French origin. That is plain. Apart from the language it is in the standard handwriting in use by French clerks. I had plenty of examples pass through my hands during the late peace."

"And the signature?"

"An interesting piece of work. Written with a turkey quill, I should say. It would call for at least an hour's practice before I could reproduce it. Now these seals —"

"I made moulds," said Dorsey.

"I could see that. But they have been lifted from the paper with reasonable care. I must congratulate you on your acquirement of a difficult art. Now —"

Claudius looked up from the paper and swept his audience with a searching glance.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have much more to say on this subject. But before I do so I need some assurance that my services will not go without recompense."

"You are having that already," said Marsden. "Your trial has been postponed for a week."

"A week? I used to preach sermons on how speedily time passes from Sunday to Sunday. No, gentlemen. I need my life. I have a mortal objection to hanging, and that is not spoken in jest."

The situation was tense with drama. Hornblower looked round at the four faces — Marsden displaying the faintest possible hint of cynical amusement, Barrow a little taken aback, Dorsey displaying the proper indifference of a subordinate, and Claudius looking warily from one to another, like a condemned criminal in the Roman arena watching the lions close in on him. Barrow spoke first, addressing Marsden.

"I'll call in the guard, sir, shall I? We don't need him."

There was yet no slackening in the tension.

"Call in the guard!" said Claudius; there was a clank of iron as he waved his manacled hands. "Take me away, and hang me tomorrow! Tomorrow? A week hence? If it is coming, the sooner the better. You gentlemen may never know the truth of that statement. I still have charity enough to hope that you never will. But true it is. Hang me tomorrow."

Hornblower found it hard to decide whether Claudius was gambling or not, staking a week of life which might well be dear to him against the possibility of pardon. But in either case he could not help feeling a guilty twinge of admiration for the ugly little man, alone and helpless, fighting his last battle and refusing to lapse

into a mere plea for mercy — especially when that, addressed to Marsden, would have been the least effective plea of all. Then Marsden spoke.

"You will not hang," he said.

Ever since Claudius had been brought in the sky had been darkening. After a few days of sunny summer weather the inevitable thunderstorm of the Thames valley was building up and there was a low rumble of thunder following Marsden's words. Hornblower was reminded of the thunder in the *Iliad* which confirmed the oath taken by Zeus.

Claudius darted a piercing glance at Marsden.

"Then we are agreed and I shall give you all the benefit of my experience," he said.

Hornblower felt another spurt of admiration; the little man had been content with the four simple words spoken by Marsden — he had not gone through any ceremony of exacting a formal promise; as a gentleman he had instantly accepted a gentleman's word. He may even have been encouraged by the peal of confirmatory thunder.

"Very well," said Marsden, and Claudius plunged into his subject. Only a slight gulping and hesitation as he began betrayed the agonizing strain he had been through.

"It is necessary first," he said, "to point out that ambition may outreach itself. It is quite impossible to forge a long document in the handwriting of another and to achieve deception. I take it you have in mind a letter and not a mere few words? Then it would be better to make no attempt at exact reproduction. On the other hand carelessness would easily be fatal. This script, as I said, is the standard script used by French clerks — I fancy it is the one which used to be taught in Jesuit schools. There are French refugees in plenty. Have one of those write your letter."

"That's very true, sir," said Dorsey to Marsden.

"And again," went on Claudius, "have your French *composed* by a Frenchman. You gentlemen may pride yourselves on writing good French, grammatical French, but a Frenchman reading it would know it was not written by a Frenchman. I'll go further than that, gentlemen. Give a Frenchman a passage in English and tell him to render it into French and a Frenchman will *still* be aware that all is not well when he reads it. You must have your French composed *ab initio* by Frenchmen, contenting yourselves with merely outlining what is to be said."

Hornblower caught Marsden nodding agreement. It was apparent that he was impressed, however little he wished to appear so.

"Now, gentlemen," went on Claudius. "With regard to details of a lower degree of sensibility. I take it you have in mind to send your forged letter to a naval, or possibly a military, man? In that case the task can be approached with more confidence. Business men, soulless bankers, hard headed merchants, with something more important to lose than other men's lives, are likely to scrutinize documents more closely. But on the staff of a general there may always be some interfering underling wishing to call attention to himself. It is necessary to be quite perfect. This signature I am confident I can reproduce in perfection. This ink — I believe it can be matched in Chancery Lane; it will be necessary to make complete tests. This printed heading — you will need to have type specially cast in exact imitation. You will have less trouble in that respect than I encountered."

"Yes," said Marsden, actually betrayed into speech.

"But the paper —" went on Claudius, feeling its texture carefully with stubby but apparently sensitive fingers.

"I will have to instruct you where to search for that, too. Would you be so kind, sir, as to hold the sheet up between my eyes and the light? This chain restricts my movements to an inconvenient degree. Thank you, sir. Yes, as I thought. I know that quality of linen, but there is a fortunate absence of watermark. It may not be necessary to have paper made *de novo* to match it. You may not appreciate the necessity for uniformity, gentlemen, unless you make use of your imagination. A single document may well be accepted, but you must think of a series. After receiving, let us say, six genuine documents, someone receives one spurious one. The recipient naturally lays them together in the course of the routine of his office. If one is markedly different from all the others — even if one is different in only a small degree — attention is clamorously called to it. *Hinc illae lachrymae*. And if that one has a content somewhat unusual — even though in other circumstances it might have passed — then the fat is in the fire, and Bow Street is called in. *Et ego in arcadia vixi*, gentlemen."

"Most illuminating," said Marsden, and Hornblower knew enough about him now to realize that this was the equivalent of a long speech in praise.

"Now I come to 'lastly' in my present sermon, gentlemen," said Claudius as the lightning flashed again and the thunder rolled. "Even in the pulpit I could feel the relief in my congregation at that word 'lastly', so I will be brief. The method of delivery must conform to the method of all the other deliveries. Once again, the greatest care is necessary in allowing nothing to call particular attention to this one item out of all the others."

Claudius when he had entered the room had been of a sickly pallor under the bristling beard, and he was whiter still when he finished his lecture.

"Perhaps, gentlemen, you would permit me to sit down?" he said. "I have not now the strength of which I used once to boast."

"Take him out, Dorsey," snapped Marsden. "Give him a glass of wine. I dare say he's hungry, too."

It may have been at the thought of food that Claudius recovered something of his unabashed self-assertion.

"A beefsteak, gentlemen?" he said. "Might I hope for a beefsteak? For the past week empty dreams of a beefsteak have further embittered my nightmares of the rope."

"See that he has a beefsteak, Dorsey," said Marsden.

Claudius turned back, still wavering a little, but with something of a smile just visible on his bristly lips.

"In that case, gentlemen, you can count on my heartiest exertions for my King, my Country, and my Self."

With the departure of Dorsey and Claudius, Marsden turned to face Hornblower again. The room was almost dark, at high noon, with the black thunder clouds overhead. A sudden lightning flash filled the room instantly followed by a clap of thunder, like a vast cannon shot, coming without warning and ending without reverberation.

"His Lordship," said Marsden in complete disregard of it, "has already approved in principle of the attempt being made. I consulted him this morning. Mr Barrow, I am sure, has in mind the French émigrés to attend to the composition and writing of the dispatch."

"I have, Mr Marsden," said Barrow.

"It will be necessary to recapture the style, of course, sir," said Hornblower.

"Undoubtedly, Captain," agreed Barrow.

"And the orders must be such that there is nothing patently impossible about them, too."

Marsden intervened.

"Did your grandmother never learn to suck eggs, Captain?" he asked, in the same unvarying tone. It was a deft reminder that the Secretaries had had years of experience in the writing of orders, and Hornblower had the sense to smile.

"I had forgotten how much practice she has had," he said. "I beg your pardon, gentlemen. I was only anxious about the success of the plan."

Now the thunderstorm had burst. A breath of cooler air came stealing into the room, bearing with it the sound of torrential rain roaring down outside. Through the windows there was nothing to be seen but the rain.

"Mr Barrow and Dorsey and Claudius can be trusted to deal with the details. The next point to consider is the landing."

"That should be the simplest part of the whole operation, sir."

The Spanish Biscay coast extended for almost three hundred miles from the French frontier to Ferrol, sparsely populated and rugged. There were inlets innumerable. The Royal Navy, omnipresent at sea, could be relied upon to put a small party on shore undetected.

"I am delighted that you think so, Captain," said Marsden.

There was a dramatic pause — a melodramatic pause. Hornblower looked from Marsden to Barrow and back again, and experienced an internal upheaval as he observed the glances they exchanged.

"What have you in mind, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Is it not quite obvious, Captain, that you are the man best fitted to undertake this mission?"

That was what Marsden said, in that same tone. Barrow spoke in his support.

"You are acquainted with Ferrol, Captain. You have had some experience of Spain. You speak a little Spanish. You should have command."

That gave the cue for Marsden again.

"You have no other command at present, Captain."

The significance of this particular remark was too obvious.

"Really, gentlemen —" said Hornblower. For once he could not think quickly enough to word his protests.

"It is not a duty you could be ordered to perform," went on Marsden. "That is quite clear. It would be a purely voluntary mission."

To enter a hostile country in disguise would be to risk a shameful death. The gallows, the rope — but in Spain it would be the iron collar of the garotte. Strangulation. Convulsions, contortions, preceding death. No fighting service could ever order its officers to take that risk.

"This Spaniard, Miranda, can be trusted, I am sure," said Barrow. "And if a Frenchman is needed as well — your opinion on that point would be valuable, Captain — there are at least three who have already done important work for us."

It was inconceivable that these two Secretaries, men of marble, could ever abase themselves to plead, but it seemed as if they were as close to doing so as ever in their lives. The Navy could order a man to climb the highest, steepest side of a ship of the line in face of well aimed musketry; it took it for granted that a man would face unflinching broadside after broadside of grape; it could send him aloft on the darkest and stormiest night to save a few yards of canvas; and it could hang him or shoot him or flog him to death should he hesitate. But it could not order him to risk the garotte, not even with the nation's existence trembling in the balance.

Now this — this recollection of England's desperate need — was something overwhelming, something that overshadowed every other consideration. In the calm atmosphere of this very room he had estimated the vital need for a victory at sea, and had balanced against it the trifling cost of his suggested attempt. That cost might be his own life, as it now appeared. And — and — who could he trust to keep a clear head, who could he trust to plan and to extemporize in an emergency? And already, unsought, there were forming in his mind improvements, refinements, in the rough plan which demanded his own personal action. He would have to agree; and in a moment of illumination he felt that he would never be happy again if he were to refuse. He must say yes.

"Captain," said Marsden. "We have not forgotten Admiral Cornwallis' recommendation that you should be made post."

The speech was so utterly disassociated from Hornblower's present train of thought, so unrelated to what he had been about to say, that he could not possibly say it. Barrow glanced over at Marsden and then made his contribution.

"There would be no need to find you a ship, Captain," he said. "You could be given a command in the Sea Fencibles which would confer post rank. Then you could be transferred for special service."

Indeed this was something alien intruding into the conversation. This was what Hornblower had given more than a passing thought to on his way here. Promotion to captain's rank; he would be 'made post', placed on the list of captains. He would cease to be a mere commander perennially irked by the conventional form of address of 'Captain'. He would be a real captain, he would have achieved the ambition of every naval officer down to the lowest King's Letterboy in the service; once on the list only a court martial or death could stop his eventually becoming an admiral. And he had quite forgotten about promotion; he had forgotten his decision to press for it. It was not so surprising that he had forgotten about the Sea Fencibles, who constituted a volunteer reserve navy formed of wherry-men and bargees and fishermen who could be called into active service should an actual attempt at invasion occur. England was divided into districts for the organization and elementary training of these men, and each district was a Captain's command — a Post Captain's command.

"Well, Captain?" asked Marsden.

"I'll do it," said Hornblower.

He saw glances interchanged again; he could see relief, or perhaps satisfaction, or perhaps self-congratulation in those glances. They were pleased that their bribe had been effective, and he was about to burst out in an indignant denial that the offer had had any weight with him. Then he shut his mouth again, remembering the philosopher who said that he had often regretted having spoken but had never regretted remaining silent. A few seconds of silence — utterly fortuitous — had won him promotion to post rank; a few seconds of speech might imperil it. And he knew, too, that these two cynical men would not believe any such protestations for a

moment. His apparent bargaining may even have won their respect; certainly they would deem a denial to be hypocritical and worthy of contempt.

"Then I had better arrange for you to make Miranda's acquaintance, Captain," said Marsden. "And I should be obliged if you would consider and elaborate a detailed plan for me to submit to His Lordship."

"Yes, sir."

"Orally, if you please. Nothing may be committed to paper regarding this plan, Captain. Except possibly your final report after achieving success."

"I understand, sir."

Was there the slightest hint of softening in Marsden's expression? That last sentence of his was undoubtedly meant as a joke; it was something entirely out of the ordinary. Hornblower had a sudden insight; the Secretary, in addition to all his routine work, carried a responsibility which must occasion him considerable anxiety. He had necessarily to deal (because transient First Lords and Sea Lords could not maintain the needed continuity) with all matters of this sort, the gathering of information, the dissemination on occasions of false information — with spying, in fact, to use a single and ugly word. Hornblower could see already now how difficult it must be to find reliable agents, men who could be trusted not to play a double role. Marsden was experiencing relief at this moment, to such an extent as actually to show it.

"I will make the arrangements for your posting to be gazetted, Captain." This was Barrow, attending to details.

"You will read yourself in before the end of the week."

"Very well, sir."

When Hornblower reached the street the rain was only falling softly although with every appearance of doing so for a long time. He had no cloak, no tarpaulin, but he went out into the rain quite gladly. He felt he must walk and walk and walk. The rain on his face was pleasant, and he told himself that the soft rainwater would dissolve out the clammy sea-salt with which all his clothes were impregnated. The thought only distracted him for a moment from the others that were writhing in his brain like eels in a sack. He was about to become a captain at last, and he was about to become a spy.

* * *

C. S. Forester died before he could finish HORNBLOWER AND THE CRISIS, but from the notes that he left behind it is possible to see how the story would have ended.

Hornblower goes through a period of training in preparation for his spy mission. He brushes up his Spanish with a ruddy complexioned Count Miranda whom he is to accompany to Spain in the disguise of the Count's servant. 'He would have to watch every word and gesture, his life depended on doing nothing that would betray them.' Then Hornblower goes through a crisis of conscience about becoming a spy.

As he is rowed towards the ship that will take him from Spithead to Spain Hornblower thinks: One stage farther along a hateful voyage. Each stroke of the boatman's oars was carrying him nearer to a time of frightful strain; to something close to a certainty of a shameful and hideous death . . .

He wonders whether to turn back, but sense of duty prevails.

Forged letters are delivered to Villeneuve which prompts the Frenchman to come out and fight. This is what Nelson wants.

It leads to the victory at Trafalgar. The course of history is changed.



A HORATIO HORNBLOWER TALE OF THE SEA

C. S. FORESTER

HORNBLOWER

AND THE
-ATROPOS-

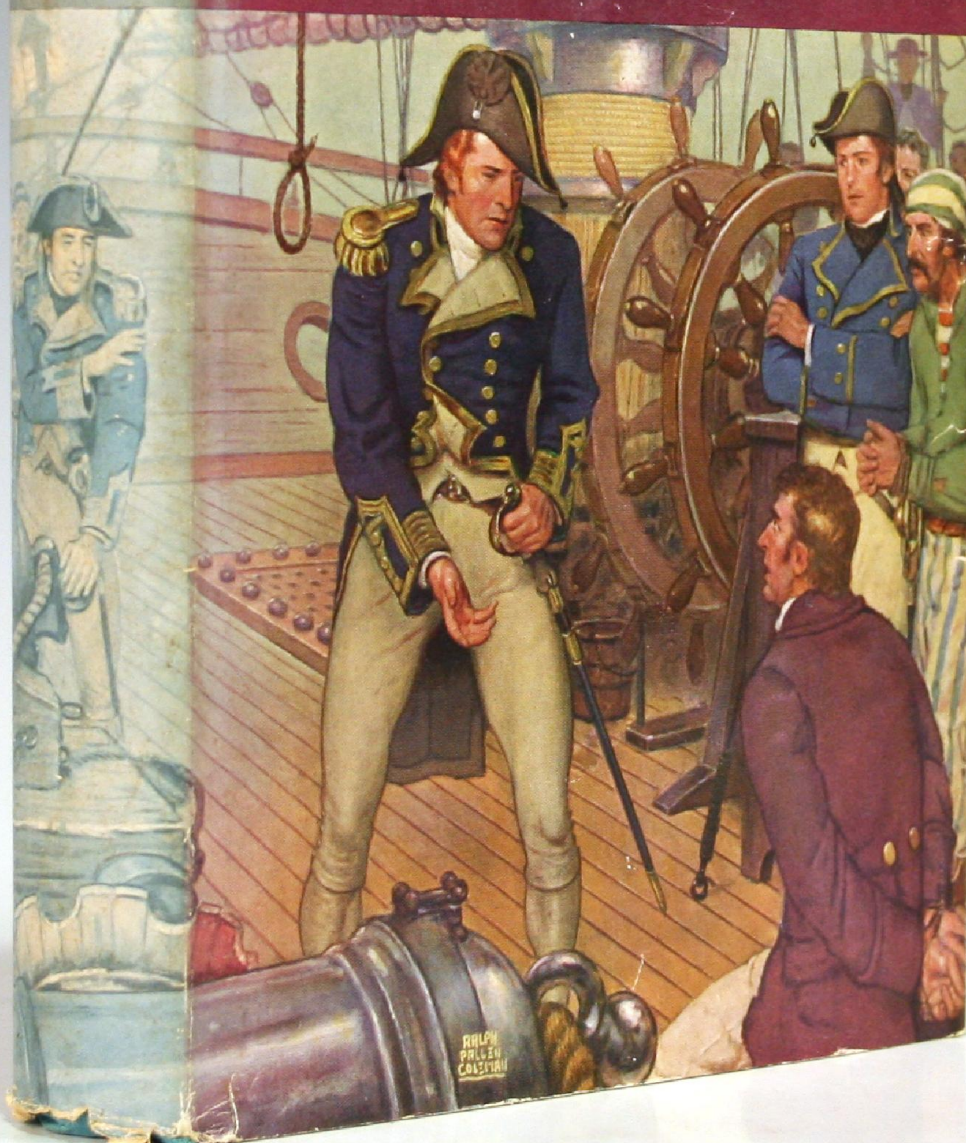


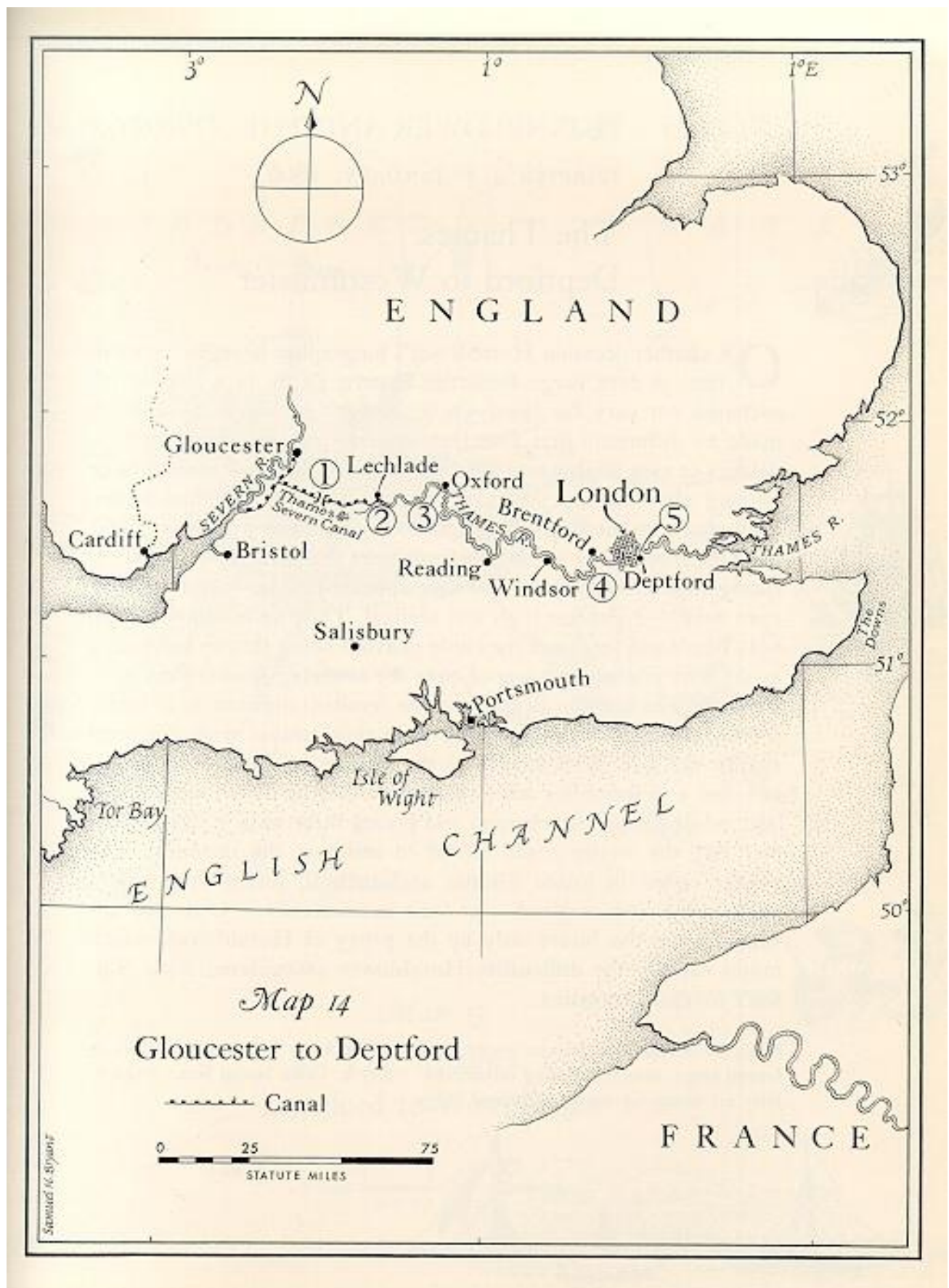
NEW INTRODUCTION BY BERNARD CORNWELL

Hornblower
and the
ATROPOS
FORESTER
LITTLE, BROWN

Hornblower and the ATROPOS

BY C. S. FORESTER





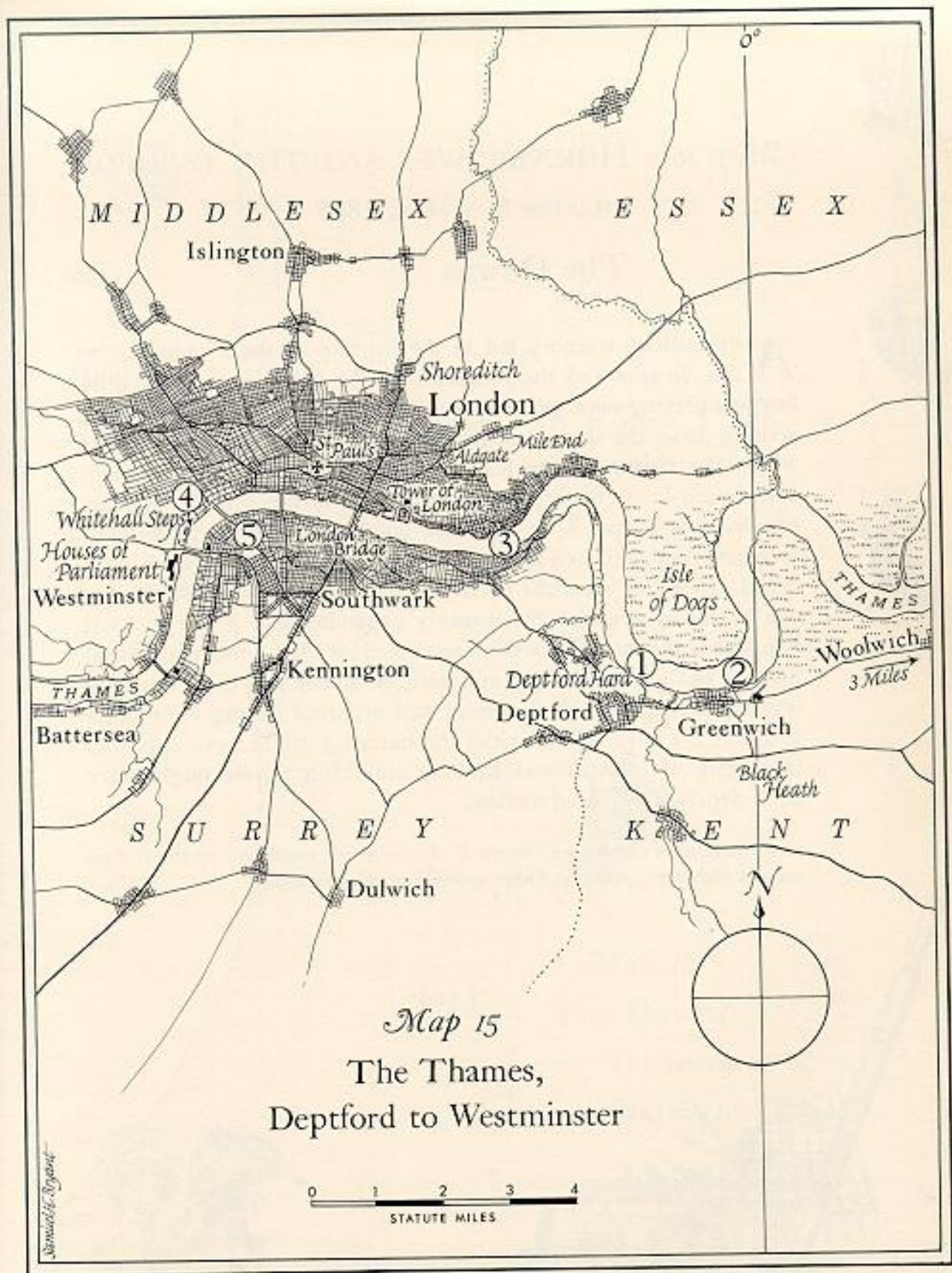
Hornblower and the *Atropos*

Chapters 1 to 3

October, 1805

Map 14 - Gloucester to Deptford

- ① Sapperton Tunnel.
- ② Transfer from canal to river.
- ③ Supper at Oxford.
- ④ Transfer to wherry.
- ⑤ *Atropos* at anchor (at Deptford).



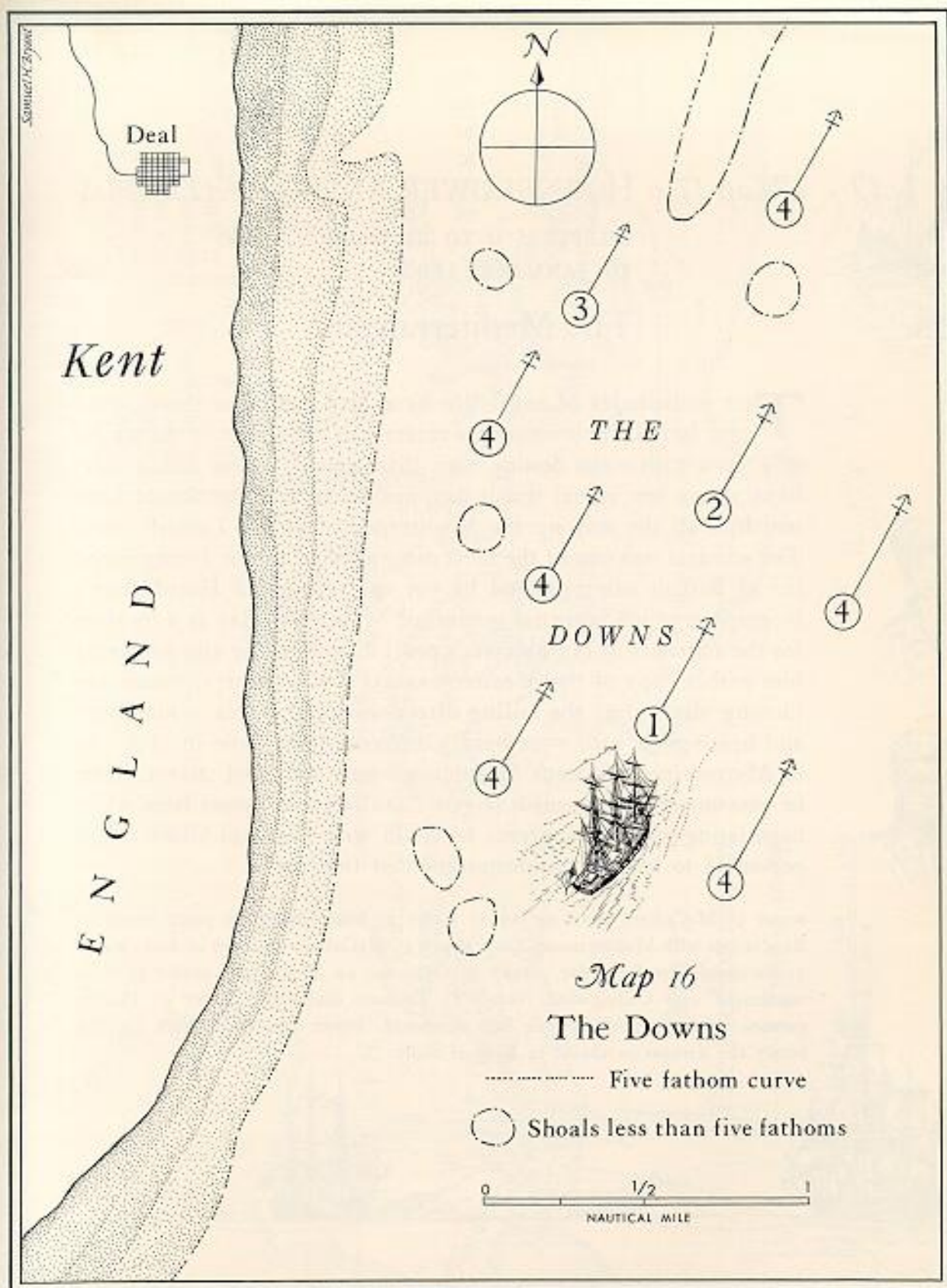
Hornblower and the *Atropos*

Chapter 4

January, 1806

Map 15 - The Thames, Deptford to Westminster

- ① *Atropos*'s anchorage.
- ② Procession forms here: plank started in funeral barge.
- ③ Bailing commenced.
- ④ Coffin landed here.
- ⑤ Jetty for emergency repairs to funeral barge.



Hornblower and the *Atropos*

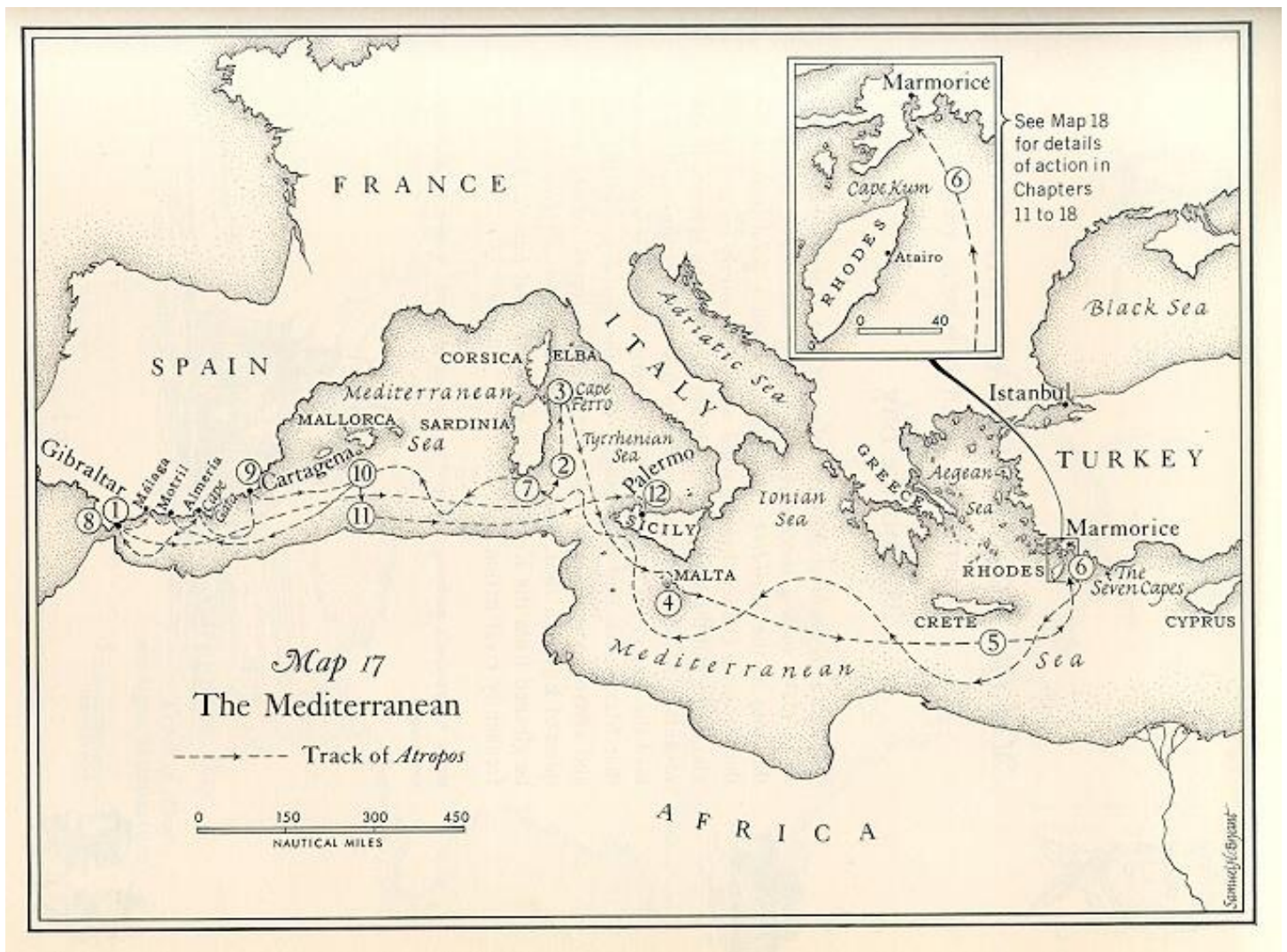
Chapter 8

May, 1806

Map 16 - The Downs

- ① *Atropos*'s anchorage.
- ③ *Vengeance*'s anchorage.

- ② *Amelia Jane*'s anchorage.
- ④ Other unidentified ships at anchor.

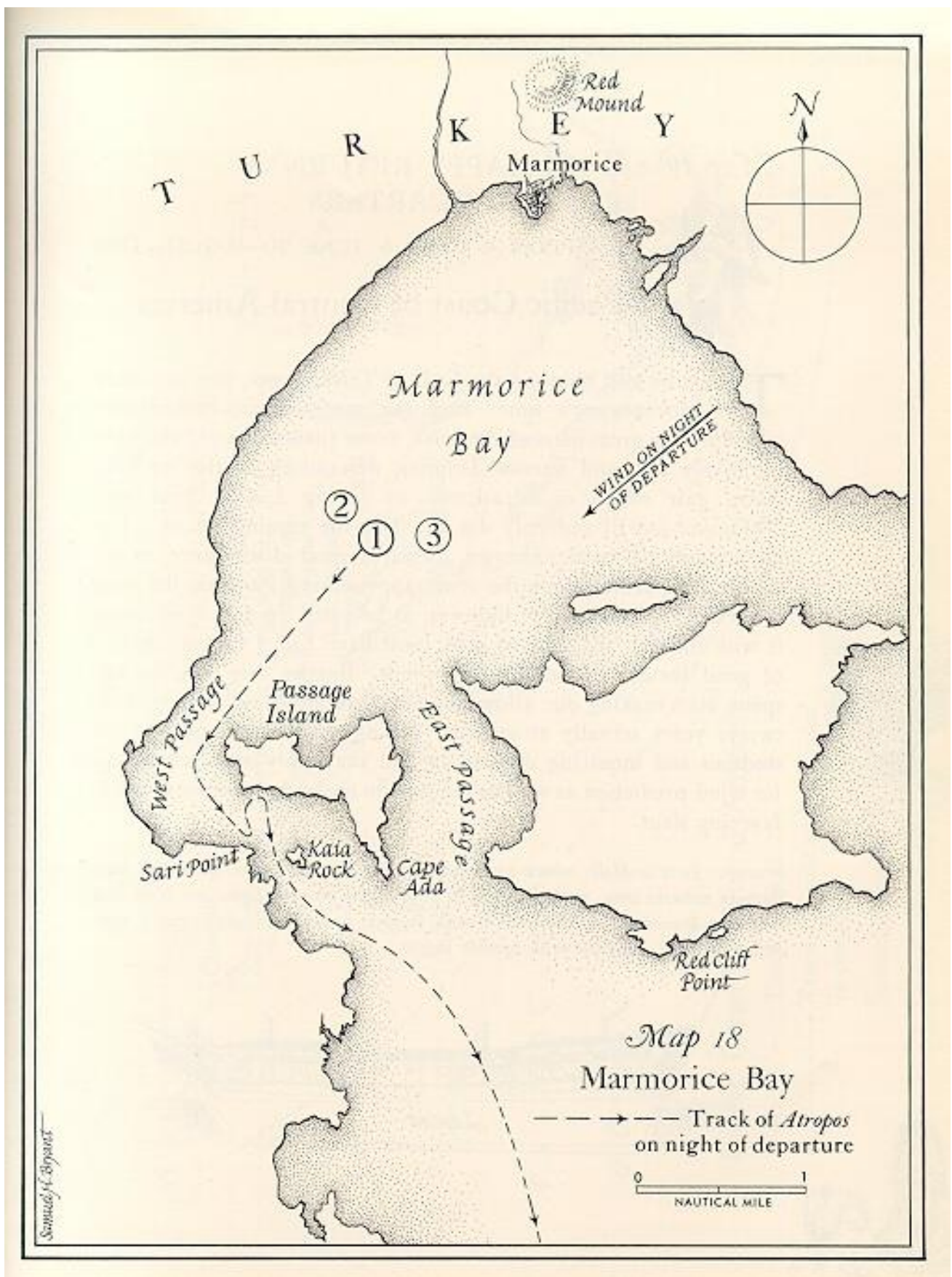


Hornblower and the *Atropos*

Chapters 9 to 21 July, 1806 to January, 1808

Map 17 - The Mediterranean

- ① McCullum comes on board.
- ② First rendezvous point.
- ③ Rendezvous with Mediterranean fleet.
- ④ McCullum wounded in duel.
- ⑤ Becalmed here for a day.
- ⑥ Operation on McCullum.
- ⑦ Next rendezvous with Collingwood.
- ⑧ Treasure discharged.
- ⑨ *Castilla* pursues.
- ⑩ Mr. Prince falls overboard.
- Point 11: Action with *Castilla*.
- Point 12: *Atropos* purchased by King of Sicily.



Hornblower and the *Atropos*

Chapters 11 to 18 March, 1807

Map 18 - Marmorice Bay

① *Antropos*'s anchorage.

② Position of wreck.

③ *Mejideh*'s anchorage.

Hornblower and the Atropos

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Chapter I

Having climbed up through the locks, the canal boat was now winding over the pleasant Cotswold country. Hornblower was bubbling with good spirits, on his way to take up a new command, seeing new sights, travelling in an entirely new way, at a moment when the entirely unpredictable English weather had decided to stage a clear sunny day in the middle of December. This was a delightful way of travelling, despite the cold. "Your pardon for a moment, ma'am," said Hornblower.

Maria, with the sleeping little Horatio in her arms, gave a sigh at her husband's restlessness and shifted her knees to allow him passage, and he rose under the restricted height of the first class cabin and stepped out through the forward door into the open bow of the passage-boat. Here he could stand on his sea chest and look round him. It was a queer craft, fully seventy feet long and, judging by eye as he looked aft, he would think hardly five feet in beam — the same proportions as had the crazy dugout canoes he had seen in use in the West Indies. Her draught must be less than a foot; that was clear as she tore along behind the cantering horses at a speed that must certainly be all of eight knots — nine miles an hour he told himself, hurriedly, for that was the way they measured speeds here inland.

The passage-boat was making her way from Gloucester to London along the Thames and Severn Canal; going far more smoothly than the stage coach, it was very nearly as fast and decidedly cheaper, at a penny a mile, even in the first class. He and Maria, with the child, were the only first-class passengers, and the boatman, when Hornblower had paid the fares, had cocked an eye at Maria's condition and had said that by rights they ought to pay two children's fares instead of one. Maria had snorted with disdain at such vulgarity, while the onlookers chuckled.

Standing on his sea chest, Hornblower could look over the canal banks, at the grey stone boundary walls and the grey stone farms. The rhythmic sound of the hoofs of the cantering tow horses accentuated the smoothness of the travel; the boat itself made hardly a sound as it slid along over the surface of the water — Hornblower noticed that the boatmen had the trick of lifting the bows, by a sudden acceleration, on to the crest of the bow wave raised by her passage, and retaining them there. This reduced turbulence in the canal to a minimum; it was only when he looked aft that he could see, far back, the reeds at the banks bowing and straightening again long after they had gone by. It was this trick that made the fantastic speed possible. The cantering horses maintained their nine miles an hour, being changed every half hour. There were two tow lines, attached to timber heads at bow and stern; one boatman rode as postillion on the rear horse, controlling the lead horse with shouts and the cracking of his whip. In the stern sat the other boatman, surly and with one hand missing and replaced by a hook; with the other he held the tiller and steered the boat round the curves with a skill that Hornblower admired.

A sudden ringing of the horses' hoofs on stone warned Hornblower just in time. The horses were dashing, without any slackening of pace, under a low bridge, where the tow-path, cramped between the water and the arch, gave them barely room to pass. The mounted boatman buried his face in his horse's mane to pass under; Hornblower had just time to leap down from his sea chest and seat himself as the bridge hurried over him. Hornblower heard the helmsman's loud laugh at his momentary discomfiture.

"You learn to move fast in a canal boat, Captain," the steersman called to him from his place by the tiller. "Two dozen for the last man off the yard! None o' that here on Cotswold, Captain, but a broken head for *you* if you don't look lively."

"Don't let that fellow be so rude to you, Horatio," said Maria from the cabin. "Can't you stop him?"

"Not so easy, dear," replied Hornblower. "It's he who's captain of this craft, and I'm only a passenger."

"Well, if you can't stop him, come in here where he can't be rude to you."

"Yes, my dear, in a minute."

Hornblower chose to risk the jeers of the boatman rather than miss looking round him; this was the best opportunity he had had of watching the working of the canals which in the last thirty years had changed the economic face of England. And not far ahead was Sapperton Tunnel, the engineering marvel of the age, the greatest achievement of the new science. He certainly wanted to see that. Let the steersman laugh his head off if he wanted to. He must be an old sailor, discharged as disabled by the loss of his hand. It must be a wonderful experience for him to have a naval captain under his command.

The grey stone tower of a lock-house showed ahead, with the minute figure of the lock-keeper opening the gates. A yell from the postillion-boatman checked the speed of the horses; the boat glided on, its speed diminishing greatly as the bows slid off the bow wave. As the boat entered the lock the one-handed steersman leaped ashore with a line which he flipped dexterously round a bollard; a smart tug or two took most of the way off the boat, and the boatman, running forward, secured the line to another bollard.

"Heave us that line, Captain," he cried, and Hornblower obediently threw up the bow line for him to secure forward. The law of the sea applied equally in inland waters — the ship first and personal dignity a long way second.

Already the lock-keeper was closing the gates behind them and the lock-keeper's wife was opening the paddles of the upper gate, the water swirling in. The lower gates closed with a crash with the mounting pressure, and the boat rose with the gurgling water. The horses were changed in a twinkling; the postillion scrambled into his saddle, and proceeded to tilt a black bottle against his lips during the remaining few seconds while the lock filled. The steersman was casting off the lines — Hornblower took the bow-line from him — and the lock-keeper's wife was thrusting at one upper gate while the lock-keeper, running up from the lower gate, thrust at the other. The postillion yelled and cracked his whip, the boat sprang forward while the helmsman leaped to his place astern, and they were off again with not a second wasted. Assuredly this canal traffic was a miracle of modernity, and it was gratifying to be on board the very fastest of the canal boats, the *Queen Charlotte*, that took priority over all other traffic. On her bow she carried a glittering scythe-blade as the proud symbol of her superior importance. It would sever the towline of any approaching boat which did not drop her line quickly enough to let her through. The two score of farmers' wives and wenches who sat aft in the second class with their chickens and ducks and eggs and butter were all of them travelling as much as twenty miles to market, in the confident expectation of returning the same day. Quite astonishing.

Here, as they climbed to the summit level, lock succeeded lock at frequent intervals, and at each the postillion held his black bottle to his lips, and his yells to his horses became more raucous and his whip-cracking more continuous. Hornblower obediently handed the bow-line at each lock, despite Maria's urgings to the contrary.

"My dear," said Hornblower, "we save time if I do."

"But it isn't right," said Maria. "He knows you're a captain in the Navy."

"He knows it too well," said Hornblower with a lopsided smile. "And after all I have a command to take up."

"As if it couldn't wait," snorted Maria.

It was hard to make Maria understand that to a captain his command was all in all, that he wished to lose not an hour, not a minute, in his journey to assume command of his sloop of war in London River; he was yearning to see what *Atropos* was like, with the mingled hope and apprehension that might be expected of an Oriental bridegroom affianced to a veiled bride — that was not a simile that it would be wise to mention to Maria, though.

Now they were gliding down the summit level of the canal; the cutting was growing deeper and deeper, so that the echo of the sound of the horses' hoofs came ringing from the rocky banks. Round the shallow curve must surely be Sapperton Tunnel.

"Hold hard, Charlie!" suddenly yelled the steersman. A moment later he sprang to the after towline and tried to cast it off from the timber head, and there was wild confusion. Shouts and yells on the towpath horses whinnying, hoofs clattering. Hornblower caught a glimpse of the lead horse leaping frantically up the steep slope of the cutting — just ahead of them was the castellated but gloomy mouth of the tunnel and there was no other way for the horse to turn. The *Queen Charlotte* lurched hideously against the bank to the accompaniment of screams from the second-class cabin; for a moment Hornblower was sure she would capsize. She righted herself and came to a stop as the towlines slackened; the frantic struggles of the second horse, entangled in two towlines, ended as it kicked itself free. The steersman had scrambled on to the towpath and had dropped the after line over a bollard.

"A pretty kettle o' fish," he said.

Another man had shown up, running down the bank from the top whence spare horses looked down at them, whinnying. He held the heads of the *Queen Charlotte's* horses, and near his feet lay Charlie, the boatman-postillion, his face a mask of blood.

"Get ye back in there!" bellowed the steersman to the women who were all scrambling out of the second-class cabin. "All's well. Get ye back! Once let them loose on the country" — he added to Hornblower — "and they'd be harder to catch than their own chickens."

"What is it, Horatio?" asked Maria, standing at the door of the first-class cabin with the baby in her arms.

"Nothing to alarm yourself about, my dear," said Hornblower. "Compose yourself. This is no time for agitation."

He turned and looked at the one-handed steersman, who bent down to examine Charlie; taking a hold of the breast of his coat with his steel hook he hauled up, but Charlie's head only hung back helplessly, the blood running over his cheeks.

"Not much use out of Charlie," said the steersman, letting him drop with a thump. As Hornblower stooped to look he could catch the reek of gin three feet from the bleeding mouth. Half stunned and half drunk — more than half of both for that matter.

"We've the tunnel to leg through," said the steersman. "Who's up at the Tunnel House?"

"Ne'er a soul," replied the man with the horses. "The trade all went through in the early morning."

The steersman whistled.

"You'll have to come wi' us," he said.

"Not I," said the householder. "I've sixteen horses — eighteen with these two. I can't leave 'em."

The steersman swore a couple of astonishing oaths — astonishing even to Hornblower, who had heard many in his time.

"What d'you mean by 'legging' through the tunnel?" Hornblower allied.

The steersman pointed with his hook at the black, forbidding tunnel mouth in the castellated entrance.

"No towpath through the tunnel, o' course, Captain," he said. "So we leaves our horses here an' we legs through. We puts a pair o' 'wings' on the bows — sort o' catheads, in a way. Charlie lies on one an' I lies on the other, wi' our heads inboard an' our feet agin the tunnel wall. Then we sort o' walks, and we gets the boat along that way, and we picks up another pair o' horses at the south end."

"I see," said Hornblower.

"I'll souse this sot wi' a couple o' buckets o' water," said the steersman. "Mebbe it'll bring him round."

"Maybe," said Hornblower.

But buckets of water made no difference to the unconscious Charlie, who was clearly concussed. The slow blood flowed again after his battered face had been washed clean. The steersman produced another couple of oaths.

"The other trade'll be coming up arter you," said the householder.

"'Nother couple o' hours, mebbe."

All he received in reply was a further series of oaths.

"We have to have daylight to run the Thames stauncher," said the steersman. "Two hours? We'll only just get there by daylight if we go now."

He looked round him, at the silent canal cut and tunnel mouths at the chattering women in the boat and the few doddering old gaffers along with them.

"Twelve hours late, we'll be," he concluded, morosely.

A day late in taking up his command, thought Hornblower.

"Damn it," he said, "I'll help you leg through."

"Good on ye, sir," said the steersman, significantly dropping the equalitarian "captain" for the "sir" he had carefully eschewed so far. "D'ye think you can?"

"Likely enough," said Hornblower.

"Let's fit those wings," said the steersman, with sudden decision.

They were small platforms, projecting out from either bow.

"Horatio," asked Maria, "whatever are you doing?"

That was just what Maria *would* ask. Hornblower was tempted to make use of the rejoinder he had heard used once in the *Renown*, to the effect that he was getting milk from a male ostrich, but he checked himself.

"Just helping the boatman, dear," he said patiently.

"You don't think enough of your position," said Maria.

Hornblower was by now a sufficiently experienced married man to realize the advantages of allowing his wife to say what she liked as long as he could continue to do as he liked. With the wings fitted he and the steersman on board, and the horseholder on the bank, took their places along the side of the *Queen Charlotte*. A strong united shove sent the boat gliding into the cut, heading for the tunnel.

"Keep 'er goin', sir," said the steersman, scrambling forward to the port side wing. It was obvious that it would be far easier to maintain gentle way on the boat than to progress in fits and starts of alternate stopping and moving. Hornblower hurried to the starboard side wing and laid himself down on it as the bows of the boat crept into the dark tunnel. Lying on his right side, with his head inboard, he felt his feet come into contact with the brick lining of the tunnel. He pressed with his feet, and then by a simple backwards walking motion he urged the boat along.

"Hold hard, sir," said the steersman — his head was just beside Hornblower's — "there's two miles an' more to go."

A tunnel two miles long, driven through the solid rock of the Cotswolds! No wonder it was the marvel of the age. The Romans with all their aqueducts had achieved nodding to compare with this. Farther and farther into the tunnel they went, into darkness that increased in intensity, until it was frightfully, astonishingly dark, with the eye recording nothing at all, strain as it might. At their entrance into the tunnel the women had chattered and laughed, and had shouted to hear the echoes in the tunnel.

"Silly lot o' hens," muttered the steersman.

Now they fell silent, oppressed by the darkness, all except Maria.

"I trust you remember you have your good clothes on, Horatio," she said.

"Yes, dear," said Hornblower, happy in the knowledge that she could not possibly see him.

It was not a very dignified thing he was doing, and not at all comfortable. After a few minutes he was acutely aware of the hardness of the platform on which he was lying; nor was it long before his legs began to protest against the effort demanded of them. He tried to shift his position a little, to bring other muscles into play and other areas of himself into contact with the platform, but he learned fast enough that it had to be done with tact and timing, so as not to disturb the smooth rhythm of the propulsion of the boat — the steersman beside him grunted a brief protest as Hornblower missed a thrust with his right leg and the boat baulked a little.

"Keep 'er goin', sir," he repeated.

So they went on through the darkness, in the strangest sort of mesmeric nightmare, suspended in utter blackness, utterly silent, for their speed was not sufficient to raise a ripple round the *Queen Charlotte*'s bows. Hornblower went on thrusting with his feet, urging his aching legs into further efforts; he could tell by the sensations conveyed through the soles of his shoes that the tunnel was no longer brick-lined — his feet pressed against naked rock, rough and irregular as the tunnellers' picks and gunpowder had left it. That made his present employment more difficult.

He became aware of a slight noise in the distance — a low muttering sound, at first so feeble that when he first took note of it he realized that he had been hearing it already for some time. It gradually increased in volume as the boat crept along, until it was a loud roaring; he had no idea what it could be, but as the steersman beside him seemed unconcerned he decided not to ask about it.

"Easy a minute, sir," said the steersman, and Hornblower, wondering, rested his aching legs, while the steersman, still recumbent, fumbled and tugged beside him. Next moment he had dragged a tarpaulin completely over both of them, except for their feet protruding from under the edges. It was no darker under the tarpaulin than outside it, but it was considerably stuffier.

"Carry on, sir," said the steersman, and Hornblower recommenced pushing with his feet against the wall, the roaring he had heard before somewhat muffled by the tarpaulin. A trickle of water volleyed loudly on the tarpaulin, and then another, and he suddenly understood what the roaring was.

"Here it comes," said the steersman under the tarpaulin.

An underground spring here broke through the roof of the tunnel and tumbled roaring into the canal. The water fell down on them in deafening cataracts. It thundered upon the roofs of the cabins, quite drowning the cries of the women within. The weight of its impact pressed the tarpaulin upon him. Then the torrent eased; fell away to trickles, and then they were past it.

"Only one more o' those," said the steersman in the stuffy darkness beside him. "It's better arter a dry summer."

"Are you wet, Horatio?" asked Maria's voice.

"No, dear," said Hornblower, the simple negative having the desired cushioning effect and smothering further expostulation.

Actually his feet were wet, but after eleven years at sea that was not a new experience; he was much more concerned with the weariness of his legs. It seemed an age before the next trickling of water and the steersman's "Here it comes" heralded the next deluge. They crawled on beyond it, and the steersman, with a grunt of relief, dragged the tarpaulin from off them. And with its removal Hornblower, twisting his neck, suddenly saw something far ahead. His eyes were by now accustomed to the darkness, and in that massive darkness, incredibly far away, there was something to be seen, a minute something, the size apparently of a grain of sand. It was the farther mouth of the tunnel. He worked away with his legs with renewed vitality. The tunnel opening grew in size, from a grain of sand to a pea; it assumed the crescentic shape to be expected of it; it grew larger still, and with its growth the light increased in the tunnel by infinitesimal gradations, until Hornblower could see the dark surface of the water, the irregularities of the tunnel roof. Now the tunnel was brick-lined again, and progress was easier — and seemed easier still.

"Easy all," said the steersman with a final thrust.

It seemed unbelievable to Hornblower that he did not have to work his legs any more, that he was emerging into daylight, that no more underground springs would cascade upon him as he lay suffocating under a tarpaulin. The boat slowly slid out of the tunnel's mouth, and despite its slow progress, and despite the fact that outside the sun shone with only wintry brilliance, he was quite blinded for a while. The chatter of the passengers rose into a roar almost comparable with the sound of the underground spring upon the tarpaulin. Hornblower sat up and blinked round him. There was a horseholder on the towpath with a pair of horses; he caught the line the steersman tossed to him and between them they drew the boat to the bank. Many of the passengers were leaving at this point, and they began to swarm out at once with their packages and their chickens. Others were waiting to board.

"Horatio," said Maria, coming out of the first-class cabin; little Horatio was awake now and was whimpering a little.

"Yes, my dear?"

Hornblower was conscious of Maria's eyes taking in the disorder of his clothes. He knew that Maria would scold him, brush him down, treat him with the same maternal possessiveness as she treated his son, and he knew that at the moment he did not want to be possessed.

"One moment, dear, if you will pardon me," he said, and stepped nimbly out on to the towpath, joining himself to the conversation of the steersman and the horseholder.

"Ne'er a man here," said the latter. "An' you won't find one before Oxford, that I'll warrant you."

In reply the steersman said much the same things as he had said to the other horseholder.

"That's how it is, an' all," said the horseholder philosophically, "you'll have to wait for the trade."

"No spare men here?" asked Hornblower.

"None, sir," said the steersman, and then, after a moment's hesitation, "I suppose, sir, you wouldn't care to drive a pair o' horses?"

"Not I," answered Hornblower hastily — he was taken sufficiently by surprise by the question to make no attempt to disguise his dismay at the thought of driving two horses in the manner of the injured Charlie; then he saw how to recover his dignity and keep himself safe from Maria's ministrations, and he added: "But I'll take the tiller."

"O' course you could, sir," answered the steersman. "Not the first time you've handled a tiller. Not by a long chalk An' I'll drive the nags, me an' my jury fist an' all."

He glanced down at the steel hook that replaced his missing hand.

"Very well," said Hornblower.

"I'm grateful to you, sir, that I am," said the steersman, and to emphasize his sincerity he swore a couple more oaths. "I've a contract on this here v'yage — that's two chests o' tea for'rard there, first o' the China crop for Lunnon delivery. You'll save me pounds, sir, an' my good name as well. Grateful I am, by —"

He emphasized his sincerity again.

"That's all right," said Hornblower. "The sooner we start the sooner we arrive. What's your name?"

"Jenkins, sir." Tom Jenkins, the steersman — now to be the postillion — tugged at his forelock, "main topman in the old *Superb*, Cap'n Keates, sir."

"Very well, Jenkins. Let's start."

The horseholder tended to the business of attaching the horses' towlines, and while Jenkins cast off the bow-line, Hornblower cast off the stern one and stood by with a single turn round the bollard; Jenkins climbed nimbly into the saddle and draped the reins about his hook.

"But, Horatio," said Maria, "whatever are you thinking about?"

"About arriving in London, my dear," said Hornblower, and at that moment the whip cracked and the towlines tightened.

Hornblower had to spring for the stern sheets, line in hand, and he had to grab for the tiller. Maybe Maria was still expostulating, but if she were, Hornblower was already far too busy to hear anything she said. It was impressive how quickly the *Queen Charlotte* picked up speed as the horses, suddenly breaking into a trot, pulled her bows up on to her bow wave. From a trot they changed to a canter, and the speed seemed fantastic — far faster, to Hornblower's heated imagination, now that he was at the helm instead of being a mere irresponsible passenger. The banks were flying by; fortunately in this deep cut of the summit level the channel was straight at first, for the steering was not perfectly simple. The two towlines, one at the bow and one at the stern, held the boat parallel to the bank with the smallest use of the rudder — an economic employment of force that appealed to Hornblower's mathematical mind, but which made the feel of the boat a little unnatural as he tentatively tried the tiller.

He looked forward at the approaching bend with some apprehension, and as they neared it he darted his eyes from bank to bank to make sure he was holding in mid-channel. And round the bend, almost upon them, was a bridge — another of these infernal canal bridges, built for economy, with the towpath bulging out under the arch, so that it was hard to sight for the centre of the greatly narrowed channel. Maria was certainly saying something to him, and little Horatio was undoubtedly yelling like a fury, but this was no moment to spare them either a glance or a thought. He steadied the boat round the bend. The hoofs of the lead horse were already ringing on the cobbles under the bridge. God! He was over too far. He tugged the tiller across. Too far the other way! He pushed the tiller back, straightening the boat on her course even as her bows entered the narrows. She turned, very nearly fast enough — her starboard quarter, just where he stood, hit with a solid thump against the elbow of the brick-faced canal side, but she had a thick rope rubbing strake there — presumably to meet situations of this sort — which cushioned the shock; it was not violent enough to throw the passengers off their benches in the cabin, although it nearly threw Hornblower, crouching low under the arch, on to his face. No time to think, not even though little Horatio had apparently been bumped by the shock and was now screaming even more wildly in the bows; the canal was curving back again and he had to guide the *Queen Charlotte* round the bend.

Crack-crack-crack-crack — that was Jenkins with his whip — was not the speed already great enough for him? Round the bend, coming towards them, there was another canal boat, creeping peacefully along towed by a

single horse. Hornblower realized that Jenkins' four whip cracks were a signal, demanding a clear passage. He hoped most sincerely and fervently that one would be granted, as the canal boat hastened down upon the barge.

The bargee at the tow horse's head brought the beast to a standstill, edging him over into the hedge beside the towpath; the bargee's wife put her tiller over and the barge swerved majestically, with her residual way, towards the reeds that lined the opposite bank; so between horse and barge the tow-rope sank to the ground on the towpath, and into the water in a deep bight. Over the tow-rope cantered Jenkins' horses, and Hornblower headed the passage boat for the narrow space between the barge and the towpath. He could guess that the water beside the path was shallow; it was necessary to steer the passage boat to shave the barge as closely as possible, and in any case the bargee's wife, accustomed to encountering skilled steersmen, had only left him the minimum of room. Hornblower was in a fair way towards panic as the passage boat dashed forward.

Starboard — meet her. Port — meet her. He was giving these orders to himself, as he might to his coxswain; like a streak of lightning through the dark confusion of his mind flashed the thought that although he might give the orders he could not trust his clumsy limbs to execute them with the precision of a skilled helmsman. Into the gap now; the stern was still swinging and at the last moment he got the tiller over to check her. The barge seemed to flash by; out of the tail of his eye he was dimly aware of the bargee's wife's greeting, changing to surprise as she noted that the *Queen Charlotte* was being steered by a man quite unknown to her. Faintly to his ear came the sound of what she said, but he could distinguish no word — he had no attention to spare for compliments.

They were through, in that flash, and he could breathe again, he could smile, he could grin; all was well in a marvellous world, steering a passage boat at nine miles an hour along the Thames and Severn Canal. But that was another yell from Jenkins: he was checking his horses, and there was the grey tower of a lock-house ahead. The gates were open, the lock-keeper standing by them. Hornblower steered for them, greatly helped by the *Queen Charlotte*'s abrupt reduction in speed as her bow wave passed ahead of her. Hornblower grabbed for the stern rope, leaped for the bank, and miraculously kept his footing. The bollard was ten feet ahead; he ran forward and dropped a loop over it and took the strain. The ideal method was to take nearly all the way off the boat, let her creep into the lock, and stop her fully at the next bollard, but it was too much to hope that he could at his first attempt execute all this exactly. He let the line slip through his hands, watching the boat's progress, and then took too sudden a pull at it. Line and bollard creaked; the *Queen Charlotte* swung her bows across the lock to bump them against the farther sides and she lay there half in and half out, helpless, so that the lock-keeper's wife had to run along from the farther gates, lean over, shove the bows clear while seizing the bowline, and, with the line over her sturdy shoulder, haul the boat the final dozen yards into the lock — a clear waste of a couple of minutes. Nor was this all, for as they had now passed the summit level, this was a downward lock, and Hornblower had not readied his mind for this transition. He was taken by surprise when the *Queen Charlotte* subsided abruptly, with the opening of the gate paddles, along with the emptying water, and he had only just time to slack away the stern-line, or else the boat might have been left hanging on it.

"Ee, man, you know little about boats," said the lock-keeper's wife, and Hornblower's ears burned with embarrassment. He thought of the examination he had passed in navigation and seamanship; he thought of how often he had tacked a monstrous ship of the line in heavy weather. That experience was not of much use to him here in inland Gloucestershire — or perhaps it was Oxfordshire by now and in any case the lock was empty, the gates opening, the towlines tightening, and he had to leap down six feet or more in a hurry into the already moving stern, remembering to take the stern-line down with him. He managed it, clumsily as ever, and he heard the lock-keeper's wife's hearty laugh as he glided on below her; and she said something more, too, but he could pay no attention to it, as he had to grab for the tiller and steer the hurrying boat out under the bridge. And when he had first paid for their passages he had pictured to himself the leisurely life of the canal boatman!

And, heavens and earth! Here was Maria beside him having made her way aft through the second-class cabin. "How can you let these people be so insolent to you, dear?" she was asking. "Why don't you tell them who you are?"

"My dear —" began Hornblower, and then stopped.

If Maria could not see the incongruity of a naval captain mishandling a canal boat it was hopeless to argue. Besides, he had no attention to spare for her, not with those cantering horses whisking the *Queen Charlotte* along like this.

"And this all seems very unnecessary, dear," went on Maria. "Why should you demean yourself like this? Is there all this need for haste?"

Hornblower took the boat round a bend — he congratulated himself that he was getting the feel of the tiller now.

"Why don't you answer me?" went on Maria. "And I have our dinner waiting for us, and little Horatio —" She was like the voice of conscience — for that matter that was exactly what she was.

"Maria," snapped Hornblower. "Get for'rard! Get for'rard, I say. Go back to the cabin."

"But, my dear —"

"Get for'rard!"

Hornblower roared this out — here was another barge approaching and he could spare no time for the niceties of married life.

"You are very heartless," said Maria, "and in my condition, too."

Heartless, maybe, but certainly preoccupied. Hornblower pulled the tiller over, and Maria put her handkerchief to her eyes and flounced — as much of a flounce as was possible to her as she was — back into the second class cabin again. The *Queen Charlotte* shot neatly down the gap between the barge and the towpath, and Hornblower could actually spare enough attention to acknowledge with a wave of his hand the greeting of the bargee's wife. He had time, too, now, for a prick of conscience about his treatment of Maria, but only a momentary one. He still had to steer the boat.

Chapter II

There was still plenty of daylight when they came out into the Thames valley and Hornblower, looking down to starboard, could see the infant river — not such an infant at its winter level — running below. Every turn and every lock brought the canal nearer to the stream, and at last they reached Inglesham, with Lechlade church steeple in view ahead, and the junction with the river. At Inglesham lock Jenkins left his horses and came back to speak to Hornblower.

"There's three staunches on the river next that we have to run, sir," he said.

Hornblower had no idea what a staunch was, and he very much wanted to know before he had to "run" them, but at the same time he did not want to admit ignorance. Jenkins may have been tactful enough to sense his difficulty; at least he gave an explanation.

"They're dams across the river, sir," he told Hornblower. "At this time o' year, with plenty of water, some o' the paddles are kept out for good, at the towpath end o' the staunch. There's a fall o' five or six feet."

"Five or six feet?" repeated Hornblower, startled.

"Yes, sir. 'Bout that much. But it isn't a real fall, if you know what I mean, sir. Steep, but no more."

"And we have to run down it?"

"Yes, sir. It's easy enough sir — at the top, leastways."

"And at the bottom?"

"There's an eddy there, sir, like as you'd expect. But if you hold her straight, sir, the nags'll take you through."

"I'll hold her straight," said Hornblower.

"O' course you will, sir."

"But what the devil do they have these staunches on the river for?"

"They keeps back the water for the mills — an' the navigation, sir."

"But why don't they have locks?"

Jenkins spread his hand and his hock in a gesture of ignorance.

"Dunno, sir. There's locks from Oxford down. These 'ere staunches are a plague. Takes six horses to get the old *Queen Charlotte* up 'em, sometimes."

Hornblower's thinking about the subject had not got progressed as far as thinking about how the staunches were passed up-river; and he was a little annoyed with himself at not having raised the point. But he managed to nod sagely at the information.

"I daresay," he said. "Well, it doesn't concern us this voyage."

"No, sir," said Jenkins. He pointed down the canal. "The first 'un is half a mile below Lechlade Bridge, there. It's well over on the port side. You can't miss it, sir."

Hornblower hoped he was right about that. He took his place in the stern and seized the tiller with a bold attempt to conceal his misgivings, and he waved to the lock-keeper as the boat moved rapidly out of the lock — he was adept enough by now to be able to spare attention for that even with a gate to negotiate. They shot out on to the surface of the young river; there was plenty of current running in their direction — Hornblower noted the eddy at the point — but the speed of the horses gave them plenty of steerage-way.

Lechlade Bridge just ahead of them — the staunch was half a mile beyond, Jenkins said. Although the air was distinctly cold now Hornblower was conscious that his palms, as they rested on the tiller, were distinctly damp. To him now it appeared a wildly reckless thing to do, to attempt to shoot the staunch inexperienced as he was. He would prefer — infinitely prefer — not to try. But he had to steer through the arch of the bridge — the horses splashed fetlock deep there — and then it was too late to do anything about his change of mind. There was the line of the staunch across the stream, the gap in it plainly visible on the port side. Beyond the staunch the surface of the river was not visible because of the drop, but above the gap the water headed down in a steep, sleek slope, higher at the sides than in the middle; the fragments which floated on the surface were all hurrying towards it, like people in a public hall all pressing towards a single exit. Hornblower steered for the centre of the gap, choking a little with excitement; he could feel the altered trim of the boat as her bows sank and her stern rose on the slope. Now they were flying down, down. Below, the smooth slope narrowed down to a point, beyond which and on each side was the turbulent water of the eddy. He still had steerage way enough to steer down the point; as he felt the boat answer the helm he was momentarily tempted to follow up the mathematical line of thought presented by that situation, but he had neither time nor really the inclination. The bows hit the turbulent water with a jar and a splash; the boat lurched in the eddy, but next moment the towlines plucked them forward again. Two seconds' careful steering and they were through the eddy and they were gliding over a smooth surface once more, foam-streaked but smooth, and Hornblower was laughing out loud. It had been simple, but so exhilarating that it did not occur to him to condemn himself for his earlier misgivings. Jenkins looked back, turning in his saddle, and waved his whip, and Hornblower waved back.

"Horatio, you *must* come and have your dinner," said Maria. "And you have left me alone all day."

"Not long before we reach Oxford now, dear," said Hornblower — he was just able to conceal the fact that he had temporarily, until then, forgotten the existence of his wife and child.

"Horatio —"

"In a little while, dear," said Hornblower.

The winter evening was closing round them, the light mellowing while it faded over ploughland and meadow, over the Pollard willows knee-deep in the stream, over the farmhouses and cottages. It was all very lovely; Hornblower had the feeling that he did not want this moment ever to end. This was happiness, as his earlier feelings of well-being changed to something more peaceful, just as the surface of the river had changed below the eddy. Soon he would be back in another life again, plunged once more into a world of cruelty and war — the world he had left behind in the tide-water of the Severn and would meet again in the tide-water of the Thames. It was symbolic that it should be here in the centre of England, at the midpoint of his journey, that he should reach this momentary summit of happiness. The cattle in the fields, the rooks in the trees — were they part of this happiness? Possibly, but not certainly. The happiness came from within him, and depended on even more transitory factors than those. Hornblower breathed the evening air as though it were divine poetry, and then he noticed Jenkins waving to him from his saddle and pointing with his whip, and the moment was over, lost for ever.

That was the next staunch at which Jenkins was pointing. Hornblower steered boldly for it, without a moment of nervousness; he steadied the boat on her course above it, felt the heave and sudden acceleration as she topped the slope, and grinned with delight as she shot down it, hit the eddy below, and emerged as before after a brief period of indecision. Onward, down the river, through the gathering night. Bridges; another staunch — Hornblower was glad it was the last; there had been much point to what Jenkins had said about needing daylight in which to run them — villages, churches. Now it was quite dark, and he was cold and weary. The next time Maria came aft to him he could address her sympathetically, and even share her indignation that Oxford was so far away. Jenkins had lighted candle-lanterns; one hung on the collar of the lead horse and the other from the cantle of the saddle of the horse he rode. Hornblower, in the stern sheets of the *Queen Charlotte*, saw the specks of light dancing on the towpath — they gave him an indication of the turns the river was making, and just enabled him to steer a safe course, although twice his heart was in his mouth as the side of the boat brushed against the reeds at the river bank. It was quite dark when Hornblower felt the boat slow up suddenly with the easing of the towlines, and in response to Jenkins' quiet hail he steered the boat towards a lantern-lit landing-stage; ready hands took the lines and moored the boat, and the passengers began to swarm out.

"Captain — sir?" said Jenkins.

That was not the way he had used the word "captain" at their first acquaintance. Then it had been with an equalitarian gibe; now he was using the formula and the intonation that would be used by any member of a ship's company addressing his captain.

"Yes?" said Hornblower.

"This is Oxford, sir, and the relief is here."

In the wavering lantern light Hornblower could see the two men indicated.

"So now I can have my dinner?" he asked, with gentle irony.

"That you can, sir, an' it's sorry I am that you have had to wait for it. Sir, I'm your debtor. Sir —"

"Oh, that's all right, Jenkins," said Hornblower testily. "I had my own reasons for wishing to get to London."

"Thank'ee sir, and —"

"How far to London now?"

"A hundred miles to Brentford, sir, by the river. You'll be there at the first light. How'll the tide be then, Jem?"

"Just at the flood," said the member of the relief crew holding the whip. "You can take water there, sir, an' be at Whitehall Steps in an hour."

"Thank you," said Hornblower. "I'll say good-bye to you, then, Jenkins."

"Good-bye, sir and thank'ee agen for a true gennelman."

Maria was standing by the bows of the boat, and even in the dim light Hornblower thought he could detect reproach in her attitude. But it was not immediately apparent in her words.

"I've found you a hot supper, Horatio," was what she said.

"By Jingo!" said Hornblower.

Standing on the quay were a few boys and young women come to sell food to the river travellers. The one who caught Hornblower's eye was a sturdy lad with a keg, clearly containing beer, on a barrow, and Hornblower realized that he was consumed with thirst even more acutely than with hunger.

"That's what I want," he said. "Give me a quart."

"On'y pints, sir," said the boy.

"Two pints then, you lubber."

He emptied the first wooden piggin without an effort without even taking breath, and started on the second, before he remembered his manners. He had honestly been so consumed with thirst that he had forgotten them completely.

"How about you, dear?" he asked Maria.

"I think I'd like half a pint," said Maria — Hornblower could have guessed at her reply beforehand; Maria would think it was a sign of a lady to drink beer only by the half pint.

"Only pints, sir," said the boy again.

"Well, give the lady a pint and I'll finish it," said Hornblower, his second piggin two-thirds empty.

"All aboard!" called the new steersman. "All aboard!"

"That'll be a shilling, sir," said the boy.

"Fourpence a pint for this beer!" marvelled Maria.

"Cheap at the price," said Hornblower. "Here, boy."

Out of sheer lightness of heart he gave the boy a florin, and the boy spun it in the air delightedly before putting it in his pocket. Hornblower took the piggin from Maria's hand and drained it and tossed it to the boy.

"All aboard!"

Hornblower stepped down into the boat and elaborately handed Maria down too. He was taken a little aback to find that the *Queen Charlotte* had acquired some more first class passengers either here or farther back along their route. There were two or three men and a half dozen women sitting in the cabin lit by the light of a lamp; little Horatio was asleep in one corner. Maria was fluttered; she wanted to speak about domestic subjects, but was self-conscious about it in the presence of strangers. She whispered what she had to say, while her hands now and then gesticulated towards the stony-faced strangers to indicate how much more she would have said if there were no fellow passengers.

"That was two shillings you gave the boy, dear," she said. "Why did you do it?"

"Just lunacy, my dear, lunacy," said Hornblower, speaking lightheartedly but not so far from the truth.

Maria sighed as she looked at this unpredictable husband of hers who could throw away a shilling, and talk about lunacy in the bearing of strangers without dropping his voice.

"And here's the supper I bought," said Maria, "while you were talking to the men. I hope it's still hot. You've not had a bite all day, and by now the bread and meat I brought for dinner will be stale."

"I'll eat whatever there is, and more," said Hornblower, with more than a quart of beer inside his otherwise empty stomach.

Maria indicated the two wooden platters awaiting them on the bench beside little Horatio.

"I got out our spoons and forks," explained Maria. "We leave the platters on board here."

"Excellent," said Hornblower.

There were two sausages on each platter, embedded in masses of pease pudding still steaming. Hornblower sat down with his platter on his lap and began to eat. Those were beef sausages, naturally, if they were not mutton or possibly goat or horse, and they apparently were made from the purest gristle. The skins were as tough as their contents. Hornblower stole a sideways glance at Maria, eating with apparent contentment. He had hurt her feelings several times today and he could not bear to do it again; otherwise he would have pitched those sausages over the side into the river where possibly the fish could deal with them. But as it was he made a valiant effort to eat them. By the time he had started the second he decided it was beyond him. He made his handkerchief ready in his left hand.

"We'll be at the first lock any moment," he said to Maria, with a gesture of his right hand calling her attention to the dark window. Maria tried to peer out, and Hornblower flipped the second sausage into his handkerchief and stuffed it into his side pocket. He caught the eye of the elderly man sitting nearly opposite him across the narrow cabin. This individual had been sitting muffled up in great coat and scarf, his hat pressed down low on his forehead, grouchy keeping watch from under his eyebrows at every movement the Hornblowers had made. Hornblower gave him an elaborate wink in reply to the astonishment which replaced the grouchy old gentleman's bad-tempered curiosity. It was not a conspiratorial wink, nor did Hornblower attempt the hopeless task of trying to pretend that he stuffed hot greasy sausages into his pocket every day of his life; the wink simply dared the old gentleman to comment on or even think about the remarkable act. He applied himself to finishing off the pease pudding.

"You eat so fast, dear," said Maria. "It cannot be good for your stomach."

She herself was struggling desperately with her own sausages

"I'm hungry enough to eat a horse," said Hornblower. "Now I'll start on our dinner, stale or not."

"I am delighted," said Maria. "Let me —"

"No, dear. Sit still. I'll look after myself."

Hornblower took the food parcel and opened it.

"Quite excellent," he said, with his mouth full of bread and meat.

At every moment he was making amends to Maria for his cavalier treatment of her during the day. The larger the meals he ate, the more appetite he evinced, the better Maria was pleased. A little gesture like helping

himself to his own dinner gratified her absurdly. He could give her so much happiness; he could hurt her so easily.

"I regret having seen so little of you during the day, dear," he said. "It was my loss. But if I had not helped with the working of the boat we should skill be at Sapperton Tunnel."

"Yes, dear," said Maria.

"I would have liked to point out the scenery to you as we passed it," went on Hornblower, battling with the self-contempt that his hypocrisy was arousing. "I trust you enjoyed it even so?"

"Not nearly as much as if you had been with me, dear," said Maria, but gratified beyond all measure. She darted glances at the other women in the cabin to detect the envy they must feel on account of her having such a wonderful husband.

"The boy was good?" asked Hornblower. "He ate his pap?"

"Every bit of it," answered Maria proudly, looking down at the sleeping child. "He was inclined to whimper at times, but now he is sleeping happily."

"If it had been two years from now that we made this journey," said Hornblower, "how interested he would have been! He would have helped with the lines, and I could have taught him to hold the tiller."

Now he was not being hypocritical at all.

"He showed a lively interest even now," said Maria.

"And what about his little sister?" asked Hornblower. "Did she behave well?"

"Horatio!" said Maria, a little scandalized.

"I hope not badly, dear," said Hornblower, smiling away her embarrassment.

"No, excellently," admitted Maria.

They were gliding into a lock; Hornblower heard the rattle of the paddles being let down behind them.

"You made very little progress with your sausages, dear," he said. "Let me dispose of them while you tackle some of this bread and meat, which is really delicious."

"But, dear —"

"I insist."

He took Maria's platter and his own, and stepped out into the bows of the boat in the darkness. It was the work of a moment to give the platters a quick rinse overside; the work of another moment to drop overside the sausage from his pocket, and he returned with the dripping platters to a Maria both scandalized and delighted at the condescension of her husband in thus doing menial work.

"Too dark to enjoy any scenery," he said — already the boat was moving out of the lock — "Maria, my dear, when you have completed your supper I will endeavour to make you as comfortable as is possible for the night."

He bent over the sleeping child while Maria repacked the remains of the supper.

"Now, my dear."

"Horatio, really you should not. Horatio, please, I beg of you —"

"No need for a hat at this time of night. Let's have it off. Now there's plenty of room for you on the bench. Put your feet up here. No need for shoes either. Not a word, now. Now a pillow for your head. The bag will make a good foundation. Comfortable like that? Now, the coat over you to keep you warm. There, now sleep well, my dear."

Maria was carried away by his masterful attentions so that she could not protest. She had lain still for a full two minutes before she opened her eyes again to ask what he was doing for his own comfort.

"I shall be supremely comfortable, my dear. I'm an old campaigner. Now close those eyes again, and sleep in peace, my dear."

Hornblower was by no means supremely comfortable, although he had often spent worse nights, in open boats, for instance. With Maria and the child lying on the thinly-cushioned bench he had necessarily to sit upright, as the other passengers were doing. What with the lamp and the breathing of all those people in the cramped little cabin the air was stuffy; his legs were cramped, the small of his back ached, and the part on which he sat protested against bearing his weight unrelieved. But it was only one night to live through, after all. He crammed his hands into his pockets and settled himself again, while the boat went on down the river through the dark, stopping at intervals at the locks, bumping gently against the walls, gliding forward again. He

knew nothing, naturally, of the river between Oxford and London, so he could not guess where they were at any time. But they were heading downstream and towards his new command.

Luckily he was to have a command, he told himself. Not a frigate, but a sloop so big — twenty-two guns — as to justify having a captain and not a commander. It was the best that could be hoped for, for the man who a month ago was the six hundred and first captain out of the six hundred and two on the list. Apparently Caldecott, the previous captain of the *Atropos*, had broken down in health while fitting her out at Deptford, which accounted for his unexpected summons thither to replace him. And the orders had no sooner reached him than the news of Nelson's victory at Trafalgar had arrived in England. Since that time no one had had a thought save for Nelson and Trafalgar. The country was wild with delight at the destruction of Villeneuve's fleet, and in the depths of sorrow at Nelson's death. Nelson — Trafalgar — Nelson — Trafalgar — no column in a newspaper, no momentary gossip with a stranger, but contained those names. The country had been lavish with its rewards. A state funeral was promised for Nelson; for the Navy there were peerages and knighthoods and promotions. With the re-creation of the rank of Admiral of the Red twenty new admirals had been promoted from the top of the captains' list; two captains had fallen at Trafalgar, and two more had died; so that Hornblower was now the five hundred and seventy-seventh captain in seniority. But at the same time promotion had been lavish among the commanders and lieutenants. There were forty-one new captains on the list — there was something gratifying in the thought that now he was senior to forty-two captains. But it meant that now there were six hundred and nineteen captains seeking employment, and even in the vast Royal Navy there were not enough vacancies for all those. A hundred at least — more likely a hundred and fifty would be on half-pay awaiting employment. That was as it should be, one might think. That proportion not only made allowance for sickness and old age among the captains, but also made it unnecessary to employ those who had been proved to be inefficient.

Unless the inefficient had friends in high places; then it would be the friendless and the unfortunate who languished on half-pay. Hornblower knew himself to be friendless, and even though he had just been congratulating himself on his good fortune he always thought himself ultimately doomed to misfortune. He was on his way to take over a ship that someone else had fitted out with officers and men he knew nothing of; those facts were sufficient basis on which his gloomy pessimism could build itself.

Maria sighed and turned herself on the bench; Hornblower crept down to her to rearrange the heavy coat over her body.

Chapter III

At Brentford, in the early light of the winter's morning, it was cold and damp and gloomy. Little Horatio whimpered ceaselessly; Maria was uncomfortable and weary, as she stood beside Hornblower while her trunk and Hornblower's two sea chests were being hoisted out of the boat.

"Is it far to Deptford, my dear?" she asked.

"Far enough," said Hornblower; between Brentford and Deptford lay the whole extent of London and much more beside, while the river on which they were to travel wound sinuously in wide curves, backwards and forwards. And they had arrived late, and the tide would barely serve.

The wherry men were soliciting for his custom.

"Boat, sir? Sculls, sir? Oars, sir?"

"Oars," said Hornblower.

It cost twice as much for a wherry rowed by two oarsmen as for one rowed by a single man with sculls, but with the ebbing tide it was worth it. Hornblower helped Maria and the baby down into the stern-sheets and looked on while the baggage was handed down.

"Right, Bill. Give way," said stroke-oar, and the wherry shot away from the slip out on to the grey river.

"Ooh," said Maria, a little afraid.

The oars ground in the rowlocks, the boat danced on the choppy water

"They say the old King's fair mazed, sir, at Lord Nelson's death," said stroke, with a jerk of his hand towards Kew, across the river. "That's where he lives, sir. In the Palace there."

"Yes," said Hornblower; in no mood to discuss the King or Lord Nelson or anyone else.

The wind was brisk and westerly; had it been easterly the river would have been far more choppy, and their progress would be delayed, so there was something at least to be said in favour of this grey world.

"Easy, 'Arry," said bow, and the wherry began to round the bend.

"Hush, baby. Don't you like the nasty boat?" said Maria to little Horatio, who was making it plain that Maria had guessed at the truth of the matter.

"Nipper's cold, likely," volunteered stroke.

"I think he is," agreed Maria.

The boatman and Maria fell into conversation, to Hornblower's relief; he could immerse himself in his thoughts then, in his hopes and his apprehensions — the latter predominating — about his ship that awaited him down river. It would only be an hour or two before he would go on board. Ship, officers and crew were an unknown to him.

"The Dook lives there, ma'am," said the boatman, through little Horatio's yells, "an' you can see the Bishop's Palace through the trees."

This was Maria's first visit to London; it was convenient that they should have a loquacious boatman.

"See the pretty houses," said Maria, dancing the baby in her arms. "Look at the pretty boats."

The houses were getting thicker and thicker; they shot bridge after bridge, and the boat traffic on the river was growing dense, and suddenly Hornblower became aware they were at London's edge.

"Westminster, ma'am," said the boatman. "I used to ply on the ferry here until they built the bridge. A ha'penny toll took the bread out of the mouths of many an honest boatman then."

"I should think so, indeed," said Maria, sympathetically. By now she had forgotten the dignity of her position as a captain's wife.

"Whitehall Steps, ma'am, and that 'ere's the Strand."

Hornblower had taken boat to Whitehall Steps often during those bitter days of half-pay when he was soliciting employment from the Admiralty.

"St Paul's, ma'am."

Now they were really within the City of London. Hornblower could smell the smoke of the coal fires.

"Easy, 'Arry," said bow again, looking back over his shoulder. Boats, lighters, and barges covered the surface of the river, and there was London Bridge ahead of them.

"Give way, 'ard," said bow, and the two oarsmen pulled desperately through a gap in the traffic above the bridge. Through the narrow arches the tide ran fast; the river was piled up above the constriction of the bridge. They shot down through the narrow opening.

"Goodness!" said Maria.

And here was the greatest port in the world; ships at anchor, ships discharging cargo, with only the narrowest channel down the centre. North country collier brigs, Ramsgate trawlers, coasters, grain ships, with the grey tower looking down on them.

"The Pool's always a rare sight, ma'am," said stroke. "Even wi' the war an' all."

All this busy shipping was the best proof that Bonaparte across the water was losing his war against England. England could never be conquered while the Navy dominated the sea, strangling the continental powers while allowing free passage to British commerce.

Below the Pool lay a ship of war, idly at anchor, topmasts sent down, hands at work on stages overside painting. At her bows was a crude figurehead of a draped female painted in red and white; in her clumsily carved hands she carried a large pair of gilded shears, and it was those which told Hornblower what the ship was, before he could count the eleven gunports aside, before they passed under her stern and he could read her name, *Atropos*. He choked down his excitement as he stared at her, taking note of her trim and her lines, of the petty officer of the anchor watch — of everything that in that piercing moment he could possibly observe.

"*Atropos*, twenty-two," said stroke-oar, noting Hornblower's interest.

"My husband is captain of her," said Maria proudly.

"Indeed, sir?" answered stroke, with a new respect that must have been gratifying to Maria.

Already the boat was swinging round; there was Deptford Creek and Deptford Hard.

"Easy!" said bow. "Give way again. Easy!"

The boat rasped against the shore, and the journey from Gloucester was over. No, not over, decided Hornblower preparing to disembark. There was now all the tedious business before them of getting a lodging, taking their baggage there, and settling Maria in before he could get to his ship. Life was a succession of pills that had to be swallowed. He paid the boatman under Maria's watchful eye; fortunately a riverside lounge came to solicit custom, and produced a barrow on which he piled the luggage. Hornblower took Maria's arm and helped her up the slippery Hard as she carried the baby.

"Glad I'll be," said Maria, "to take these shoes off. And the sooner little Horatio is changed the better. There, there, darling." Only the briefest walk, luckily, took them to the "George". A plump landlady received them, running a sympathetic eye over Maria's condition. She took them up to a room while a maid under her vigorous urgings sped to get hot water and towels.

"There, my poppet," said the landlady to little Horatio.

"Ooh," said Maria, sitting down on the bed and already beginning to take off her shoes.

Hornblower was standing by the door waiting for his sea chests to be brought up.

"When are you expecting, ma'am?" asked the landlady.

It seemed not a moment before she and Maria were discussing midwives and the rising cost of living — the latter subject introduced by Maria's determination to chaffer over the price of the room. The potman and the riverside lounge carried the baggage up and put it down on the floor of the room, interrupting the discussion. Hornblower took out his keys and knelt eagerly at his chest.

"Horatio, dear," said Maria, "we're speaking to you."

"Eh — what?" asked Hornblower absently over his shoulder.

"Something hot, sir, while breakfast is preparing?" asked the landlady. "Rum punch? A dish o' tea?"

"Not for me, thank you," said Hornblower.

He had his chest open by now and was unpacking it feverishly.

"Cannot that wait until we've had breakfast, dear?" asked Maria. "Then I could do it for you."

"I fear not, ma'am," said Hornblower, still on his knees.

"Your best shirts! You're crumpling them," protested Maria.

Hornblower was dragging out his uniform coat from beneath them. He laid the coat on the other chest and searched for his epaulette.

"You're going to your ship!" exclaimed Maria.

"Of course, my dear," said Hornblower.

The landlady was out of the room and conversation could run more freely.

"But you must have your breakfast first," expostulated Maria.

Hornblower made himself see reason.

"Five minutes for breakfast, then, after I've shaved," he said.

He laid out his coat on the bed, with a frown at its creases, and he unlatched the japanned box which held his cocked hat. He threw off the coat he was wearing and undid, feverishly, his neckcloth and stock. Little Horatio decided at that moment to protest again against a heartless world, and Hornblower unrolled his housewife and took out his razor and addressed himself to shaving while Maria attended to the baby.

"I'll take Horatio down for his bread and milk, dear," said Maria.

"Yes, dear," said Hornblower through the lather.

The mirror caught Maria's reflection, and he forced himself back into the world again. She was standing pathetically looking at him, and he put down his razor, and took up the towel and wiped the lather from his mouth.

"Not a kiss since yesterday!" he said. "Maria, darling, don't you think you've been neglecting me?"

She came to his outstretched arms; her eyes were wet, but the gentleness of his voice and the lightness of his tone brought a smile to her lips despite her tears.

"I thought I was the neglected one," she whispered.

She kissed him eagerly, possessively, her hands at his shoulders, holding him to her swollen body.

"I have been thinking about my duty," he said to her, "to the exclusion of the other things I should have thought about. Can you forgive me, dearest?"

"Forgive!" the smile and the tears were both more evident as she spoke. "Don't say that, darling. Do what you will — I'm yours. I'm yours."

Hornblower felt a wave of real tenderness rise within him as he kissed her again; the happiness, the whole life, of a human creature depended on his patience and his tact. His wiping off of the lather had not been very effective; there were smears of it on Maria's face.

"Sweetness," he said, "that makes you my very dearest possession."

And while he kissed her he thought of *Atropos* riding to her anchor out there in the river, and despised himself as a hypocritical unfaithful lover. But his concealment of his impatience brought its reward, for when little Horatio began to wail again it was Maria who drew back first.

"The poor lamb!" she said, and quitted Hornblower's arms to go and attend to him. She looked up at her husband from where she bent over the child, and smiled at him. "I must see that both of these men of mine are fed."

There was something Hornblower had to say, but it called for tact, and he fumbled in his mind before he found the right way to say it.

"Dearest," he said. "I do not mind if the whole world knows I have just kissed you, but I fear lest you would be ashamed."

"Goodness!" said Maria, grasping his meaning and hurrying to the mirror to wipe off the smears of lather.

Then she snatched up the baby. "I'll see that your breakfast is ready when you come down."

She smiled at him with so much happiness in her face, and she blew him a kiss before she left the room.

Hornblower turned again to renew the lather and prepare himself for going on board. His mind was full of his ship, his wife, his child, and the child to be. The fleeting happiness of yesterday was forgotten; perhaps, not being aware that he was unhappy now, he could be deemed happy today as well, but he was not a man with a gift for happiness.

With breakfast finished at last he took boat again at the Hard to go the short distance to his ship; as he sat in the stern-sheets he settled his cocked hat with its gold loop and button, and he let his cloak hang loose to reveal the epaulette on his right shoulder that marked him as a captain of less than three years' seniority. He momentarily tapped his pocket to make sure that his orders were in it, and then sat upright in the boat with all the dignity he could muster. He could imagine what was happening in *Atropos* — the master's mate of the watch catching sight of the cocked hat and the epaulette, the messenger scurrying to tell the first lieutenant, the call for sideboys and bosun's mates, the wave of nervousness and curiosity that would pass over the ship at the news that the new captain was about to come on board. The thought of it made him smile despite his own nervousness and curiosity.

"Boat ahoy!" came the hail from the ship.

The boatman gave an inquiring glance at Hornblower, received a nod in return, and turned to hail back with a pair of lungs of leather.

"*Atropos*!"

That was positive assurance to the ship that this was her captain approaching.

"Lay her alongside," said Hornblower.

Atropos sat low in the water, flush-decked; the mizzen chains were within easy reach of Hornblower where he stood. The boatman coughed decorously.

"Did you remember my fare, sir?" he asked, and Hornblower had to find coppers to pay him.

Then he went up the ship's side, refusing, as far as his self-control would allow, to let the incident fluster him. He tried to conceal his excitement as he reached the deck amid the twittering of the pipes, with his hand to his hatbrim in salute, but he was not capable of seeing with clarity the faces that awaited him there.

"John Jones, First Lieutenant," said a voice. "Welcome aboard, sir."

Then there were other names, other faces as vague as the names. Hornblower checked himself from swallowing in his excitement for fear lest it should be noticed. He went to some pains to speak in a tone of exactly the right pitch.

"Call the ship's company, Mr Jones, if you please."

"All hands! All hands!"

The cry went through the ship while the pipes twittered and squealed again. There was a rush of feet, a bustling and a subdued murmur. Now there was a sea of faces before him in the waist, but he was still too excited to observe them in detail.

"Ship's company assembled, sir."

Hornblower touched his hat in reply — he had to assume that Jones had touched his hat to him, for he was not aware of it — and took out his orders and began to read.

"Orders from the Commissioners for executing the office of Lord High Admiral of Great Britain and Ireland, addressed to Captain Horatio Hornblower of His Majesty's Navy.

"You are hereby required —"

He read them through to the end, folded them, and returned them to his pocket. Now he was legally captain of the *Atropos*, holding a position of which only a court martial or an Act of Parliament — or the loss of the ship — could deprive him. And from this moment his half-pay ceased and he would begin to draw the pay of a captain of a sixth-rate. Was it significant that it was from this moment the mists began to clear from before his eyes? Jones was a lantern-jawed man, his close-shaven beard showing blue through his tan. Hornblower met his eyes.

"Dismiss the ship's company, Mr. Jones."

"Aye aye, sir."

This might have been the moment for a speech, Hornblower knew. It was even customary to make one. But he had prepared nothing to say; and he told himself it was better to say nothing. He had it in mind that he would give a first impression of someone cold and hard and efficient and unsentimental. He turned to the waiting group of lieutenants; now he could distinguish their features, recognize that they were distinct individuals, these men whom he would have to trust and use for years in the future; but their names had escaped him completely. He had really heard nothing of them in those excited seconds after arriving on the quarterdeck.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said to them. "We shall know each other better soon, I do not doubt."

There was a touching of hats and a general turning away of them all except Jones.

"There's an Admiralty letter waiting for you, sir," said the latter.

An Admiralty letter! Orders! The key to the future, which would reveal what was to be their fate — the words which might despatch him and the *Atropos* to China or Greenland or Brazil. Hornblower felt his excitement surge up again — it had hardly subsided in any case. Once more he checked himself from swallowing.

"Thank you, Mr. Jones. I'll read it as soon as I have leisure."

"Would you care to come below, sir?"

"Thank you."

The captain's quarters in the *Atropos* were as minute as Hornblower had expected; the smallest possible day-cabin and night-cabin. They were so small that they were not bulkheaded off from one another; a curtain was supposed to be hung between them, but there was no curtain. There was nothing at all — no cot, no desk, no chair, nothing. Apparently Caldecott had made a clean sweep of all his belongings when he left the ship. There was nothing surprising about that, but it was inconvenient. The cabin was dark and stuffy, but as the ship was newly out of dry dock she had not yet acquired all the manifold smells which would impregnate her later.

"Where are these orders?" demanded Hornblower, brusque with his suppressed excitement.

"In my desk, sir. I'll fetch 'em at once."

It could not be too quickly for Hornblower, who stood under the little skylight awaiting Jones' return. He took the sealed package into his hand and stood holding it for a moment. This was an instant transition. The journey of the last twenty-four hours had been a longer period, but of the same kind — an interval between one kind of activity and another. The next few seconds would eventually transform the *Atropos* from an idle ship in the Thames to an active ship at sea, lookouts at the masts, guns ready for action, peril and adventure and death only just over the horizon if not alongside. Hornblower broke the seal — the foul anchor of the Admiralty, the most inappropriate emblem conceivable for a nation that ruled the sea. Looking up, he met Jones' eyes, as the first lieutenant waited anxiously to hear what their fate was to be. Hornblower knew

that he should have sent Jones away before breaking the seal, but it was too late now. Hornblower read the opening lines he could have announced beforehand what would be the first six words, or even the first twelve.

You are hereby requested and required, immediately upon receipt of these orders —

This was the moment; Hornblower savoured it for one half of one second.

— to wait upon Henry Pallender, Esq., Blue Mantle Pursuivant at Arms, at the College of Heralds —

"God Hess my soul," said Hornblower.

"What is it, sir?" asked Jones.

"I don't know yet," answered Hornblower.

— there to consult with him upon the arrangements to be made for the funeral Procession by water of the late Vice-Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson —

"So that's it," said Hornblower.

"It's *what*, sir?" asked Jones, but Hornblower could not spare the time at present to enlighten him.

— You will take upon yourself, by the authority of these order, the command of all officers, seamen, and Royal Marines to be engaged in the Procession aforesaid, likewise of all vessels, boats and barges belonging to the Cities of London and Westminster and to the City Companies. You will issue all the orders necessary for the Procession to be conducted in a seaman-like manner. You will, by your consultations with Henry Pallender, Esq., aforesaid, ascertain the requirements of Ceremonial and Precedence, but you are hereby charged, upon your peril, to pay strict attention to conditions of Tide and Weather so that not only may Ceremonial be observed, but also that no Danger or Damage may be incurred by the boats, barges, and vessels aforesaid, nor by their Crews and Passengers.

"Please, sir. *Please*, sir," said Jones.

His thoughts came back into the little cabin.

"These are orders for me personally," he said. "Oh — very well, you can read them if you wish to."

Jones read them with moving lips and finally looked up at Hornblower with a bewildered compression.

"So the ship stays here, sir?" he asked.

"She certainly does. She is from this moment the flagship of the funeral procession," said Hornblower. "I shall need a boat and boat's crew at once. Oh yes, pen and paper to send a message to my wife."

"Aye aye, sir."

"See there's a good petty officer in the boat. She'll be waiting a good deal ashore."

"Aye aye, sir. We're having men run every day."

Of course desertion could be a very serious problem in a ship anchored here in the river, within swimming distance of shore and innumerable boats plying about, with the whole City of London close at hand into which a deserter might disappear. And there could be the question of liquor being surreptitiously sold on board from shore boats. And Hornblower had been on board for a full ten minutes and he was no wiser about the things he most wanted to know — about how *Atropos* was manned and officered, what she lacked, what was her material condition — than he had been yesterday. But all the problems with which he was so anxious to deal must for the moment be shelved, to be dealt with at intervals when this new strange duty permitted. The mere question of the furnishing of his cabin might demand more attention than he could spare at present. Hornblower knew from the newspaper he had read yesterday that Nelson's body was at the Nore, awaiting a fair wind before being brought up to Greenwich. Time was pressing and there were orders in hundreds to be written, he did not doubt.

And so the moment of transition was over. If he had been allowed a thousand guesses as to what his orders would contain, he would never have thought of this particular duty. He could laugh about it if it were not so

serious. He could laugh in any case, and he did. After a moment's glance of surprise Mr. Jones decided that he should laugh too, and did so, obsequiously.

Chapter IV

"Black breeches?" asked Hornblower, startled.

"Of course. Black breeches and stockings, and mourning bands," said Mr. Pallender solemnly.

He was an aged man, and although the top of his head was bald he wore the remainder of his white hair long, clubbed at the nape of his neck in a thick short queue tied with black ribbon. He had pale blue eyes, rheumy with age, and a thin pointed nose which in the chill of the room bore a small drop at its reddish tip — perhaps always bore one.

Hornblower made a note on the sheet of paper before him regarding the black breeches and stockings and mourning bands. He also made a mental note that he would have to obtain these things for himself as well, and he wondered where the money was coming from to do it.

"It would be best," went on Mr. Pallender, "if the procession were to pass through the City at midday. Then the populace will have plenty of time to assemble and the apprentices can do a morning's work."

"I can't promise that," said Hornblower. "It depends on the tide."

"The tide, Captain Hornblower? You must realize that this is a ceremonial in which the Court — His Majesty himself — is deeply interested."

"But it has to depend on the tide all the same," said Hornblower. "And even on the winds too."

"Indeed? His Majesty will be most provoked if his ideas are scouted."

"I see," said Hornblower.

He thought of remarking that although His Majesty ruled the waves he had no more control over the tides than had his illustrious predecessor King Canute, but he thought better of it. Mr. Pallender was not the type to appreciate jokes about the limitations of the royal power. Instead Hornblower decided to imitate Mr. Pallender's solemnity.

"Since the actual day of the ceremonial hasn't yet been decided upon," he said, "it might be possible to choose such a day as the tide serves best."

"I suppose so," conceded Mr. Pallender.

Hornblower made a note of the necessity of immediately consulting the tide-tables.

"The Lord Mayor," said Mr. Pallender, "will not be present in person, but his representative will."

"I understand."

There would be some small relief in not being responsible for the person of the Lord Mayor, but not much, seeing that the eight most senior admirals in the Navy were going to be present, and were going to be his responsibility.

"Are you sure you won't try a little of this brandy?" asked Mr. Pallender, giving the decanter a little push.

"No, thank you."

Hornblower had no desire at all to drink brandy at this time of day; but now he knew what gave Mr.

Pallender's nose that reddish tip. Mr. Pallender sipped appreciatively before going on.

"Now as regards the minute guns —"

Along the processional route apparently there were fifteen points at which minute guns were to be fired, and his Majesty would be listening to see that they were properly timed. Hornblower covered more paper with notes. There would be thirty-eight boats and barges in the procession, to be assembled in the tricky tideway at Greenwich, marshalled in order, brought up to Whitehall Steps, and dispersed again after delivering over the body to a naval guard of honour assembled there which would escort it to the Admiralty to lie there for the night before the final procession to St. Paul's.

"Can you tell me, sir," asked Hornblower, "what kind of vessel these ceremonial barges are?"

He regretted the question as soon as he asked it; Mr. Pallender showed surprise that any man should not be familiar with ceremonial barges, but as for knowing how handy they were in choppy water, or even how many

oars aside they rowed, that was of course more than could be expected of Mr. Pallender. Hornblower realized that the sooner he took one over, and rowed it over the course of the procession in the appropriate tidal conditions, timing every stage, the better. He went on adding to his pages of notes while Mr. Pallender went on with what to him was most important — the order of precedence of the boats; how the whole College of Heralds would be present, including Norroy King of Arms and himself, Blue Mantle Pursuivant; the Royal Dukes and the Admirals; the formalities to be observed at the embarkation and the landing; the Chief Mourner and the train-bearer, the pall-bearers and the Family of the Deceased.

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower at last, gathering up his notes. "I will begin these preparations at once."

"Greatly obliged, I'm sure, sir," said Mr. Pallender, as Hornblower took his leave.

This was an operation as elaborate as Abercrombie's landing on the Egyptian coast — and in the Mediterranean there were no tides to complicate arrangements. Thirty-eight boats with their crews and oarsmen; guards of honour; mourners and officials; there would be a thousand officers and men at least under Hornblower's command. And Hornblower's heart sank a little when he was able to take one of the barges from the hands of the workmen who were attaching the insignia to it in Deptford Yard, and conduct his own trials with it. It was a vast clumsy vessel, not much smaller and no more manageable than a cargo lighter. Forward in the open bows she pulled twelve oars; from midships aft she was covered with a vast canopy of solid construction, exposing an enormous area to the wind. The barge allotted to the conveyance of the Body (Mr. Pallender had made that capital letter quite obvious in their discussion) was being so covered with plumes that she would catch the wind like a frigate's mainsail. There must be lusty oarsmen detailed to the task of rowing that barge along — and it would be best to have as nearly as complete a relief available as possibly hidden away under the canopy. But as she would head the procession, with the other boats taking station upon her, he must be careful not to overdo that. He must time everything exactly — up with the flood tide, arriving at Whitehall Steps precisely at slack water so that the complicated manoeuvres there could be carried out with the minimum of risk, and then back with the ebb, dispersing barges and crews along the route as convenient.

"My dear," said Maria to him, in their bedroom at the "George". "I fear I have little of your attention at present."

"Your pardon, dear?" said Hornblower, looking round from the table at which he was writing. He was deep in plans for issuing a solid breakfast to a thousand men who would have small chance of eating again all day.

"I was telling you that I spoke to the midwife today. She seems a worthy woman. She will hold herself free from tomorrow. As she lives only in the next street there is no need for her to take up residence here until the time comes, which is fortunate — you know how little money we have, Horatio."

"Yes, dear," said Hornblower. "Have those black breeches of mine been delivered yet?"

It was a perfectly natural step from Maria's approaching confinement to Hornblower's black breeches, *via* the question of money, but Maria resented her husband's apparent heartlessness.

"Do you care more for your breeches than for your child?" she asked, "— or for me?"

"Dearest," answered Hornblower. He had to put down his pen and rise from his chair to comfort her. "I have much on my mind. I can't tell you how much I regret it at this moment."

This was the very devil. The eyes not only of London but of all England would be on that procession. He would never be forgiven if there was any blunder. But he had to take Maria's hands in his and reassure her.

"You, my dear," he said, smiling into her eyes, "are my all in all. There is nothing in my world as important as you are."

"I wish I could be sure," said Maria.

He kissed the hands he held.

"What can I say to make you sure?" he asked. "That I love you?"

"That would be pleasant enough," said Maria.

"I love you, dear," he said, but he had not had now a smile from her as yet, and he went on, "I love you more dearly even than my new black breeches."

"Oh!" said Maria.

He had to labour the point to make sure that she understood he was both joking and tender.

"More dearly than a thousand pair of black breeches," he said. "Could any man say more?"

She was smiling now, and she took her hands from his and laid them on his shoulders.

"Is that a compliment for me to treasure always?" she asked.

"It will always be true, my dear," he said.

"You are the kindest of husbands," she said, and the break in her voice showed that she meant it.

"With the sweetest of wives," he answered. "And now may I go on with my work?"

"Of course, darling. Of course. I fear I am selfish. But — but — darling, I love you so. I love you so!"

"There, there," said Hornblower patting her shoulder. Perhaps he felt as strongly over this business as Maria did, but he had much else to feel strongly about. And if he mismanaged these ceremonial arrangements the child to come might go on short commons with him on half-pay for life. And Nelson's body was at this very moment lying in state at Greenwich, and the day after tomorrow was the date fixed for the procession, with the tide beginning to flood at eleven, and there was still much to be done. He was glad to get back to the writing of his orders. He was glad to go back on board *Atropos* and plunge into business there.

"Mr. Jones, I'd be glad if you'd call the midshipmen and master's mates. I need half a dozen who can write a fair round hand."

The cabin of the *Atropos* took on the appearance of a schoolroom, with the midshipmen sitting on mess stools at improvised tables, with inkwells and pens, copying out Hornblower's drafts of the orders, and Hornblower going from one to another, like a squirrel in a cage, answering questions.

"Please, sir, I can't read this word."

"Please, sir, do I start a new paragraph here?"

It was one way of finding out something of the junior officers, of distinguishing them as individuals out of what had been so far a formless mass of officers; there were the ones who appealed for help at every turn, and the ones who could make deductions from the context; there were the stupid ones who wrote orders that made nonsense.

"Damn it, man," said Hornblower. "Would anyone out of Bedlam say a thing like that — far less write it?"

"That's what it looked like, sir," said the midshipman stubbornly.

"God help us all," said Hornblower in despair.

But that was the man who wrote a very clear hand; Hornblower put him on to the task of writing the beginnings of each letter.

H.M.S. *Atropos* at Deptford

Jan 6th 1806

Sir

By virtue of the powers entrusted to me by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty —

Other men could carry on from there, with a saving of time. The ninety different written orders with their duplicates were written at last, and distributed by midnight; crews and petty officers had been found from various sources for every boat that was to take part in the procession, rations allotted to them, their place in the line clearly stated — "You will take the seventeenth position, immediately after the barge of the Commander-in-Chief at the Nore and immediately preceding that of the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers."

The final arrangements were made with Mr. Pallender at two in the morning of the day of the procession, and Hornblower, yawning, could think of nothing else to be done. Yes, there was a final change to be made.

"Mr. Horrocks, you will come with me with the Body in the first barge. Mr. Smiley, you'll command the second with the Chief Mourner."

Horrocks was the stupidest of the midshipmen and Smiley the brightest — it had been natural to reserve the latter for himself, but now he realized how stupid Horrocks was, and how necessary it was to keep him under his own eye.

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower fancied Smiley looked pleased at thus escaping from the direct supervision of his captain, and he pricked that bubble.

"You'll have nine admirals and four captains as passengers, Smiley," he said. "Including Admiral of the Fleet Sir Peter Parker and Lord St Vincent."

Smiley did not look nearly as pleased at that.

"Mr. Jones, have the longboat with the hands at Greenwich Pier at six o'clock, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

"And call away the gig for me now."

"Aye aye, sir."

"I'll be at the "George" until five. Send any messages there."

"Aye aye, sir."

He still had a personal life; Maria was very near her time now.

On the deck there was a brisk westerly wind harping in the rigging, gusty, Hornblower noted. The barges would call for careful handling unless it dropped considerably. He stepped down into the gig.

"Make for Deptford Hard," he ordered the coxswain, and clasped his coat close tightly round him, for the cabin of the *Atropos* had been hot with lamps and candles and many people. He walked up the Hard and knocked at the door of the "George"; from the window at the side there was a faint light showing and the window of their room above was illuminated. The door opened to reveal the landlady.

"Oh, it's you, sir. I thought it was the midwife. I've just sent Davie for her. Your good lady —"

"Let me by," said Hornblower.

Maria was walking about the bedroom in her dressing-gown; two candles illuminated the room, and the shadows of the bed-tester and the other furniture moved in sinister fashion as Hornblower opened the door.

"Darling!" said Maria.

Hornblower came towards her, his hands held out.

"I hope all is well with you, dear," he said.

"I think so. I — I hope so. It has only just begun," said Maria.

They kissed.

"Darling," said Maria. "How good of you to come here. I — I was hoping I should see you again before — before — my time came."

"Not good of me," said Hornblower. "I came because I wanted to come. I wanted to see you."

"But you are so busy. Today is the day of the procession, is it not?"

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"And our child will be born today. A little girl, dear? Or another little boy?"

"We'll know soon," said Hornblower. He knew which Maria wanted. "Whichever it is we'll love her — or him."

"That we shall," said Maria.

The last syllable was jerked out of her more forcibly than necessary, and Maria's face took on an expression of preoccupation.

"How is it, dearest?" asked Hornblower, concerned.

"Only a pain," said Maria, smiling — forcing a smile, as Hornblower well knew. "They are not coming close together yet."

"I wish I could help," said Hornblower, in the manner of uncounted millions of fathers.

"You have helped by coming to me, my darling," said Maria.

A bustle outside the door and a knock heralded the entrance of the midwife and the landlady.

"Well, well," said the midwife. "So it has begun, has it?"

Hornblower looked her over carefully. She was not neat — no one could be expected to be in those conditions — but she were at least sober, and her gap-toothed smile was kindly.

"I'll have a look at you, ma'am," said the midwife and then, with a sidelong glance, "Gentlemen will retire."

Maria looked at him. She was trying so hard to appear unconcerned.

"I'll see you again, dear," said Hornblower, trying equally hard.

Outside the bedroom the landlady was cordial in her offers of hospitality.

"How about a go of brandy, sir? Or a glass o' rum, hot?"

"No, thank you," said Hornblower.

"The young gennelman's sleeping in with one o' the maids now," explained the landlady. "He didn't cry, no, not a sound, when we carried him in. A fine little fellow he is, sir."

"Yes," said Hornblower. He could smile at the thought of his little son.

"You'd better come into the coffee-room, sir," said the landlady. "There's still what's left of the fire there."

"Thank you," said Hornblower, with a glance at his watch. God, how time was passing!

"Your good lady will be all right," said the landlady maternally. "It'll be a boy, as sure as fate. I can tell by the way she was carrying."

"Perhaps you'll be right," said Hornblower, and he looked at his watch again. He really must start preparations for the day.

"Now see here, please," he said, and then he paused, as he made his mind clear itself of its preoccupation with Maria, and of its deadly fatigue. He began to list the things he needed from the bedroom upstairs, ticking them off on his fingers as he told them to the landlady. The black breeches and stockings, the epaulette and the best cocked hat, the sword and the mourning band.

"I'll get 'em, sir. You can dress in here — no one won't disturb you, not at this time o' night."

She came back later with her arms full of the things Hornblower had asked for.

"A marvel that I should forget this was the day of the Funeral, sir," she said. "No one hasn't talked o' nothing else along the river not for the last week. There's your things, sir."

She looked closely at Hornblower in the candlelight

"You'd better shave, sir," she went on. "You can use my husband's razor if yours is in the ship."

One mention of maternity, it seemed, turned all women into mothers.

"Very well," said Hornblower.

Later he was dressed and looking at his watch again.

"I must leave now," he said. "Will you find out if I can see my wife?"

"I'll tell you now you can't, sir," said the landlady. "Not if you can hear what I can hear."

Much of what Hornblower felt must have shown in his expression, for the landlady went on —

"It'll all be over in a bower, sir: whyn't you wait a bit?"

"Wait?" repeated Hornblower, looking at his watch again. "No, I can't do that. I'll have to go."

The landlady lighted the candle of his lantern at that on the coffee-room mantel.

"Lord a mercy," she said. "You look just the picture. But it's cold out."

She fastened the button of his coat close at his neck.

"Can't have you catching cold. There! Don't you worry, now."

Good advice, thought Hornblower, walking down the slope towards the river again, but as difficult to act upon as most good advice. He saw the light of the gig at the water's edge, and a sudden movement of shadowy figures there. The gig's crew must have appointed one of its members to keep watch for his lantern, while the others snatched what sleep they could in the exceedingly uncomfortable spaces of the gig. But however uncomfortable they were, they were better off than he was. He felt he could sleep on the bobstay of the *Atropos* if only he had the chance. He got into the gig.

"Down river," he ordered the coxswain.

At Greenwich Pier it was still dark, no sign as yet of the late January dawn. And the wind was blowing steadily from the west, downstream. It would probably freshen as the day went on. A loud challenge halted him as he walked down the pier.

"Friend," said Hornblower, opening his cloak for his lantern to show his uniform.

"Advance and give the countersign!"

"The Immortal Memory," said Hornblower — he had chosen that countersign himself; one detail out of a thousand details of the day before.

"Pass, friend. All's well," said the sentry.

He was a private in the Blackheath Militia; during the time the Body had been lying in state at Greenwich there had had to be guards posted at all points to prevent the public from straying into areas where they were not wanted. The Hospital was lighted up; there was already bustle and excitement there.

"The Governor's dressing now, sir," said a wooden-legged lieutenant. "We're expecting the quality at eight."

"Yes," said Hornblower. "I know."

It was he who had drawn up the time table; the national, naval, and civic dignitaries were to come by road from London, to accompany the Body back by water. And here was the Body, in its coffin, the trestles on which

it lay concealed by flags and trophies and heraldic insignia. And here came the Governor, limping with his rheumatism, his bald head shining in the lamplight.

"Morning, Hornblower."

"Good morning, sir."

"Everything settled?"

"Yes, sir. But the wind's blowing very fresh from the west. It'll hold back the flood."

"I feared as much."

"It will delay the boats, too, of course, sir."

"Of course."

"In that case, sir, I'd be obliged if you would do all you can to see that the Mourners leave on time. There'll be little to spare, sir."

"I'll do my best, Hornblower. But you can't hurry an Admiral of the Fleet. You can't hurry Lord St Vincent. You can't hurry a Lord Mayor—not even his representative."

"It will be difficult, I know, sir."

"I'll do my best, Hornblower. But they have to have their bite of breakfast."

The Governor gestured towards the next room where, under the supervision of the wooden-legged lieutenant, seamen with black scarves round their necks were laying out a meal. There were cold pies, there were hams, there were cold roasts of beef being assembled on the buffet; silver was being set out on the dazzling white cloth. At the smaller buffet a trusted petty officer was setting out decanters and bottles.

"A bite and a glass of something?" asked the Governor.

Hornblower looked as always at his watch.

"Thank you, sir. I've three minutes to spare."

It was gratifying to have a meal when he expected to have none; it was gratifying to gulp down slices of ham which otherwise would have gone down the throat of an Admiral of the Fleet. He washed the ham down with a glass of water, to the ill-concealed amazement of the petty officer at the wine buffet.

"Thank you, sir," he said to the Governor. "I must take my leave now."

"Good-bye, Hornblower. Good luck."

At the pier now it was almost dawn — light enough to satisfy the Mohammedan definition of being able to distinguish a black thread from a white. And the river was alive now with boats. From upstream the wind carried down the sound of the splash of oars and sharp naval commands. Here was the *Atropos*' longboat, with Smiley and Horrocks in the stern; here were the boats from the guardship and the receiving ship; measured tread on the pier heralded the arrival of another contingent of seamen. The day was beginning in earnest. Really in earnest. The thirty-eight boats had to be manned and arranged in their correct order, stretching a mile down-stream. There were the fools who had mislaid their orders, and the fools who could not understand theirs. Hornblower dashed up and down the line in the gig, that watch of his continually in and out of his pocket. To complicate matters, the grog sellers, anticipating a good day's business, were already out and rowing along the line, and they obviously had effected some surreptitious sales. There were red faces and foolish grins to be seen. The ebb was still running strongly, with the wind behind it. Horrocks, in the state barge that was to carry the Body, completely misjudged his distances as he tried to come alongside. The clumsy great boat, swept round by the wind and borne by the tide, hit the pier on her starboard quarter with a resounding crash. Hornblower on the pier opened his mouth to swear, and then shut it again. If he were to swear at every mishap he would be voiceless soon. It was enough to dart a glance at the unhappy Horrocks. The big raw-boned lout wilted under it; and then turned to rave at the oarsmen.

These ceremonial barges were heartbreaking boats to manage, admittedly. Their twelve oars hardly sufficed to control their more than forty feet of length, and the windage of the huge cabin aft was enormous. Hornblower left Horrocks struggling to get into his station, and stepped down into his gig again. They flew downstream; they toiled up. Everything seemed to be in order. Hornblower, looking over the side from the pier when he landed again, thought he could detect a slacking of the ebb. Late, but good enough. High and clear from the Hospital came the notes of a trumpet. Tone-deaf as he was, the notes meant nothing to him. But the sound itself was sufficient. The militia were forming up along the road from the Hospital to the pier, and here came the dignitaries in solemn procession, walking two by two, the least important leading. The boats came to the

pier to receive them, in inverted order of numbers — how hard that had been for Hornblower to impress upon the petty officers commanding — and dropped back again downstream to wait, reversing their order. Even now there was a boat or two out of correct order, but this was not a moment for trifles. The dignitaries on the pier were hustled into even inappropriate boats without a chance of protesting. More and more important were the dignitaries advancing on to the pier — here were the Heralds and Pursuivants, Mr. Pallender among them. And here at last was the Chief Mourner, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Peter Parker, with Blackwood bearing his train, and eight other admirals with — as the drill-book stated — melancholy aspects; perhaps their aspects would be melancholy even without the drill-book. Hornblower saw them down into their boat, all of them. The tide had turned, and already the flow was apparent. Minutes would be precious now.

The shattering boom of a gun from not far away made Hornblower start, and he hoped nobody would notice it. That was the first of the minute guns, that would boom on from now until the Body reached its next temporary resting-place at the Admiralty. For Hornblower it was the signal that the Body had started from the Hospital. He handed Sir Peter Parker into the barge. A loud order from the militia colonel, and the troops reversed their arms and rested on them. Hornblower had seen them doing that drill every available minute during the last two days. He reversed his own sword with as much military precision as he could manage — a couple of days ago Maria, coming into the bedroom at the "George", had caught him practicing the drill, and had laughed immoderately. The mourners' barge had shoved off, and Horrocks was gingerly bringing his up to the pier. Hornblower watched from under his eyebrows, but now that the wind was against the tide it was not such a difficult operation. The band approached; all tunes were dreary to Hornblower, but he gathered that the one they were playing was drearier than most. They wheeled to the right at the base of the pier, and the seamen drawing the gun-carriage, stepping short, with bowed heads, came into view behind them.

Hornblower thought of the long line of boats struggling to keep position all down the reach, and wished they would step out, although he knew such a wish was nonsense. The monotonous booming of the minute gun marked the passage of valuable time. Up to the pier's end came the carriage. It was a tricky business to transfer the coffin from the gun-carriage to the top of the state barge; Hornblower caught some of the words whispered, savagely, by the petty officer supervising the operation, and tried not to smile at their incongruity. But the coffin was put safely in place, and quickly lashed into position, and while the wreaths and flags were being arranged to conceal the lashings Hornblower advanced to the barge. He had to make himself step short, with his back bowed and the melancholy aspect on his face, his reversed sword under his right arm, and he strove to maintain the attitude while making the wide stride from the pier on to the stern of the barge behind the canopy.

"Shove off!" he ordered, out of the side of his mouth. The minute guns bellowed a farewell to them as the barge left the pier, the oar-blades dragging through the water before she gathered way. Horrocks beside him put the tiller over, and they headed out for midstream. Before they straightened on their course Hornblower, his head still bowed, was able to steal a sideways glance downstream at the waiting procession. All seemed to be well; the boats were bunched in places, crowded in others, with the effort of maintaining station in difficult weather conditions, but once everyone was under way it would be easier.

"Slow at first," he growled to Horrocks, and Horrocks translated the order to the rowers; it was necessary to give the boats time to take up station.

Hornblower wanted to look at his watch. Moreover, he realized that he would have to keep his eye continually on his watch, and he certainly could not be pulling it out of his pocket every minute. The foot of the coffin was there by his face. With a quick movement he hauled out both watch and chain, and hung them on the end handle, the watch dangling conveniently before his nose. All was well; they were four minutes late, but they still had a full eleven minutes in reserve.

"Lengthen the stroke," he growled to Horrocks.

Now they were rounding the bend. The shipping here was crowded with spectators, so was the shore, even as far from London as this. The *Atropos* had her yards manned by the remnant of her crew, as Hornblower had ordered. He could see that out of the tail of his eye; and as they approached the clear sharp bang of her aftermost nine-pounder took up the tale of minute guns from the one at Greenwich. All well, still. Of all the ungrateful duties a naval officer ever had to perform, this one must be the worst. However perfect the performance, would he receive any credit? Of course not. Nobody — not even the Admiralty — would stop

and think how much thought and labour were necessary to arrange the greatest water procession London had ever seen, on one of the trickiest possible sideways. And if anything went wrong there were hundreds of thousands of pairs of eyes ready to observe it, and hundreds of thousands of pairs of lips ready to open in condemnation.

"Sir! Sir!"

The curtains at the after end of the cabin had parted; an anxious seaman's face was peering out, from where the reserve rowers lay concealed; so anxious was the speaker that he put out his hand to twitch at Hornblower's black breeches to call attention to himself.

"What is it?"

"Sir! We've sprung a leak!"

My God! The news chimed in with his thoughts with perfectly devilish accuracy of timing.

"How bad?"

"Dunno, sir. But it's up over the floorboards. That's 'ow we know. Must be making pretty fast, sir."

That must have been when Horrocks allowed the barge to crash against the pier. A plank started. Up over the floorboards already? They would never get to Whitehall Steps in time, then. God, if they were to sink here in the middle of the river! Never, never, *never*, would England forgive the man who allowed Nelson's coffin to sink, unceremoniously, in Thames mud beside the Isle of Dogs. Get in to shore and effect repairs? With the whole procession behind them — God, what confusion there would be! And without any doubt at all they would miss the tide, and disappoint the waiting thousands, to say nothing of His Majesty. And tomorrow was the final ceremony, when the Body would be carried from the Admiralty to St Paul's — dukes, peers, the royal family, thousands of troops, hundreds of thousands of people were to take part in or to watch the ceremonies. To sink would be disaster. To stop would be disaster. No; he could get into shore and effect repairs, causing today's ceremony to be abandoned. But then they could get the Body up to the Admiralty tonight, enabling tomorrow's funeral to be carried out. It would ruin him professionally, but it was the safest half-measure. No, no, no! To hell with half-measures.

"Mr. Horrocks!"

"Sir!"

"I'll take the tiller. Get down in there. Wait, you fool, and listen to me. Get those floorboards up and deal with that leak. Keep bailing — use hats or anything else. Find that leak and stop it if you can — use one of the men's shirts. Wait. Don't let all the world see you bailing. Pitch the water out here, past my legs. Understand?"

"Er — yes, sir."

"Give me the tiller, then. Get below. And if you fail I'll have the hide off you, if it's the last thing I do on earth. Get below."

Horrocks dived down through the curtains, while Hornblower took the tiller and shifted his position so as to see forward past the coffin. He had to let his sword drop, and of course had had to abandon his melancholy aspect, but that was no hardship. The westerly wind was blowing half a gale now, right in their teeth; against the tide it was raising a decided chop on the water — spray was flying from the bows and now and then the oar-blades raised fountains. Perhaps it was a fitting homecoming for the dead hero whose corpse lay just before him. As they came to the bend a fresher gust set them sagging off to leeward, the wind acting powerfully on all the top hamper in the stern.

"Put your backs into it!" shouted Hornblower to the rowers, throwing much of his dignity to the wind, although he was the leading figure in the procession.

The rowers clenched their teeth, snarling with the effort as they tugged at the oars, dragging the obstinate barge by main force forward. Here the wind, acting directly against the tide, was raising some quite respectable rollers, and the barge plunged over them, bows up, bows down, stagger, and heave, like a fishing smack in a gale at sea, lurching and plunging; it was hard to stand upright in her, harder to hold her on her course. And surely — surely — Hornblower was conscious of the water on board cascading forward and back as she plunged. With the ponderous coffin stowed so high up he was nervous about the stability of the absurd craft. Inch by inch they struggled round the bend, and once round it the massed shipping on the north side gave them a lee.

"Haven't you got those floorboards up, Mr. Horrocks?" said Hornblower, trying to hurl the words down into the cabin without stooping in the sight of the crowds.

He heard a splintering crash at that moment, and Horrocks' face emerged between the curtains.

"They were all nailed down tight here," he said. "I had to prise 'em up. We're down by the stern an' we'd have to bail from here, anyways."

What with the coffin and the auxiliary rowers they would, of course, be down by the stern.

"How much water?"

"Nigh on a foot, I should say, sir."

"Bail like hell!"

Horrocks' nose had hardly been withdrawn from between the curtains when a hatful of water shot out past Hornblower's legs, and was followed by another and another and another. A good deal of it soused Hornblower's new black breeches. He cursed but he could not complain. That was Bermondsey on the Surrey shore; Hornblower glanced at his watch dangling from the coffin. They were dropping very slightly behind time, thanks to this wind. Not dangerously, though. They were not nearly in as much danger of missing the tide as they were of sinking in mid-river. Hornblower shifted position miserably in his soaking breeches and glanced back. The procession was keeping station well enough; he could see about half of it, for the centre of it was just now fighting round the bend he had already negotiated. Ahead lay another bend, this time to starboard. They would have a head-wind there again.

So indeed they had. Once more they plunged and staggered over the rollers. There was one moment when the barge put her bows down and shipped a mass of water over them — as much must have come in as Horrocks had been able by now to bail out. Hornblower cursed again, forgetting all about the melancholy aspect he should maintain. He could hear and feel the water rolling about in her as she plunged. But the hatfuls of water were still flying out from between the curtains, past — and on to — Hornblower's legs. Hornblower did not worry now about the effect on the crowd of the sight of the funeral barge bailing out; any seamen among the crowd, seeing that rough water, would appreciate the necessity for it without making allowance for a leak. They fought their way round the bend; for a few desperate moments it seemed as if they were making no progress at all, with the oar-blades dragging through the water. But the gust was succeeded by a momentary lull and they went on again.

"Can't you plug that leak, Mr. Horrocks?"

"Tain't easy, sir," said Horrocks, putting his nose out again. "There's a whole plank stove in. The tree-nails at the ends are on'y just holding, sir. If I plug too hard —"

"Oh, very well. Get on with the bailing again."

Make for the shore? Over there, beside the Tower? That would be a convenient place. No, damn it. Never. Bail, bail, bail. Steer a course that gave them the utmost advantage from the flood and from the lee afforded by the shipping — that calculation was a tricky one, something to occupy his mind. If he could spare a moment to look round he could see the thousands of spectators massed along the shores. If he could spare a moment — God, he had forgotten all about Maria! He had left her in labour. Perhaps — most likely — the child was born by now. Perhaps — perhaps — no, that did not bear thinking about.

London Bridge, with its narrow arches and the wicked swirls and eddies beyond. He knew by the trials he had made two days ago that the oars were too wide for the arches. Careful timing was necessary; fortunately the bridge itself broke most of the force of the wind. He brought the tiller over and steadied the barge as best he could on a course direct for the arch's centre.

"Now, pull!" he bellowed to the oarsmen; the barge swept forward, carried by the tide and the renewed efforts of the oarsmen. "In oars!"

Fortunately they did it smartly. They shot into the arch, and there the wind was waiting for them, shrieking through the gap, but their way took them forward. Hornblower measured their progress with his eye. The bows lurched and began to swing in the eddy beyond, but they were just clear enough even though he himself was still under the arch.

"Pull!" he yelled — under the bridge he had no fear of being seen behaving without dignity.

Out came the oars. They groaned in their rowlocks. The eddy was turning her — the oars were dragging her forward — now the rudder could bite again. Through — with the eddies left behind.

The water was still cascading out through the curtains, still soaking his dripping breeches, but despite the rate at which they were bailing he did not like the feel of the barge at all. She was sluggish, lazy. The leak must be gaining on them, and they were nearing the danger point.

"Keep pulling!" he shouted to the rowers; glancing back he saw the second barge, with the Chief Mourners, emerging from the bridge. Round the bend to sight the churches in the Strand — never did shipwrecked mariner sight a sail with more pleasure.

"Water's nearly up to the thwarts, sir," said Horrocks.

"Bail, damn you!"

Somerset House, and one more bend, a shallow one, to Whitehall Steps. Hornblower knew what orders he had given for the procession — orders drawn up in consultation with Mr. Pallender. Here the funeral barge was to draw towards the Surrey bank, allowing the next six barges in turn to come alongside the Steps and disembark their passengers. When the passengers had formed up in proper order, and not until then, the funeral barge was to come alongside for the coffin to be disembarked with proper ceremony. But not with water up to the thwarts — not with the barge sinking under his feet. He turned and looked back to where Smiley was standing in the stern-sheets of the second barge. His head was bowed as the instructions stated, but fortunately the coxswain at the tiller noticed, and nudged Smiley to call his attention. Hornblower put up his hand with a gesture to stop; he accentuated the signal by gesturing as though pushing back. He had to repeat the signal before Smiley understood and nodded in reply. Hornblower ported his helm and the barge came sluggishly round, creeping across the river. Round farther; no; with that wind, and with the flood slacking off, it would be better to come alongside bows upstream. Hornblower steadied the tiller, judging his distances, and the barge crept towards the Steps.

"Easy all!"

Thank God, they were alongside. There was a Herald at Arms, tabard and all, standing there with the naval officer in command of the escort.

"Sir!" protested the Herald, as vehemently as his melancholy aspect allowed, "You're out of your order — you —"

"Shut your mouth!" growled Hornblower, and then, to the naval officer, "Get this coffin ashore, quick!"

They got it ashore as quickly as dignity would permit; Hornblower, standing beside them, head bowed, a sword reversed again, heaved a genuine sigh of relief as he saw, from under his lowered brows, the barge rise perceptibly in the water when freed from the ponderous weight of the coffin. Still with his head bowed he snapped his orders.

"Mr. Horrocks! Take the barge over to the jetty there. Quick. Get a tarpaulin, put it overside and plug that leak. Get her bailed out. Give way, now."

The barge drew away from the Steps; Hornblower could see that Horrocks had not exaggerated when he said the water was up to the thwarts. Smiley, intelligently, was now bringing the Mourners' barge up to the Steps, and Hornblower, remembering to step short, moved out of the way. One by one they landed, Sir Peter Parker with Blackwood bearing his train, Cornwallis, St Vincent. St Vincent, labouring on his gouty feet, his shoulders hunched as well as his head bent, could hardly wait to growl his complaints, out of the corner of his mouth as he went up the Steps.

"What the devil, Hornblower?" he demanded. "Don't you read your own orders?"

Hornblower took a few steps — stepping slow and short — alongside him.

"We sprung a leak, sir — I mean, my lord," he said, out of the corner of his mouth in turn. "We were nigh on sinking. No time to spare."

"Ha!" said St Vincent. "Oh, very well then. Make a report to that effect."

"Thank you, my lord," said Hornblower.

He halted again, head bowed, sword reversed, and allowed the other mourners to flow on past him. This was extemporized ceremonial, but it worked. Hornblower tried to stand like a statue, although no statue he had ever seen was clothed in breeches streaming with wet. He had to repress a start when he remembered again about Maria. He wished he knew. And then he had more difficulty in repressing another start. His watch! That was still dangling on the coffin, now being put into the waiting hearse. Oh well, he could do nothing about that at the moment. And nothing about Maria. He went on standing in his icy breeches.

Chapter V

The sentry at the Admiralty was worried but adamant. "Pardon, sir, but them's my orders. No one to pass, not even a Admiral, sir."

"Where's the petty officer of the guard?" demanded Hornblower.

The petty officer was a little more inclined to listen to reason.

"It's our orders, sir," he said, however. "I daren't, sir. You understand, sir."

No naval petty officer gladly said "no" to a Post Captain, even one of less than three years' seniority.

Hornblower recognized a cocked-hatted lieutenant passing in the background.

"Bracegirdle!" he hailed.

Bracegirdle had been a midshipman along with him in the old *Indefatigable*, and had shared more than one wild adventure with him. Now he was wearing a lieutenant's uniform with the aiguillettes of a staff appointment.

"How are you, sir?" he asked, coming forward.

They shook hands and looked each other over, as men will, meeting after years of war. Hornblower told about his watch, and asked permission to be allowed in to get it. Bracegirdle whistled sympathetically.

"That's bad," he said. "If it was anyone but old Jervie I'd risk it. But that's his own personal order. I've no desire to beg my bread in the gutter for the rest of my days."

Jervie was Admiral Lord St Vincent, recently become First Lord of the Admiralty again, and once Sir John Jervis whose disciplinary principles were talked of with bated breath throughout the Navy.

"You're his flag-lieutenant?" asked Hornblower.

"That's what I am," said Bracegirdle. "There are easier appointments. I'd exchange for the command of a powder hulk in Hell. But I only have to wait for that. By the time I've gone through my period of servitude with Jervie that'll be the only command they'll offer me."

"Then I can say good-bye to my watch," said Hornblower.

"Without even a farewell kiss," said Bracegirdle. "But in after years when you visit the crypt of St. Paul's you will be able to look at the hero's tomb with the satisfaction of knowing that your watch is in there along with him."

"Your humour is frequently misplaced, Mr. Bracegirdle," replied Hornblower, quite exasperated, "and you seem to have forgotten that the difference in rank between us should invite a more respectful attitude on the part of a junior officer."

Hornblower was tired and irritated; even as he said the words he was annoyed with himself for saying them. He was fond of Bracegirdle, and there was still the bond of perils shared with him, and the memory of lighthearted banter in the days when they were both midshipmen. It was not good manners, so to speak, to make use of his superior rank (which only good fortune had brought him) to wound Bracegirdle's feelings as undoubtedly he had, and merely to soothe his own. Bracegirdle brought himself stiffly to attention.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I allowed my tongue to run away with me. I hope you will overlook the offense, sir."

The two officers eyed each other for a moment before Bracegirdle unbent again.

"I haven't said yet how sorry I am about your watch, sir," he said. "I'm genuinely sorry on your account. Really sorry, sir."

Hornblower was about to make a pacific reply, when another figure appeared behind Bracegirdle, huge and ungainly, still in gold-laced full dress, and peering from under vast white eyebrows at the two officers. It was St Vincent; Hornblower touched his hat and the gesture informed Bracegirdle that his superior was behind him.

"What's the young man so sorry about, Hornblower?" asked St Vincent.

Hornblower explained as briefly as he could, with hardly a stumble this time over saying "my Lord".

"I'm glad to see Mr. Bracegirdle was carrying out my orders," said St Vincent. "We'd have the Admiralty chock a block with sightseers in a moment otherwise. But you have my personal permission, Captain Hornblower, to pass the sentries."

"Thank you, my lord. I am most grateful."

St Vincent was about to hobble on his way when he checked himself and looked more acutely than ever at Hornblower.

"Have you been presented to His Majesty yet, young Hornblower?"

"No sir — my lord."

"You should be. Every officer should show his respect to his king. I'll take you myself."

Hornblower thought about his wife, about the new baby, about his ship at Deptford, about his wet uniform which would have to be pressed into incredible smartness before he could show it at court. He thought about the rich, and the great, and the powerful, who frequented courts, and knew he would be out of place there and would be unhappy every minute he was compelled to appear there. It might be possible to make an excuse. But — but it would be a new adventure. The distasteful aspects about which he had been thinking were really so many challenges, which he felt spurred to meet.

"Thank you, my lord," he said, searching in his mind for the words appropriate to the subject, "I should be most honoured, most deeply obliged."

"Settled, then. Today's Monday, isn't it? Levee's on Wednesday. I'll take you in my coach. Be here at nine."

"Aye aye, sir — my lord."

"Pass Captain Hornblower through, Mr. Bracegirdle," said St Vincent, and hobbled on his way.

Bracegirdle led Hornblower through to where the coffin stood on its trestles, and there, sure enough, the watch still hung on the end handle. Hornblower unhooked it with relief and followed Bracegirdle out again. There he stood and offered his hand to Bracegirdle in farewell; as they clasped hands Bracegirdle's expression was one of hesitant inquiry.

"Two bells in the forenoon watch the day after tomorrow, then, sir," he said; there was the faintest accent on the "forenoon".

"Yes, I'll see you then," said Hornblower.

His other responsibilities were crowding in upon him, and he turned and burned back to Whitehall Steps. But as he walked, with his mind busily engaged in planning his activities for the next two days, that slight stress came back into his mind. Bracegirdle had relieved him of one small extra worry — by tomorrow at the latest he would have been in painful doubt as to whether his appointment with St Vincent had been for the morning or the evening.

At the Steps the ebb was already running full; there were broad strips of mud visible on either side of the river. Over at the Lambeth jetty the funeral barge could be seen with Horrocks and his men completing their task of getting a tarpaulin over the bottom of the boat. The other boats which had taken part in the procession were clustered here, there, and everywhere, and it was with pleasure that Hornblower saw his own gig clinging to the steps below him. He climbed down into it, picked up his speaking trumpet, and plunged into the business of dispersing the craft in accordance with the scheme he had laid down in his previous orders. The wind was blowing as briskly as ever, but now that the tide had turned the water was more smooth, and the only new difficulty he encountered was the great number of small craft that now were pulling about the river, bearing sightseers to a closer inspection of the ceremonial vessels.

Aldermen and City Companies, Heralds at Arms and Admirals, had all landed and gone home to their respective dinners, and the January darkness had hardly closed in before Hornblower dismissed the last of his charges at Greenwich and, getting back into his gig, was able with relief to give the order to pull for Deptford Hard. He climbed wearily up to the "George", cold and hungry and fatigued. That busy day seemed to stretch back in his memory for a week at least — except that he had left Maria in labour only that morning.

He came walking into the "George", and the first face that he caught sight of was the landlord's — a shadowy figure with whom he was scarcely acquainted, in this house where the landlady assumed all the responsibility.

"How's my wife?" demanded Hornblower.

The landlord blinked.

"I don't rightly know, sir," he said, and Hornblower turned away from him impatiently and ran up the stairs. He hesitated at the bedroom door, with his hand on the handle; his heart was beating fast. Then he heard a murmur of voices within and opened the door. There was Maria in bed, lying back on the pillows, and the midwife moving about by the window. The light of a candle faintly illuminated Maria's face.

"Horry!" said Maria; the glad surprise in her voice accounted for her use of the diminutive.

Hornblower took her hand.

"All well, dearest?" he asked.

"Yes," said Maria.

She held up her lips to be kissed, but even before the kiss was completed she was turning her eyes towards the wicker basket which stood on a small table beside the bed.

"It's a little girl, darling," she said. "Our little girl."

"And a fine little babby too," added the midwife.

Hornblower walked round the bed and peered into the basket. The blanket there concealed a diminutive figure — Hornblower, grown accustomed to playing with little Horatio, had forgotten how tiny a thing was a new-born baby — and a minute red face, a sort of caricature of humanity, was visible on the little pillow. He gazed down upon it; the little lips opened and emitted a squall, faint and high-pitched, so that little Horatio's remembered cries were lusty bellows by comparison.

"She's beautiful," said Hornblower, gallantly, while the squalling continued and two minute clenched fists appeared above the edge of the blanket.

"Our little Maria," said Maria, "I'm sure her hair is going to curl."

"Now, now," said the midwife, not in reproof of this extravagant prophecy but because Maria was trying to lift herself in bed to gaze at the child.

"She has only to grow up like her mother," said Hornblower, "to be the best daughter I could wish for."

Maria rewarded him with a smile as she sank back on the pillow again.

"Little Horatio's downstairs," she said. "He has seen his sister."

"And what did he think of her?"

"He cried when she did," said Maria.

"I had better see how he is," suggested Hornblower.

"Please do," said Maria, but she extended her hand to him again, and Hornblower bent and kissed it.

The room was very warm with a fire burning briskly in the grate, and it smelt of sickness, oppressive to Hornblower's lungs after the keen January air that had filled them all day.

"I am happy beyond all measure to see you so well, dear," said Hornblower, taking his leave.

Downstairs as he stood hesitating in the hall the landlady popped her head out from the kitchen.

"The young gennelman's in here, sir," she said, "if you don't mind stepping in."

Little Horatio was sitting up in a high-chair. His face lit up with a smile as he caught sight of his father — the most flattering experience Hornblower had ever known — and he bounced up and down in his chair and waved the crust he held in his fist.

"There! See him smile 'cause his daddy's come home!" said the landlady; then she hesitated before she put forward a suggestion which she knew to verge on the extravagant. "His bedtime's coming soon, sir. Would you care to play with him until then, sir?"

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"There, baby!" said the landlady. "Daddy's going to play with you. Oops-a-daisy, then. The bar parlour's empty now, sir. This way, sir. Emily, bring a candle for the captain."

Little Horatio was in two minds, once he found himself on the parlour floor, as to which of two methods of progression was most satisfactory to a man almost a year old. On hands and knees he could make prodigious speed, and in any direction he chose. But on the other hand he could pull himself upright by clinging to the leg of a chair, and the radiant expression on his face when he did so was proof of the satisfaction this afforded him. Then, having let go of the chair, provided he had already been successful in the monstrous effort necessary to turn away from it, he could manage to take a step towards his father; he was then compelled to stop and sway perilously on widely separated feet before taking another step, and it was rarely that he could

accomplish a step before sitting down on the floor with something of a bump. And was it possible that the monosyllable he said so frequently — "Da" it sounded like — was an attempt to say "Daddy"? This was happiness again, fleeting, transient, to have his lithe son tottering towards him with a beaming smile. "Come to Daddy," said Hornblower, hands outstretched. Then the smile would turn to a mischievous grin, and down on his hands and knees went young Horatio, galloping like lightning across the room, and gurgling with delirious joy when his father came running after him to seize him and swing him into the air. Simple and delightful pleasure; and then as Hornblower held the kicking gurgling baby up at arm's length he had a fleeting recollection of the moment when he himself had hung suspended in the mizzen rigging on that occasion when the *Indefatigable's* mizzen mast fell when he was in command of the top. This child would know peril and danger — and fear; in later years. He would not let the thought cloud his happiness. He lowered the baby down and then held him at arm's length again — a most successful performance, judging by the gurgles it elicited. The landlady came in, knocking at the door. "That's a big man," she said, and Hornblower forced himself not to feel self-conscious at being caught enjoying the company of his own child. "Dunno what come over me, sir," went on the landlady. "I clear forgot to ask if you wanted supper." "Supper?" said Hornblower. The last time he had eaten was in the Painted Hall at Greenwich. "Ham an' eggs?" asked the landlady. "A bite o' cold beef?" "Both, if you please," said Hornblower. "Three shakes of a duck's tail an' you'll have 'em," said the landlady. "You keep that young feller busy while I get it." "I ought to go back to Mrs. Hornblower." "She'll do for another ten minutes without you," said the landlady, briskly. The smell of bacon and eggs when they came was heavenly. Hornblower could sit down with appetite while Emily bore little Horatio off to bed. And after bacon and eggs, cold beef and pickled onions, and a flagon of beer — another simple pleasure, that of eating his fill and more, the knowledge that he was eating too much serving as a sauce to him who kept himself almost invariably within bounds and who looked upon overindulgence usually with suspicion and contempt. With his duty carried out successfully today he had for once no care for the morrow, not even when the day after tomorrow would see him engaged in the rather frightening experience of attending the King's levee. And Maria had come safely through her ordeal, and he had a little daughter who would be as adorable as his little son. Then he sneezed three times running.

Chapter VI

"Whitehall Steps," said Hornblower, stepping down into his gig at Deptford Hard. It was convenient having his gig for use here; it was faster than a wherryman's boat and it cost him nothing. "Give way!" said the coxswain. Of course it was raining. The westerly wind still blew and bore with it today flurries of heavy rain, which hissed down on the surface of the river, roared on the tarpaulins of the wretched boat's crew, and rattled loudly on the sou'wester which Hornblower wore on his head while he sheltered his cocked hat under his boat cloak. He sniffed lamentably. He had the worst cold he had ever experienced, and he needed to use his handkerchief. But that meant bringing a hand out from under his cloak, and he would not do that — with the boat cloak spread round him like a tent as he sat in the stern-sheets, and with the sou'wester on top, he could hope to keep himself reasonably dry as far as Whitehall if he did not disturb the arrangement. He preferred to sniff. Up the river, through the rain; under London Bridge, round the bends he had come to know so well during the last few days. He cowered in misery under his boat cloak, shuddering. He was sure he had never felt so ill in his life before. He ought to be in bed, with hot bricks at his feet and hot rum-and-water at his side, but on the day when the First Lord was going to take him to the Court of St. James's he could not possibly plead illness, not even though the shivers ran up and down his spine and his legs felt too weak to carry him.

The Steps were slippery where the tide had receded from them; in his weak state he could hardly keep his footing as he climbed them. At the top, with the rain still beating down, he put his appearance to rights as well as he could. He rolled up the sou'wester and put it in the pocket of his cloak, put on his cocked hat, and hurried, bending forward into the driving rain, the hundred and fifty yards to the Admiralty. Even in the short time that took him his stockings were splashed and wet, and the brim of his cocked hat was filled with water. He was glad to stand before the fire in the Captain's Room while he waited until Bracegirdle came in with the announcement that His Lordship was ready for him.

"Morning, Hornblower," said St Vincent, standing under the portico.

"Good morning, my lord."

"No use waiting for a smooth," growled St Vincent, looking up at the rain and eyeing the distance between him and his coach. "Come on."

He hobbled manfully forward. Hornblower and Bracegirdle advanced with him. They had no cloaks on — Hornblower had left his at the Admiralty — and had to wait in the rain while St Vincent walked to the coach and with infinite slowness hauled himself into it. Hornblower followed him and Bracegirdle squeezed in after him, perching on the turndown seat in front. The coach rumbled forward over the cobbles, with a vibration from the iron-rimmed wheels that found an echo in the shudders that were still playing up and down Hornblower's spine.

"All nonsense, of course, having to use a coach to St. James's from the Admiralty," growled St Vincent. "I used to walk a full three miles on my quarterdeck in the old *Orion*."

Hornblower sniffed again, miserably. He could not even congratulate himself on the fact that as he felt so ill he knew almost no qualms about his new experience which was awaiting him, because, stupefied by his cold, he was unable even to indulge in his habitual self-analysis.

"I read your report last night, Hornblower," went on St Vincent. "Satisfactory."

"Thank you, my lord." He braced himself into appearing intelligent. "And did the funeral at St. Paul's go off well yesterday?"

"Well enough."

The coach rumbled down the Mall.

"Here we are," said St Vincent. "You'll come back with me, I suppose, Hornblower? I don't intend to stay long. Nine in the morning and I haven't done a third of my day's work yet."

"Thank you, my lord. I'll take station on you, then."

The coach door opened, and Bracegirdle nimbly stepped out to help his chief down the steps. Hornblower followed; now his heart was beating faster. There were red uniforms, blue and gold uniforms, blue and silver uniforms, in evidence everywhere; many of the men were in powder. One powdered wig — the dark eyes below it were in startling contrast — detached itself and approached St Vincent. The uniform was black and silver; the polished facets of the silver-hilted sword caught and reflected the light at a myriad points.

"Good morning, my lord."

"Morning, Catterick. Here's my protégé, Captain Horatio Hornblower."

Catterick's keen dark eyes took in every detail of Hornblower's appearance in one sweeping glance, coat, breeches, stockings, sword, but his expression did not change. One might gather he was used to the appearance of shabby naval officers at levees.

"His Lordship is presenting you, I understand, Captain. You accompany him into the Presence Chamber."

Hornblower nodded; he was wondering how much was implied by that word "protégé". His hat was in his hand, and he made haste to cram it under his arm as the others did.

"Follow me, then," said St Vincent.

Up the stairs; uniformed men on guard on the landings; another black and silver uniform at the head of the stairs; a further brief exchange of sentences; powdered footmen massed about the doorway; announcements made in a superb speaking voice, restrained but penetrating.

"Admiral the Right Honourable Earl St Vincent. Captain Horatio Hornblower. Lieutenant Anthony Bracegirdle." The Presence Chamber was a mass of colour. Every possible uniform was represented there. The scarlet of the infantry; light cavalry in all the colours of the rainbow, be-frogged and be-furred, cloaks swinging, sabres trailing; heavy cavalry in jack boots up to the thigh; foreign uniforms of white and green; St Vincent carried his

vast bulk through them all, like a battleship among yachts. And there was the King, seated in a throne-like chair with a lofty back; it was an odd surprise to see him, in his little tie-wig, looking so exactly like his pictures. Behind him stood a semi-circle of men wearing ribbons and stars, blue ribbons, red ribbons, green ribbons, over the left shoulder and over the right; Knights of the Garter, of the Bath, of St. Patrick, these must be, the great men of the land. St Vincent was bending himself in clumsy obeisance to the King.

"Glad to see you, my lord, glad to see you," said the latter. "Haven't had a moment since Monday. Glad all went well."

"Thank you, sir. May I present the officer responsible for the naval ceremonial?"

"You may."

The King turned his eyes on Hornblower; light blue eyes, prominent,

"Captain Horatio Hornblower," said St Vincent, and Hornblower did his best to bow, as his French émigré dancing teacher had tried to teach him ten years before, left foot forward, hand over his heart. He did not know how far down to bend; he did not know how long to stay there when he had bent. But he came up again at last, with something of the sensation of breaking the surface of the water after a deep dive.

"What ship, sir? What ship?" asked the King

"*Atropos, twenty-two*, Your Majesty."

Sleepless during the previous night Hornblower had imagined that question might be put to him, and so the answer came fast enough.

"Where is she now?"

"Deptford, Your Majesty."

"But you go to sea soon?"

"I — I —" Hornblower could not answer that question, but St Vincent spoke up for him.

"Very shortly, sir," he said.

"I see," said the King. "I see."

He put up his hand and stroked his forehead with a gesture of infinite weariness before recalling himself to the business in hand

"My great-nephew," he said, "Prince Ernst — did I speak to you about him, my lord?"

"You did, sir," answered St Vincent.

"Do you think Captain Hornblower would be a suitable officer for the duty?"

"Why yes, sir. Quite suitable."

"Less than three years' seniority," mused the King, his eyes resting on Hornblower's epaulette. "But still. Harmond!"

"Your Majesty."

A glittering figure with ribbon and star came gliding forward from the semi-circle.

"Present Captain Hornblower to His Serene Highness."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

There was a smile in the pale blue eyes.

"Thank you, Captain," said the King. "Do your duty as you have done it, and your conscience will always be clear."

"Yes, Your Majesty," said Hornblower.

St Vincent was bowing again; Hornblower bowed. He was aware of the fact that he must not turn his back upon the King — that was almost the sum of his knowledge of court ceremonial — and he found it not so difficult to withdraw. Already there was a line formed of people waiting their turn to reach the royal presence, and he sidled away from them in St Vincent's wake.

"This way, if you please," said Harmond, directing their course to the farther side of the room. "Wait a moment."

"His Majesty's service makes strange bedfellows sometimes," said St Vincent as they waited. "I hardly expected you would be saddled with this, Hornblower."

"I — I have not yet understood," said Hornblower.

"Oh, the Prince is —"

"This way, if you please," said Harmond, appearing again.

He led them towards a diminutive figure who awaited them with composure. A young man — no, only a boy — wearing an outlandish uniform of gold and green, a short gold-hilted sword at his side, orders on his breast, and two more hanging from his neck. Behind them towered a burly figure in a more moderate version of the same uniform, swarthy, with fat pendulous cheeks. The boy himself was handsome, with fair hair falling in ringlets about his ears, frank blue eyes and a nose slightly turned upwards. The burly figure stepped forward, intercepting the approach of the group to the boy. Harmond and he exchanged glances.

"Presentations should be made to me first," said the burly figure; he spoke thickly, in what Hornblower guessed to be a German accent.

"And why, sir?" asked Harmond.

"By the fundamental law of Seitz-Bunau only the High Chamberlain can make presentations to His Serene Highness."

"Yes?"

"And I, sir, am the High Chamberlain. As you know."

"Very well, sir," said Harmond with resignation. "Then may I have the honour to present — Admiral the Right Honourable Earl St Vincent; Captain Horatio Hornblower; Lieutenant Anthony Bracegirdle."

Hornblower was about to bow, but out of the tail of his eye he caught sight of St Vincent still holding himself ponderously erect, and he restrained himself.

"To whom have I the honour of being presented?" asked St Vincent, coldly. It appeared as if St Vincent entertained some prejudice against Germans.

"Doctor Eisenbeiss," said Harmond.

"His Excellency the Baron von Eisenbeiss, High Chamberlain and Secretary of State to His Serene Highness the Prince of Seitz-Bunau," said the burly man, in further explanation. "It is with much pleasure that I make your acquaintance."

He stood meeting St Vincent's eyes for a moment, and then he bowed; St Vincent bowed only after Eisenbeiss had begun to bow; Hornblower and Bracegirdle followed his example. All four of them straightened up at the same moment.

"And now," said Eisenbeiss, "I have the honour to present —"

He turned to the Prince and continued his speech in German, apparently repeating his first words and then mentioning the names in turn. The little Prince gave a half bow at each name, but as St Vincent bowed low — nearly as low as he had bowed to the King — Hornblower did likewise. Then the Prince spoke in German to Eisenbeiss.

"His Serene Highness says," translated the latter, "that he is delighted to make the acquaintance of officers of His Majesty's Navy, because it is His Highness's will that he should make war against the French tyrant in their company."

"Tell His Serene Highness," said St Vincent, "that we are all delighted, too."

The translation was made, and the Prince produced a smile for each of them. Then there was an uncomfortable moment as they looked at each other. Finally Eisenbeiss said something again to the Prince, received a reply, and then turned to the group.

"His Serene Highness," he announced, "says that he will not detain you longer."

"Hm'ph," said St Vincent, but he bent himself once more in the middle, as did the others, and then they withdrew themselves, backwards and sideways, from out of His Serene Highness's presence.

"Damned upstart whippersnapper," mumbled St Vincent to himself, and then added, "At any rate, our duty's done. We can leave. Follow me over to that door."

Down below loud bawling by a footman in the courtyard brought up the Earl's coach again, and they climbed in, Hornblower utterly dazed by reason of his cold, the excitement he had been through, and his puzzlement about the incident in which he had taken part.

"Well, that's your midshipman, Hornblower," said St Vincent. His voice was so like the rumbling of the iron tyres over the cobbles that Hornblower was not sure that he had heard aright — especially as what St Vincent had said was so strange.

"I beg your pardon, my lord?"

"I have no doubt you heard me. I said that's your midshipman — the Prince of Seitz-Bunau."

"But who is he, my lord?"

"One of those German princes. Boney chased him out of his principality last year, on his way to Austerlitz. Country's brimful of German princes chased out by Boney. The point is that this one's the King's great-nephew, as you heard."

"And he's to be one of my midshipmen?"

"That is so. He's young enough to learn sense, not like most of 'em. Most of 'em go in the army. On the staff, God help the staff. But now the navy's fashionable — first time since the Dutch Wars. We've been winning battles, and God knows the soldiers haven't. So all the ne'er do well young lords join the Navy nowadays instead of the Light Dragoons. It was His Majesty's own idea that this young fellow should do the same."

"I understand, my lord."

"It won't do him any harm. *Atropos* won't be any palace, of course."

"That's what I was thinking, my lord. The midshipmen's berth in *Atropos* —"

"You'll have to put him there, all the same. Not much room in a flush-decked sloop. If it were a ship of the line he might berth by himself, but if it's to be *Atropos* he'll have to take what comes. And it won't be caviar and venison, either. I'll send you orders on the subject, of course."

"Aye aye, my lord."

The coach was grinding to a stop at the Admiralty; someone opened the door, and St Vincent began to heave himself out of his seat. Hornblower followed him in under the portico.

"I'll bid you good-bye, then, Hornblower," said St Vincent, offering his hand.

"Good-bye, my lord."

St Vincent stood looking at him from under his eyebrows.

"The Navy has two duties, Hornblower," he said. "We all know what one is — to fight the French and give Boney what for."

"Yes, my lord?"

"The other we don't think about so much. We have to see that when we go we leave behind us a Navy which is as good as the one in which we served. You've less than three years' seniority now, Hornblower, but you'll find you'll grow older. It'll seem you've hardly had time to look round before you'll have forty-three years' seniority, like me. It goes fast enough, I assure you. Perhaps then you'll be taking another young officer to present him at the Palace."

"Er — yes, my lord."

"Choose carefully, Hornblower, if it ever becomes your duty. One can make mistakes. But let them be honest mistakes."

"Yes, my Lord."

"That's all."

The old man turned away without another word, leaving Hornblower with Bracegirdle under the portico.

"Jervie's in a melting mood," said Bracegirdle.

"So it seems."

"I think he wanted to say he had his eye on you, sir."

"But he had an anchor out to windward all the same," said Hornblower, thinking of what St Vincent had said about the chance of one making mistakes.

"Jervie never forgives, sir," said Bracegirdle, seriously.

"Well —"

Twelve years of service in the Navy had gone far to make Hornblower, on occasions, fatalist enough to be able to shrug off that sort of peril — at least until it was past.

"I'll take my boat cloak, if you please," he said, "and I'll say good-bye, and thank you."

"A glass of something? A cup of tea? A mouthful to eat, sir?"

"No, thank you, I'd better shove off."

Maria was waiting for him at Deptford, longing to hear about his visit to Court and his presentation to the King. Maria had been wildly excited when Hornblower had told her what he was going to do. The thought that he was going to meet face to face the Lord's anointed was almost too much for her — the midwife had come

forward with a warning that all this excitement might bring on a fever. And he had not merely been presented to the King, but the King had actually spoken to him, had discussed his professional career with him. Besides, he was to have a real Prince as a midshipman on board his ship — a dispossessed prince, admittedly, but to counter-balance that was the fact that the prince was a great-nephew of the King, related by blood to the Royal Family. That would delight Maria as much as his presentation at Court.

She would want to know all about it, who was there (Hornblower found himself wishing he had been able to identify a single one of the figures who had stood behind the throne) and what everyone was wearing — that would be easier, as there had been no women present, of course, at the levee, and practically everyone had been in uniform. He would have to be careful in his account, as it was possible to hurt Maria's feelings. Hornblower himself fought for his country; it might be better said that he fought for the ideals of liberty and decency against the unprincipled tyrant who ruled across the Channel; the hackneyed phrase "for King and Country" hardly expressed his feelings at all. If he was ready to lay down his life for his King that really had no reference to the kindly pop-eyed old gentleman with whom he had been speaking this morning; it meant that he was ready to die for the system of liberty and order that the old gentleman represented. But to Maria the King was representative of something other than liberty and order; he had received the blessing of the Church; he was somebody to be spoken about with awe. To turn one's back on the King was to Hornblower a breach of good manners, something damaging, in some degree, to the conventions which held the country together in the face of its imminent peril; but to Maria it would be something very close to sacrilege. He would have to be careful not to speak too lightly of the old gentleman.

And yet (the gig was carrying him through the Pool now, under the walls of the Tower) Hornblower had to admit it to himself that Maria's views about his service in the Navy were not on as lofty a plane as his own. To Maria it was a gentlemanly trade; it gave her a certain social status to which she otherwise would not have attained, and it put food into the mouth of her precious child — children, now that little Maria was born. But self-sacrifice for a cause; the incurring of danger beyond the dictates of duty; honour; glory; these were conceptions that Maria cared little about. She was in fact rather inclined to turn up her nose at them as purely masculine notions, part of an elaborate game or ritual devised by men to make them feel superior to and different from women whose self-respect and sublime certainty of superiority needed no such puerile bolstering.

It was a surprise to Hornblower to find that the gig was now passing the *Atropos* as she lay at the edge of the stream. He should have been all eyes to see that all was well with her and that the officer of the watch had been on the alert to detect the gig as she came down the river; as it was Hornblower merely had time to acknowledge the salute of Lieutenant Jones as the gig left the ship behind. There was Deptford Dock, and beside it the enormous activities of the Victualling Yard. From a sailing barge lying beside the jetty a gang of men were at work driving a herd of pigs up into the yard, destined for slaughter and salting down to feed the Navy.

"Eyes in the boat, there!" growled the coxswain.

One of the gig's crew had made a *sotto voce* joke about those pigs, evidently. It was hard to believe, even with this evidence before their eyes, that the unrecognizable, wooden hard chunks of matter that were issued from the brine barrels to the men at sea, really came from decent respectable animals like those there.

Hornblower's sympathies were with his men. The coxswain was putting his tiller over to bring the gig up to Deptford Hard. Hornblower disembarked, to walk up to the "George", to where his family was awaiting him. He would sit by Maria's bed and tell her about the pageantry of the Court of St. James's. He would hold his little daughter in his arms; he would play with his little son. It might well be for the very last time; at any moment his orders would come, and he would take *Atropos* to sea. Battle, storm, shipwreck, disease — what were the chances that he would never come back again? And if ever he did the squalling baby he was leaving behind would be a trim little miss playing with her dolls; little Horatio would be at least starting with slate and pencil writing his letters and figures; he might be beginning to decline mensa and learning the Greek alphabet. And he himself? He hoped he would be able to say he had done his duty; he hoped that those weaknesses of which he was so conscious would not prevent him from achieving something of which his children might be proud.

Chapter VII

So it was to be the Mediterranean. Hornblower sat in his canvas chair in his cabin in *Atropos*, rereading the orders which had come for him.

Sir —

I am commanded by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty —

He was to prepare himself with the utmost diligence ready to proceed to Gibraltar, and there he was to call for orders which the Vice-Admiral Commanding in the Mediterranean might send to him there. In the event that no such orders should be forthcoming, he was to ascertain where the Vice-Admiral was likely to be found, and to proceed with the same diligence to put himself under the Vice-Admiral's orders.

That must be Cuthbert Collingwood — Lord Collingwood now that he had received his peerage after Trafalgar. The fleet that had won the battle there — or such ships of it as were still seaworthy — had been sent into the Mediterranean after the battle, he knew. The destruction of the French and Spanish fleets outside Cadiz had definitely established British command of the Atlantic, so now the Navy was carrying its ponderous weight into the Mediterranean to head off there any moves that Bonaparte might make now that Austerlitz had given him command of Continental Europe. Austerlitz — Trafalgar. The French army — and the Royal Navy. The one might be balanced against the other. There was no corner of Europe whither French troops might not march — as long as there was land for them to march on; there was no corner of the sea where British ships might not bring their influence to bear — as long as there was water in which they could float. In the landlocked Mediterranean with its peninsulas and islands sea power could best confront land power. The bloody and seemingly endless conflict between tyranny and liberty would be fought out there. He would play his part in it. The Secretary to the Lords Commissioners signed himself "your obedient humble servant", but before he did so he went on to say that Their Lordships rested assured that *Atropos* was ready for immediate departure, so that on receipt of final orders and of the last minute despatches which would be entrusted to her she would be able to leave at once. Hornblower and his ship, in other words, were being put on notice of instant readiness.

Hornblower felt a slight feeling of apprehension, a sensation of gooseflesh at the back of his neck. He did not believe that his ship was prepared in all respects to leave at a moment's notice.

Hornblower lifted up his voice in a call to the sentry outside his door.

"Pass the word for Mr. Jones."

He heard the cry repeated in 'tween decks like an echo, as he sat on with the orders in his hands. It was only a few moments before Mr. Jones came in hastily, and it was only when he arrived that Hornblower realized that he had not prepared himself to give the necessary orders and make the necessary inquiries. As a result Hornblower found himself compelled to look Jones over without speaking. His mind was sorting out his thoughts without reacting at all to the reports his eyes were making to it, but Hornblower's steady stare discomposed the unfortunate Jones, who put his hand up nervously to his face. Hornblower saw a dab of dry lather in front of Jones's right ear, and as the lieutenant's gesture recalled him to himself he noticed something more; one lantern cheek was smooth and well shaved, while the other bristled with a fair growth of black beard.

"Pardon, sir," said Jones, "but your call caught me half shaved, and I judged it best to come at once."

"Very well, Mr. Jones," said Hornblower; he was not sorry that Jones had something to explain away while he himself was not ready with the definite orders that a good officer should be able to issue.

Under that embarrassing stare Jones had to speak again.

"Did you want me, sir?"

"Yes," said Hornblower. "We are under orders for the Mediterranean."

"Indeed, sir?" Mr. Jones's remarks did not make any great contribution to the progress of the conversation.

"I want your report on how soon we can be ready for sea."

"Oh, sir —"

Jones put his hand up to his face again; perhaps it was as long as it was because of his habit of pulling at his chin.

"Are stores and water complete?"

"Well, sir, you see —"

"You mean they are not?"

"N — no, sir. Not altogether."

Hornblower was about to ask for an explanation, but changed his approach at the last second.

"I won't ask why at present. How short are we?"

"Well, sir —" The wretched Jones entered into a hurried statement. They were twenty tons of water short. Bread, spirits, meat —

"You mean that with the Victualling Yard only across the river you have not kept the ship complete with stores?"

"Well, sir —" Jones tried to explain that he had not thought it necessary to draw supplies from day to day.

"There was plenty of other work for the hands, sir, fitting out."

"Watch bills? Station bills?"

These were the lists that allocated the hands to their duties and quarters in the ship.

"We're twenty topmen short, sir," said Jones pitifully.

"All the more reason to make the most of what we have."

"Yes, sir, of course, sir." Jones sought desperately in his mind for excuses for himself. "Some of our beef, sir — it — it isn't fit to eat."

"Worse than usual?"

"Yes, sir. Must be some of an old batch. Real bad, some of it."

"In which tier?"

"I'll ask the purser, sir."

"You mean you don't know?"

"No, sir — yes, sir."

Hornblower fell into deep thought again, but as once more he did not take his eyes from Jones's face that did not help the delinquent first lieutenant to recover his equanimity. Actually Hornblower was condemning himself. During the few days he had held command of the *Atropos* he had been hard at work on the details of Nelson's funeral, and then he had been preoccupied with his own family affairs, but all that was no excuse. The captain of a ship should be aware at every moment of the state of his command. He was savagely angry with himself. He hardly knew his officers' names; he could not even estimate what sort of fight *Atropos* could put up — and yet he would not have to go very far down the river to find his ship likely to be in action.

"What about the gunner's stores?" he asked. "Powder? Shot? Wads? Cartridges?"

"I'll send for the gunner, sir, shall I?" asked Jones. He was desperate at all this revelation of his own inadequacies.

"I'll see 'em all in a minute," said Hornblower. "Purser, gunner, bos'n, cooper, master's mate."

These were the subordinate heads of department responsible through the first lieutenant to the captain for the proper functioning of the ship.

"Aye aye, sir."

"What the devil's that noise?" asked Hornblower pettishly. For some minutes now there had been some sort of altercation on the quarterdeck over their heads. Strange voices were making themselves heard through the skylight.

"Shall I find out, sir?" asked Jones eagerly, hoping for some distraction. But as he spoke there was a knock at the cabin door.

"This'll tell us," said Hornblower. "Come in!"

Midshipman Horrocks opened the door.

"Mr. Still's respects, sir, an' there are some gentlemen come on board with an Admiralty letter for you, sir."

"Ask them to come here."

It could only be trouble of one sort or another, Hornblower decided, as he waited. One more distraction at a moment when he was about to be desperately busy. Horrocks ushered in two figures, one large and one diminutive, wearing glittering uniforms of green and gold — Hornblower had last seen them only yesterday at the Court of St. James's, the German princeling and his bear-leader. Hornblower rose to his feet, and Eisenbeiss stepped forward with an elaborate bow, to which Hornblower replied with a curt nod.

"Well, sir?"

Eisenbeiss ceremoniously handed over a letter; a glance showed Hornblower that it was addressed to him. He opened it carefully and read it.

You are hereby requested and required to receive into your ship His Serene Highness Ernst Prince of Seitz-Bunau, who has been rated as midshipman in His Majesty's Navy. You will employ your diligence in instructing His Serene Highness in his new profession as well as in continuing his education in readiness for the day which under Providence may not be far distant, when His Serene Highness will again assume the government of his hereditary dominions. You will also receive into your ship His Excellency the Baron Otto von Eisenbeiss, Chamberlain and First Secretary of State to His Serene Highness. His Excellency was until recently practicing as a surgeon, and he has received from the Navy Office a warrant as such in His Majesty's Navy. You will make use of His Excellency's services, therefore, as Surgeon in your ship while, as far as naval discipline and the Articles of War allow, he continues to act as Chamberlain to His Serene Highness.

"I see," he said. He looked at the odd pair in their resplendent uniforms. "Welcome aboard, Your Highness." The prince nodded and smiled, clearly without understanding.

Hornblower sat down again, and Eisenbeiss began to speak at once, his thick German accent stressing his grievances.

"I must protest, sir," he said.

"Well?" said Hornblower, in a tone that might well have conveyed a warning.

"His Serene Highness is not being treated with proper respect. When we reached your ship I sent my footman on board to announce us so that His Highness could be received with royal honours. They were absolutely refused, sir. The man on the deck there — I presume he is an officer — said he had no instructions. It was only when I showed him that letter, sir, that he allowed us to come on board at all."

"Quite right. He had no instructions."

"I trust you will make amends, then. And may I remind you that you are sitting in the presence of royalty?"

"You call me 'sir'," snapped Hornblower. "And you will address me as my subordinate should."

Eisenbeiss jerked himself upright in his indignation, so that his head came with a shattering crash against the deck-beam above; this checked his flow of words and enabled Hornblower to continue.

"As officers in the King's service you should have worn the King's uniform. You have your dunnage with you?"

Eisenbeiss was still too stunned to answer, even if he understood the word, and Horrocks spoke for him.

"Please, sir, it's in the boat alongside. Chests and chests of it."

"Thank you, Mr. Horrocks. Now, doctor, I understand you have the necessary professional qualifications to act as surgeon in this ship. That is so?"

Eisenbeiss still strove to retain his dignity.

"As Secretary of State I am addressed as 'Your Excellency'," he said.

"But as surgeon in this ship you are addressed as 'doctor'. And that is the last time I shall overlook the omission of the word 'sir'. Now. Your qualifications?"

"I am a surgeon — sir."

The last word came out with a jerk as Hornblower's eyebrows rose.

"You have been in practice recently?"

"Until a few months ago — sir. I was surgeon to the Court of Seitz-Bunau. But now I am —"

"Now you are surgeon in H.M.S. *Atropos*, and we can leave off the farce of your being Secretary of State."

"Sir —"

"Silence, if you please, doctor. Mr. Horrocks!"

"Sir!"

"My compliments to Mr. Still. I'll have these two gentlemen's baggage swayed up. They are to make immediate selection of their necessities to the extent of one sea chest each. You will be able to help them in their choice. The remainder is to leave the ship within ten minutes by the boat in which it came. Is that quite clear, Mr. Horrocks?"

"Aye aye, sir. If you please, sir, there's a couple of footmen with the baggage."

"Footmen?"

"Yes, sir, in uniforms like these," Horrocks indicated the green and gold of the Germans.

"That's two more hands, then. Read 'em in and send 'em for'rard."

The Navy could always use more men, and a couple of fat, well-fed footmen would make useful hands in time to come.

"But sir —" said Eisenbeiss.

"Speak when you're spoken to, doctor. Now Mr. Horrocks, you will take the prince and settle him into the midshipmen's berth. I'll introduce you. Mr. Midshipman Horrocks — er, Mr. Midshipman Prince."

Horrocks automatically offered his hand, and the prince as automatically took it, displaying no immediate change at the contamination of a human touch. He smiled shyly, without understanding.

"And my compliments to the master's mate, too, Mr. Horrocks. Ask him to be good enough to show the doctor where he berths for'rard."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Now, doctor, in half an hour I wish to see you both in the King's uniform. You can take up your duties then. There will be a court of inquiry opened at that time, consisting of the first lieutenant, the purser, and yourself, to decide whether certain hogsheads of beef are fit for human consumption. You will be secretary of that court and I want your written report by noon. Go with Mr. Horrocks now."

Eisenbeiss hesitated a moment under Hornblower's sharp glance before he turned to leave the cabin, but at the curtain his indignation overcame him again.

"I shall write to the Prime Minister, sir," he said. "He shall hear about this treatment of His Majesty's Allies."

"Yes, doctor. If you contravene the Mutiny Act you'll swing at the yardarm. Now, Mr. Jones, with regard to these station and quarter bills."

As Hornblower turned to Jones to re-enter into the business of getting *Atropos* ready for sea he was conscious of feeling some contempt for himself. He could browbeat a silly German doctor effectively enough; he could flatter himself that he had dealt adequately with what might have been a difficult though petty situation. But that was nothing to be proud of, when he had to realize that with regard to his real duties he had been found wanting. He had wasted precious hours. During the last two days he had twice played with his little son; he had sat by his wife's bedside and held his little daughter in his arms, when really he should have been on board here looking after his ship. It was no excuse that it was Jones's duty to have attended to the matters under consideration; it had been Hornblower's duty to see that Jones had attended to them. A naval officer should not have a wife or children — this present situation was the proof of that trite saying. Hornblower found himself setting his mouth hard as he came to that conclusion. There were still eight hours of daylight left today. He began an orderly planning of those eight hours. There were the matters that would call for his own personal activity like appealing to the superintendent of the dockyard; there were the matters he could safely leave to his subordinates. There was work that could be done on one side of the ship, leaving the other side clear; there was work that would demand the services of skilled seamen, and work that landsmen could do. There were some jobs that could not be started until other jobs were finished. If he was not careful some of his officers would have to be in two places at once, there would be confusion, delay, ridiculous disorder. But with good planning it could be done.

Purser and gunner, boatswain and cooper, each in turn was summoned to the after cabin. To each was allotted his tasks; to each was grudgingly conceded a proportion of the men that each demanded. Soon the pipes were shrilling through the ship.

"Launch's crew away!"

Soon the launch was pulling across the river, full of the empty barrels the cooper and his mates had made ready, to begin ferrying over the twenty tons of water necessary to complete the ship's requirements. A dozen

men went scurrying up the shrouds and out along the yards under the urging of the boatswain; yardarm tackles and stay tackles had to be readied for the day's work.

"Mr. Jones! I am leaving the ship now. Have that report on the beef ready for me by the time I return from the dockyard."

Hornblower became aware of two figures on the quarterdeck trying to attract his attention. They were the prince and the doctor. He ran his eye over their uniforms, the white collar patches of the midshipman and the plain coat of the surgeon.

"They'll do," he said, "your duties are awaiting you, doctor. Mr. Horrocks! Keep Mr. Prince under your lee for today. Call away my gig."

The captain superintendent of the dockyard listened to Hornblower's request with the indifference acquired during years of listening to requests from urgent officers.

"I've the men ready to send for the shot, sir. Port side's clear for the powder hulk to come alongside — slack water in half an hour, sir. I can send men to man her too if necessary. It's only four tons that I need. Half an hour with the hulk."

"You say you're ready now?"

"Yes, sir."

The captain superintendent looked across at the *Atropos* lying in the stream.

"Very well. I hope what you say is quite correct, captain, for your sake. You can start warping the hulk alongside — I warn you I want her back at her moorings in an hour."

"Thank you, sir."

Back in the *Atropos* the cry went round the ship.

"Hands to the capstan! Waistlers! Sailmakers! Loblolly boys ! "

The inmost recesses of the ship were cleared of men to man the capstan bars — any pairs of arms, any stout backs, would serve for that purpose. A drum went roaring along the deck.

"All lights out! "

The cook and his mates dumped the galley fire overside and went reluctantly to man the yardarm and stay tackles. The powder hulk came creeping alongside. She had stout sheers and wide hatchways, efficient equipment for the rapid transfer of explosives. Four tons of powder, eighty kegs of one hundredweight each, came climbing out of the hulk's holds to be swayed down the hatchways of the *Atropos*, while down below the gunner and his mates and a sweating working party toiled in near darkness — barefooted to avoid all chance of friction or sparks — to range the kegs about the magazines. Some day *Atropos* might be fighting for her life, and her life would depend on the proper arrangement of those kegs down below so that the demands of the guns on deck might be met.

The members of the court of inquiry, fresh from their investigation of the defective beef barrels, made their appearance on deck again.

"Mr. Jones, show the doctor how to make his report in due form." Then to the purser, "Mr. Carslake, I want to be able to sign your indents as soon as that report is ready."

One final look round the deck, and Hornblower could dive below, take pen and ink and paper, and devote himself single-mindedly to composing a suitable covering letter to the Victualling Yard (worded with the right urgency and tactfully coaxing the authorities there into agreement without annoying them by too certain assumption of acquiescence) beginning: "Sir, I have the honour to enclose —" and concluding: "— in the best interests of His Majesty's service, Your Obedient Servant —"

Then he could come on deck again to see how the work was progressing and fume for a space before Jones and Carslake appeared with the documents they had been preparing. Amid the confusion and din he had to clear his head again to read them with care before signing them with a bold "H. Hornblower, Captain".

"Mr. Carslake, you can take my gig over to the Victualling Yard. Mr. Jones, I expect the Yard will need hands to man their lighter. See to that, if you please."

A moment to spare now to observe the hands at work, to settle his cocked hat square on his head, to clasp his hands behind him, to walk slowly forward, doing his best to look quite cool and imperturbable, as if all this wild activity were the most natural thing in the world.

"Avast heaving there on that stay-tackle. Belay!"

The powder keg hung suspended just over the deck. Hornblower forced himself to speak coldly, without excitement. A stave of the keg had started a trifle. There was a minute trail of powder grains on the deck; more were dribbling very slowly out.

"Sway that keg back into the hulk. You, bos'n's mate, get a wet mop and swill that powder off the deck."

An accident could have fired that powder easily. The flash would pass in either direction; four tons of powder in *Atropos*, forty, perhaps in the hulk — what would have happened to the massed shipping in the Pool in that event? The men were eyeing him; this would be a suitable moment to encourage them with their work.

"Greenwich Hospital is over there, men," said Hornblower, pointing down river to the graceful outlines of Wren's building. "Some of us will wind up there in the end, I expect, but we don't want to be blown straight there today."

A feeble enough joke, perhaps, but it raised a grin or two all the same.

"Carry on."

Hornblower continued his stroll forward, the imperturbable captain who was nevertheless human enough to crack a joke. It was the same sort of acting that he used towards Maria when she seemed likely to be in a difficult mood.

Here was the lighter with the shot, coming along the starboard side. Hornblower looked down into it. Nine-pounder balls for the four long guns, two forward and two aft; twelve-pounder balls for the eighteen carronades that constituted the ship's main armament. The twenty tons of iron made a pathetically small mass lying in the bottom of the lighter, when regarded with the eye of a man who had served in a ship of the line; the old *Renown* would have discharged that weight of shot in a couple of hours' fighting. But this dead weight was a very considerable proportion of the load *Atropos* had to carry. Half of it would be distributed fairly evenly along the ship in the shot-garlands; where he decided to stow the other ten tons would make all the difference to *Atropos*, could add a knot to her speed or reduce it by a knot, could make her stiff in a breeze or crank, handy or awkward under sail. He could not reach a decision about that until the rest of the stores were on board and he had had an opportunity of observing her trim. Hornblower ran a keen eye over the nets in which the shot were to be swayed up at the starboard fore-yardarm, and went back through his mind in search of the data stored away there regarding the breaking strain of Manila line — this, he could tell, had been several years in service.

"Sixteen rounds to the load," he called down into the lighter, "no more."

"Aye aye, sir."

It was typical of Hornblower's mind that it should spend a moment or two thinking about the effect that would be produced if one of those nets was to give way; the shot would pour down into the lighter again; falling from the height of the yardarm they could go clear through the bottom of the lighter; with all that deadweight on board, the lighter would sink like a stone, there on the edge of the fairway, to be an intolerable nuisance to London's shipping until divers had painfully cleared the sunken wreck of the shot, and camels had lifted the wreck clear of the channel. The vast shipping of the Port of London could be seriously impeded as a result of a momentary inattention regarding the condition of a cargo net.

Jones was hastening across the deck to touch his hat to him.

"The last of the powder's just coming aboard, sir."

"Thank you. Mr. Jones. Have the hulk warped back to her moorings. Mr. Owen can send the powder boys here to put the shot in the garlands as they come on board."

"Aye aye, sir."

And the gig was coming back across the river with Carslake sitting in the stern.

"Well, Mr. Carslake, how did the Victualling Yard receive those indents?"

"They've accepted them, sir. They'll have the stores on the quayside tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Didn't you listen to my orders, Mr. Carslake? I don't want to have to put a black mark against your name. Mr. Jones! I'm going over to the Victualling Yard. Come back with me, Mr. Carslake."

The Victualling Yard was a department of the Navy Office, not of the Admiralty. The officials there had to be approached differently from those of the dockyard. One might almost think the two organizations were rivals, instead of working to a common patriotic end against a deadly enemy.

"I can bring my own men to do the work," said Hornblower. "You needn't use your own gangs at all."

"M'm," said the victualling superintendent.

"I'll move everything to the quayside myself, besides lightering it over."

"M'm," said the victualling superintendent again, a trifle more receptively.

"I would be most deeply obliged to you," went on Hornblower. "You need only instruct one of your clerks to point out the stores to the officer in command of my working party. Everything else will be attended to. I beg of you, sir."

It was highly gratifying to a Navy Office official to have a captain, metaphorically, on his knees to him, in this fashion. Equally gratifying was the thought that the Navy would do all the work, with a great saving of time-tallies to the Victualling Yard. Hornblower could see the satisfaction in the fellow's fat face. He wanted to wipe it off with his fist, but he kept himself humble. It did him no harm, and by this means he was bending the fellow to his will as surely as if he was using threats.

"There's the matter of those stores you have condemned," said the superintendent.

"My court of inquiry was in due form," said Hornblower.

"Yes," said the superintendent thoughtfully.

"Of course I can return you the hogsheads," suggested Hornblower. "I was intending to do so, as soon as I had emptied the beef over into the tide."

"No, please do not go to that trouble. Return me the full hogsheads."

The working of the minds of these government Jacks-in-office was beyond normal understanding. Hornblower could not believe — although it was just possible — that the superintendent had any personal financial interest in the matter of those condemned stores. But the fact that the condemnation had taken place presumably was a blot on his record, or on the record of the yard. If the hogsheads were returned to them no mention of the condemnation need be made officially, and presumably they could be palmed off again on some other ship — some ship that might go to sea without the opportunity of sampling the stuff first. Sailors fighting for their country might starve as long as the Victualling Yard's records were unsmirched.

"I'll return the full hogsheads gladly, sir," said Hornblower. "I'll send them over to you in the lighter that brings the other stores over."

"That might do very well," said the superintendent.

"I am delighted, and, as I said, intensely obliged to you, sir. I'll have my launch over here with a working party in ten minutes."

Hornblower bowed with all the unction he could command; this was not the moment to spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar. He bowed himself out before the discussion could be reopened. But the superintendent's last words were:

"Remember to return those hogsheads, captain."

The powder hulk had been warped back to her moorings; the other ordnance stores that were being taken on board seemed trifling in appearance, bundles of wads, and bales of empty serge cartridges, a couple of sheaves of flexible rammers, spare gun trucks, reels of slow-match — the multifarious accessories necessary to keep twenty-two guns in action. Hornblower sent off Midshipman Smiley with the working party promised to the Victualling Yard.

"Now I'll have those condemned hogsheads got up on deck, Mr. Carslake. I must keep my promise to return them."

"Aye aye, sir," said Carslake.

Carslake was a bull-headed, youngish man with expressionless pale-blue eyes. Those eyes were even more expressionless than usual. He had been a witness of the interview between Hornblower and the superintendent, and he did not allow his feelings to show. He could not guess whether as a purser he thoroughly approved of saving the stores to be fobbed off on another ship or whether as a sailor certain to endure privations at sea he despised Hornblower's weakness in agreeing to the superintendent's demands.

"I'll mark 'em before I return 'em," said Hornblower.

He had thought of paint when he had been so accommodating towards the superintendent, but was not quite happy in his mind about it, for turpentine would remove paint fast enough. A better idea occurred to him, marvellously, at that very moment.

"Have the cook relight the fire in the galley," he ordered. "I'll have — I'll have a couple of iron musket ramrods heated in the fire. Get them from the armourer, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir. If you please sir, it's long past the hands' dinner-time."

"When I've time for my own dinner the hands can have theirs," said Hornblower.

He was glad that the deck was crowded so that those words of his could be overheard, for he had had the question of the men's dinnertime in his mind for some time although he was quite resolved not to waste a moment over it.

The first of the condemned hogsheads came creaking and swaying up from the hold and was lowered to the deck. Hornblower looked round him; there was Horrocks with the young prince, quite bewildered with all the continuous bustles trailing after him.

"You'll do, Mr. Horrocks. Come here," said Hornblower. He took the chalk from beside the slate at the binnacle; and wrote with it, in large letters diagonally round the hogshead, the word "CONDEMNED". "There are two irons heating in the galley fire. You and Mr. Prince can spend your time branding these hogsheads. Trace out those letters on every one. Understand?"

"Er — yes, sir."

"Good and deep, so there is no chance of planing it off. Look sharp about it."

"Aye aye, sir."

The next lighter for the Dockyard was alongside now, at the port side recently vacated by the powder hulk. It was full of boatswain's stores, cordage, canvas, paint; and a weary party of men were at work swaying the bundles up. There seemed no end to this business of getting *Atropos* fully equipped for sea. Hornblower himself felt as leg-weary as a foundered horse, and he stiffened himself up to conceal his fatigue. But as he looked across the river he could see the Victualling Yard's lighter already emerging from the Creek. Smiley had his men at work on the sweeps, straining to row the ponderous thing across the ebbing tide.

Prom the quarterdeck he could see the lighter was crammed with the hogsheads and kegs and biscuit bags. Soon *Atropos* would be full-gorged. And the acrid smell of the red-hot irons burning into the brine-soaked staves of the condemned hogsheads came to his nostrils. No ship would ever accept those stores. It was a queer duty for a Serene Highness to be employed upon. How had those orders read? "You will employ your diligence in instructing His Serene Highness in his new profession." Well, perhaps it was not a bad introduction to the methods of fighting men and civilian employees.

Later — ever so much later, it seemed — Mr. Jones came up and touched his hat.

"The last of the stores are on board, sir," he said. "Mr. Smiley's just returning the Victualling Yard's lighter."

"Thank you, Mr. Jones. Call away my gig, please."

Hornblower stepped down into the boat conscious of many weary eyes on him. The winter afternoon was dissolving in a cold and gloomy drizzle as a small rain was beginning to fall. Hornblower had himself rowed round his ship at a convenient distance to observe her trim. He looked at her from ahead, from broadside on, from astern. In his mind's eye he was visualizing her underwater lines. He looked up at the spread of her lower yards; the wind would be pressing against the canvas there, and he worked out the balance of the forces involved, wind against lateral resistance, rudder versus headsails. He had to consider seaworthiness and handiness as well as speed. He climbed back on deck to where Jones was awaiting him.

"I want her more down by the head," he announced. "I'll have those beef casks at the for'rard end of the tier, and the shot for'rard of the magazine. Get the hands to work, if you please."

Once more the pipes shrilled through the ship as the hands began to move the stores ranged upon the deck. It was with anxiety that Hornblower's return was awaited from his next pull round the ship.

"She'll do for the present," said Hornblower.

It was not a casual decision, no stage-effect. The moment *Atropos* should clear the land she would be in danger, she might find herself in instant action. She was only a little ship; even a well found privateer might give her a hard battle. To overtake in pursuit; to escape in flight; to handle quickly when manoeuvring for position in action; to claw off to windward should she be caught on a lee shore; she must be capable of all this, and she must be capable of it today, for tomorrow, even tomorrow, might be too late. The lives of his crew, his own life, his professional reputation, could hang on that decision.

"You can strike everything below now, Mr. Jones."

Slowly the littered decks began to clear, while the rain grew heavier and the night began to close in round the little ship. The tiers of great casks, down against the skin of the ship, were squeezed and wedged into position; the contents of the hold had to be jammed into a solid mass, for once at sea *Atropos* would roll and pitch, and nothing must budge, nothing must shift, lest the fabric of the ship be damaged or even perhaps the ship might be rolled completely over by the movement of an avalanche of her cargo. The Navy still thought of Sir Edward Berry as the officer who, when captain of Nelson's own *Vanguard*, allowed the masts of his ship to be rolled clear out of her in a moderate gale of wind off Sardinia.

Hornblower stood aft by the taffrail while the rain streamed down on him. He had not gone below; this might be part of the penance he was inflicting on himself for not having sufficiently supervised the management of his ship.

"The decks are cleared, sir," said Jones, looming up in the wet darkness before him.

"Very well, Mr. Jones. When everything is swabbed down the men can have their dinners."

The little cabin down below was cold and dark and cheerless. Two canvas chairs and a trestle-table stood in the day cabin; in the night cabin there was nothing at all. The oil lamp shone gloomily over the bare planks of the deck under his feet. Hornblower could call for his gig again; it would whisk him fast enough half a mile downstream to Deptford Hard, and there at the "George" were his wife and his children. There would be a roaring fire of sea coal, a spluttering beef steak with cabbage, a feather bed with the sheets made almost too hot to bear by the application of a warming pan. His chilled body and aching legs yearned inexpressibly for that care and warmth. But in his present mood he would have none of them. Instead he dined, shivering, off ship's fare hastily laid out for him on the trestle-table. He had a hammock slung for himself in the night cabin, and he climbed into it and wrapped himself in clammy blankets. He had not lain in a hammock since he was a midshipman, and his spine had grown unused to the necessary curvature. He was too numb, both mentally and physically, to feel any glow of conscious virtue.

Chapter VIII

Fog in the Downs, cold, dense, and impenetrable over the surface of the sea. There was no breath of air to set it stirring; overside the surface of the sea, just visible when Hornblower looked down at it from the deck, was black and glassy. Only close against the side could be detected the faintest of ripples, showing how the tide was coursing beside the ship as she lay anchored in the Downs. Condensing on the rigging overhead the fog dripped in melancholy fashion on to the deck about him, an occasional drop landing with a dull impact on his cocked hat; the heavy frieze pea-jacket that he wore looked as if it were frosted with the moisture that hung upon it. Yet it was not freezing weather, although Hornblower felt chilled through and through inside his layers of clothing as he turned back from his gloomy contemplation of the sea.

"Now, Mr. Jones," he said, "we'll start again. We'll have topmasts and yards struck — all top hamper down and stowed away. Order 'out pipes', if you please."

"Aye aye, sir," said Jones.

The hands had already spent half the morning at sail drill; Hornblower was taking advantage of the fogbound calm to exercise his ship's company. With so many landsmen on board, with officers unfamiliar with their divisions, this fog actually could be used to advantage; the ship could be made more of a working, fighting unit during this interval of grace before proceeding down Channel. Hornblower put his cold hand inside his coat and brought out his watch; as if the gesture had called forth the sound five bells rang out sharply from beside the binnacle, and from the thick fog surrounding them came the sound of other bells — there were many ships anchored in the Downs all about them, so many that it was some minutes before the last sound died away; the sand-glasses on board the ships were by no means in agreement.

While the bells were still sounding Hornblower took note of the position of the minute hand of his watch and nodded to Jones. Instantly came a roar of orders; the men, already called to attention after their brief stand-easy came pouring aft with their petty officers urging them on. Watch in hand, Hornblower stood back by the taffrail. From where he stood only the lower part of the main rigging was visible; the foremast was

completely hidden in fog. The hands went hurrying up the ratlines, Hornblower watching keenly to see what proportion of them were vague about their stations and duties. He could have wished that he could see all that was going on — but then if there had been no fog there would have been no sail drill, and *Atropos* would have been making the best of her way down Channel. Here was the Prince, hurried along by Horrocks with a hand at his shoulder.

"Come on," said Horrocks, leaping at the ratlines.

The Prince sprang up beside him. Hornblower could see the bewildered expression on the boy's face. He had small enough idea of what he was doing. He would learn, no doubt — he was learning much even from the fact that the blood-royal, the King's nephew, could be shoved about by the plebeian hand of a midshipman. Hornblower got out of the way as the mizzen topsail came swaying down. A yelping master's mate came running up with a small pack of waisters at his heels; they fell upon the ponderous roll and dragged it to the side. The mizzen mast hands were working faster than the mainmast, apparently — the main topsail was not lowered yet. Jones, his head drawn back so that his Adam's apple protruded apparently by inches, was bellowing the next orders to the masthead. A shout from above answered him. Down the ratlines came a flood of men again.

"Let go! Haul! Lower away!"

The mizzen topsail yard turned in a solemn arc and made its slow descent down the mast. There was an exasperating delay while the mainstay tackle was applied — organization at this point was exceedingly poor — but at last the yard was down and lying along the booms beside its fellows. The complicated and difficult business of striking the topmasts followed.

"An hour and a quarter, Mr. Jones. More nearly an hour and twenty minutes. Far too long. Half an hour — half an hour with five minutes' grace; that's the longest you should ever take."

"Yes, sir," said Jones. There was nothing else he could say.

As Hornblower was eyeing him before giving his next orders a faint dull thud came to his ears, sounding flatly through the fog. A musket shot? A pistol shot? That was certainly what it sounded like, but with the fog changing the quality of all the sounds he could not be sure. Even if it were a shot, fired in one of the numerous invisible ships round about, there might be endless innocent explanations of it; and it might not be a shot. A hatch cover dropped on a deck — a grating being pushed into place — it could be anything.

The hands were grouped about the deck, looming vaguely in the fog, awaiting further orders. Hornblower guessed that they were sweating despite the cold. This was the way to get that London beer out of them, but he did not want to drive them too hard.

"Five minutes stand-easy," said Hornblower. "And, Mr. Jones, you had better station a good petty officer at that mainstay tackle."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower turned away to give Jones an opportunity to arrange his reorganization. He set himself to walk the deck to bring some life back into his cold body; his watch was still in his hand through sheer forgetfulness to replace it in his pocket. He ended his walk at the ship's side, glancing over into the black water. Now what was that floating down beside the ship? Something long and black; when Hornblower first caught sight of it it had bumped one end against the ship's side under the main chains, and as he watched it swung solemnly round, drawn by the tide, and came down towards him. It was an oar. Curiosity overcame him. In a crowded anchorage like this there was nothing very surprising about a floating oar, but still —

"Here, quartermaster," said Hornblower. "Get down into the mizzen chains with a line to catch that oar."

It was only an oar; Hornblower looked it over as the quartermaster held it for his inspection. The leather button was fairly well worn—it was by no means a new oar. On the other hand, judging by the fact that the leather was not entirely soaked through, it had not long been in the water, minutes rather than days, obviously. There was the number "27" burned into the loom, and it was that which caused Hornblower to look more sharply. The "7" bore a crossbar. No Englishman ever wrote a "7" with a crossbar. But everyone on the Continent did; there were Danes and Swedes and Norwegians, Russians and Prussians, at sea, either neutrals in the war or allies of England. Yet a Frenchman or a Dutchman, one of England's enemies, would also write a "7" in that way.

And there had certainly been something that sounded like a shot. A floating oar and a musket shot made a combination that would be hard to explain. Now if they had been connected in causation — ! Hornblower still had his watch in his hand. That shot — if it was a shot — had made itself heard just before he gave the order for stand-easy, seven or eight minutes ago. The tide was running at a good two knots. If the shot had caused the oar to be dropped into the water it must have been fired a quarter of a mile or so — two cables' length — upstream. The quartermaster still holding the oar was looking at him curiously, and Jones was waiting, with the men poised for action, for his next orders. Hornblower was tempted to pay no more attention to the incident.

But he was a King's officer, and it was his duty to make inquiry into the unexplainable at sea. He hesitated in inward debate; the fog was horribly thick. If he sent a boat to investigate it would probably lose itself; Hornblower had had much experience of making his way by boat in a fog-ridden anchorage. Then he could go himself. Hornblower felt a qualm at the thought of blundering about trying to find his way in the fog — he could make a fool of himself so easily in the eyes of his crew. Yet on the other hand that was not likely to be as exasperating as fuming on board waiting for a dilatory boat to return.

"Mr. Jones," he said, "call away my gig."

"Aye aye, sir," said Jones, the astonishment in his voice hardly concealed at all.

Hornblower walked to the binnacle and took a careful reading of how the ship's head lay. It was the most careful reading he could possibly take, not because his comfort or his safety but because his personal dignity depended on getting that reading right. North by East half East. As the ship lay riding to her anchor bows to the tide he could be sure that the oar had come down from that direction.

"I want a good boat compass in the gig, Mr. Jones, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower hesitated before the last final order, which would commit him to a public admission that he thought there was a chance of something serious awaiting him in the fog. But not to give the order would be to strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. If that had really been a musket shot that he had heard there was a possibility of action; there was a likelihood that at least a show of force would be necessary.

"Pistols and cutlasses for the gig's crew, Mr. Jones, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir," said Jones, as if nothing could astonish him again.

Hornblower turned back as he was about to step down into the boat.

"I shall start timing you from this moment, Mr. Jones. Try to get those tops'l yards across in half an hour from now — I'll be back before then."

"Aye aye, sir."

The ship broke into a roar of activity as Hornblower took his place in the stern-sheets of the gig.

"I'll take the tiller," he said to the coxswain. "Give way."

He steered the gig along the *Atropos* from stern to bow. He took one last look up at her bows, at her bowsprit and bobstay, and then the fog swallowed them up. The gig was instantly in a world of its own, constricted about by the walls of mist. The sounds of activity on board the ship died rapidly away.

"Pull steady!" growled Hornblower to the man at the oars. That little boat compass would be swinging about chasing its tail in ten seconds if he allowed the gig to keep anything except an exactly straight course. North by East half East.

"Seventeen," said Hornblower to himself. "Eighteen. Nineteen."

He was counting the strokes of the oars; it was a rough way of estimating the progress made. At seven feet to the stroke less than two hundred strokes meant a quarter of a mile. But there was the speed of the tide to be allowed for. It would be nearer five hundred strokes — all very vague, but every possible precaution must be taken on a foolish expedition like Otis.

"Seventy-four, seventy-five," said Hornblower, his eyes glued to the compass.

Even with the brisk tide running the surface of the sea was a glassy flat calm; the oar-blades, lifting from the water at the completion of each stroke, left whirlpools circling on the surface.

"Two hundred," said Hornblower, suppressing a momentary fear that he had miscounted and that it was really three hundred.

The oars groaned on monotonously in the rowlocks.

"Keep your eyes ahead," said Hornblower to the coxswain. "Tell me the moment you see anything. Two sixty-four."

It seemed only yesterday that he had sat in the stern-sheets of the jolly boat of the *Indefatigable*, rowing up the estuary of the Gironde to cut out the *Papillon*. But that was more than ten years ago. Three hundred. Three hundred and fifty.

"Sir," said the coxswain, tersely.

Hornblower looked forward. Ahead, a trifle on the port bow, there was the slightest thickening in the fog, the slightest looming of something solid there.

"Easy all!" said Hornblower, and the boat continued to glide over the surface; he put the tiller over slightly so as to approach whatever it was more directly. But the boat's way died away before they were near enough to distinguish any details, and at Hornblower's command the men began to row again. Distantly came a low hail out of the fog, apparently called forth by the renewal of the sound of the oars.

"Boat ahoy!"

At least the hail was in English. By now there was visible the vague outlines of a large brig; from the heaviness of her spars and fast lines she looked like one of the West India packets.

"What brig's that?" hailed Hornblower in reply.

"*Amelia Jane* of London, thirty-seven days out from Barbados."

That was a direct confirmation of Hornblower's first impression. But that voice? It did not sound quite English, somehow. There were foreign captains in the British merchant service, plenty of them, but hardly likely to be in command of a West India packet.

"Easy," said Hornblower to the rowers, the gig glided silently on over the water. He could see no sign of anything wrong.

"Keep your distance," said the voice from the brig.

There was nothing suspicious about the words. Any ship at anchor hardly more than twenty miles from the coast of France was fully entitled to be wary of strangers approaching in a fog. But that word sounded more like "deestance" all the same. Hornblower put his helm over to pass under the brig's stern. Several heads were now apparent at the brig's side; they moved round the stern in time with the gig. There was the brig's name, sure enough. *Amelia Jane*, London. Then Hornblower caught sight of something else; it was a large boat lying under the brig's port quarter from the main chains. There might be a hundred possible explanations of that, but it was a suspicious circumstance.

"Brig ahoy!" he hailed, "I'm coming aboard."

"Keep off!" said the voice in reply.

Some of the heads at the brig's side developed shoulders, and three or four muskets were pointed at the gig.

"I am a King's officer," said Hornblower.

He stood up in the stern-sheets and unbuttoned his pea-jacket so that his uniform was visible. The central figure at the brig's side, the man who had been speaking, looked for a long moment and then spread his hands in a gesture of despair.

"Yes," he said.

Hornblower went up the brig's side as briskly as his chilled limbs would permit. As he stood on the deck he felt a trifle self-conscious of being unarmed, for facing him were more than a dozen men, hostility in their bearing, and some of them with muskets in their hands. But the gig's crew had followed him on the deck and closed up behind him, handling their cutlasses and pistols.

"Cap'n, sir!" It was the voice from overside of one of the two men left down in the gig. "Please, sir, there's a dead man in the boat here."

Hornblower turned away to look over. A dead man certainly lay there, doubled up in the bottom of the boat. That accounted for the floating oar, then. And for the shot, of course. The man had been killed by a bullet from the brig at the moment the boat was laid alongside; the brig had been taken by boarding. Hornblower looked back towards the group on the deck.

"Frenchmen?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

The fellow was a man of sense. He had not attempted a hopeless resistance when his coup had been discovered. Although he had fifteen men at his back and there were only eight altogether in the gig he had realized that the presence of a King's ship in the immediate vicinity made his final capture a certainty.

"Where's the crew?" asked Hornblower.

The Frenchman pointed forward, and at a gesture from Hornblower one of his men ran to release the brig's crew from their confinement in the forecastle, half a dozen coloured hands and a couple of officers.

"Much obliged to you, mister," said the captain, coming forward.

"I'm Captain Hornblower of His Majesty's ship *Atropos*," said Hornblower.

"I beg your pardon, Captain." He was an elderly man, his white hair and blue eyes in marked contrast with his mahogany tan. "You've saved my ship."

"Yes," said Hornblower, "you had better disarm those men."

"Gladly, sir. See to it, Jack."

The other officer, presumably the mate, walked aft to take muskets and swords from the unresisting Frenchmen.

"They came out of the fog and laid me alongside before I was aware, almost, sir," went on the captain. "A King's ship took my four best hands when we was off the Start, or I'd have made a better account of them. I only got one crack at them as it was."

"It was that crack that brought me here," said Hornblower shortly. "Where did they come from?"

"Now that's just what I was asking myself," said the captain. "Not from France in that boat, they couldn't have come."

They turned their gaze inquiringly upon the dejected group of Frenchmen. It was a question of considerable importance. The Frenchmen must have come from a ship, and that ship must be anchored somewhere amid the crowded vessels in the Downs. And at that rate she must be disguised as a British vessel or a neutral, coming in with the others before the wind dropped and the fog closed down. There had been plenty of similar incidents during the war. It was an easy way to snap up a prize. But it meant that somewhere close at hand there was a wolf in sheep's clothing, a disguised French privateer, probably crammed with men — she might have made more than one prize. In the bustle and confusion that would ensue when a breeze should get up, with everyone anxious to up anchor and away, she could count on being able to make her escape along with her prizes.

"When the fog closed down," said the captain, "the nearest vessel to us was a Ramsgate trawler. She anchored at the same time as we did. I doubt if it could be her."

It was a matter of so much importance that Hornblower could not keep still. He turned and paced the deck for a space, his mind working rapidly. Yet his mind was not completely made up when he turned back and gave his first order in execution of the vague plan. He did not know if he would have the resolution to go through with it.

"Leadbitter," he said to the coxswain

"Sir!"

"Tie those men's hands behind them."

"Sir?"

"You heard what I said."

To bind prisoners was almost a violation of the laws of war. When Leadbitter approached to carry out his orders the Frenchmen showed evident resentment. A buzz of voices arose.

"You can't do this, sir," said their spokesman. "We have —"

"Shut your mouth," snapped Hornblower.

Even having to give that order put him in a bad temper, and his bad temper was made worse by his doubts about himself. Now that the Frenchmen were disarmed they could offer no resistance in face of the drawn pistols of the British sailors. With loud protests they had to submit, as Leadbitter went from man to man tying their wrists behind their backs. Hornblower was hating himself for the part he had to play, even while his calculating mind told him that he had a fair chance of success. He had to pose as a bloodthirsty man, delighting in the taking of human life, without mercy in his soul, gratified by the sight of the death struggles of a fellow-human. Such men did exist, he knew. There were gloomy tyrants in the King's service. In the past ten

years of war at sea there had been some outrages, a few, on both sides. These Frenchmen did not know him for what he really was, nor did the West India crew. Nor for that matter his own men. Their acquaintance had been so short that they had no reason to believe him not to have homicidal tendencies, so that their behaviour would not weaken the impression he wished to convey. He turned to one of his men.

"Run aloft," he said. "Reeve a whip through the block at the main yardarm."

That portended a hanging. The man looked at him with a momentary unbelief, but the scowl on Hornblower's face sent him scurrying up the ratlines. Then Hornblower strode to where the wretched Frenchmen were standing bound; their glance shifted from the man at the yardarm to Hornblower's grim face, and their anxious chattering died away.

"You are pirates," said Hornblower, speaking slowly and distinctly. "I am going to hang you."

In case the English-speaking Frenchman's vocabulary did not include the word "hang" he pointed significantly to the man at the yardarm. They could all understand that. They remained silent for a second or two, and then several of them began to speak at once in torrential French which Hornblower could not well follow, and then the leader, having pulled himself together, began his protest in English.

"We are not pirates," he said.

"I think you are," said Hornblower.

"We are privateersmen," said the Frenchman.

"Pirates," said Hornblower.

The talk among the Frenchmen rose to a fresh height; Hornblower's French was good enough for him to make out that the leader was translating his curt words to his companions, and they were urging him to explain more fully their position.

"I assure you, sir," said the wretched man, striving to be eloquent in a strange language, "we are privateersmen and not pirates."

Hornblower regarded him with a stony countenance, and without answering turned away to give further orders.

"Leadbitter," he said, "I'll have a hangman's noose on the end of that line."

Then he turned back to the Frenchmen.

"Who do you say you are then?" he asked. He tried to utter the words as indifferently as he could.

"We are from the privateer *Vengeance* of Dunkirk, sir. I am Jacques Lebon, prizemaster."

Privateers usually went to sea with several extra officers, who could be put into prizes to navigate them back to a French port without impairing the fighting efficiency of the privateer, which could continue her cruise. These officers were usually selected for their ability to speak English and for the knowledge of English seagoing ways, and they bore the title of "prizemaster". Hornblower turned back to observe the noose now dangling significantly from the yardarm, and then addressed the prizemaster.

"You have no papers," he said.

He forced his lips into a sneer as he spoke; to the wretched men studying every line in his face his expression appeared quite unnatural, as indeed it was. And Hornblower was gambling a little when he said what he did. If the prizemaster had been able to produce any papers the whole line of attack would have to be altered; but it was not much of a gamble. Hornblower was certain when he spoke that if Lebon had had papers in his pocket he would have already mentioned them, asking someone to dive into his pocket for them. That would be the first reaction of any Frenchman whose identity had been put in question.

"No," said Lebon, crestfallen. It was hardly likely that he would have, when engaged on an ordinary operation of war.

"Then you hang," said Hornblower. "All of you. One by one."

The laugh he forced himself to produce sounded positively inhuman, horrible. Anyone hearing it would be justified in thinking that he was inspired by the anticipated pleasure of watching the death struggles of a dozen men. The white-haired captain of the *Amelia Jane* could not bear the prospect, and came forward to enter into the discussion.

"Sir," he said. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going to attend to my own business, sir," said Hornblower, striving to throw into his voice all the harshness he had ever heard employed by all the insolent officers he had met during his service. "May I ask you to be kind enough to do the same?"

"But you can't be meaning to hang the poor devils," went on the captain.

"But that is what I do mean."

"But not in my ship, sir — not now — not without trial."

"In your ship, sir, which you allowed to be captured. And now. Pirates taken red-handed can be hanged instantly, as you know, sir. And that is what I shall do."

It was a stroke of good fortune that the captain should have entered into the discussion. His appearance of sick dismay and the tone of his protests were convincingly genuine — they would never have been so if he had been admitted previously to a planned scheme. Hornblower's attitude towards him was brutal, but it was for the good of the cause.

"Sir," persisted the captain, "I'm sure they're only privateersmen —"

"Please refrain from interfering with a King's officer in the execution of his duty. You two men, there, come here."

The two of the crew of the gig that he indicated approached obediently. Probably they had seen hangings before, along with every kind of brutality in a brutal service. But the imminent certainty of taking personal part in a hanging obviously impressed them. There was some reluctance visible in their expressions, but the hard discipline of the service would make certain they would obey the orders of this one man, unarmed and outnumbered.

Hornblower looked along the line of faces. Momentarily he felt a horrid sickness in his stomach as it occurred to him to wonder how he would be feeling if he really was selecting a victim.

"I'll have that one first," he said, pointing.

The bull-throated swarthy man whom he indicated paled and shuddered; backing away he tried to shelter himself among his fellows. They were all speaking at once, jerking their arms frantically against the bonds that secured their wrists behind them.

"Sir!" said Lebon. "Please — I beg of you — I implore —"

Hornblower condescended to spare him a glance, and Lebon went on in a wild struggle against the difficulties of language and the handicap of not being free to gesticulate.

"We are privateersmen. We fight for the Empire, for France." Now he was on his knees, his face lifted. As he could not use his hands he was actually nuzzling with his mouth against the skirts of Hornblower's pea-jacket.

"We surrendered. We did not fight. We caused no death."

"Take this man away from me," said Hornblower, withdrawing out of reach.

But Lebon on his knee followed him over the deck, nuzzling and pleading

"Captain," said the English captain, interceding once again. "Can't you at least wait and land 'em for trial? If they're pirates it'll be proved quick enough."

"I want to see 'em dangling," said Hornblower, searching feverishly in his mind for the most impressive thing he could say.

The two English seamen, taking advantage of the volume of protest, had paused in the execution of their orders. Hornblower looked up at the noose, dangling dimly but horribly in the fog.

"I don't believe for one single moment," went on Hornblower, "that these men are what they say they are. Just a band of thieves, pirates. Leadbitter, put four men on that line. I'll give the word when they are to walk away with it."

"Sir," said Lebon, "I assure you, word of honour, we are from the privateer *Vengeance*."

"Bah!" replied Hornblower. "Where is she?"

"Over there," said Lebon. He could not point with his hands; he pointed with his chin, over the port bow of the anchored *Amelia Jane*. It was not a very definite indication, but it was a considerable help, even that much.

"Did you see any vessel over there before the fog closed down, captain?" demanded Hornblower, turning to the English captain.

"Only the Ramsgate trawler," he said, reluctantly.

"That is our ship!" said Lebon. "That is the *Vengeance*! She was a Dunkirk trawler — we — we made her look like that."

So that was it. A Dunkirk trawler. Her fish-holds could be crammed full of men. A slight alteration of gear, an "R" painted on her mainsail, a suitable name painted on her stern and then she could wander about the narrow seas without question, snapping up prizes almost at will.

"Where did you say she lay?" demanded Hornblower.

"There — oh!"

Lebon checked himself as he realized how much information he was giving away.

"I can hazard a good guess as to how she bears from us," interposed the English captain, "I saw — oh!" He broke off exactly as Lebon had done, but from surprise. He was staring at Hornblower. It was like the denouement scene in some silly farce. The lost heir was at last revealed. The idea of now accepting the admiration of his unwitting fellow players, of modestly admitting that he was not the monster of ferocity he had pretended to be, irritated Hornblower beyond all bearing. All his instincts and good taste rose against the trite and the obvious. Now that he had acquired the information he had sought he could please himself as long as he acted instantly on that information. The scowl he wished to retain rested the more easily on his features with this revulsion of feeling.

"I'd be sorry to miss a hanging," he said, half to himself, and he allowed his eye to wander again from the dangling noose to the shrinking group of Frenchmen who were still ignorant of what had just happened. "If that thick neck were stretched a little —"

He broke off and took a brief turn up and down the deck, eyed by every man who stood on it.

"Very well," he said, halting. "It's against my better judgment, but I'll wait before I hang these men. What was the approximate bearing of that trawler when she anchored, captain?"

"It was at slack water," began the captain, making his calculations. "We were just beginning to swing. I should say —"

The captain was obviously a man of sober judgment and keen observation. Hornblower listened to what he had to say.

"Very well," said Hornblower when he had finished. "Leadbitter, I'll leave you on board with two men. Keep an eye on these prisoners and see they don't retake the brig. I'm returning to the ship now. Wait here for further orders."

He went down into his gig; the captain accompanying him to the ship's side was clearly and gratifyingly puzzled. It was almost beyond his belief that Hornblower could be the demoniac monster that he had appeared to be, and if he were it was strange good fortune that his ferocity should have obtained, by pure chance, the information that the prisoners had just given him. Yet on the other hand it was almost beyond his belief that if Hornblower had employed a clever ruse to gain the information he should refuse to enjoy the plaudits of his audience and not to bask in their surprise and admiration. Either notion was puzzling. That was well. Let him be puzzled. Let them all be puzzled — although it seemed as if the sobered hands pulling at the oars of the gig were not at all puzzled. Unheeding of all that had been at stake they were clearly convinced that their captain had shown himself in his true colours, and was a man who would sooner see a man's death agonies than eat his dinner. Let 'em think so. It would do no harm. Hornblower could spare them no thought in any case, with all his attention glued upon the compass card. It would be ludicrous — it would be horribly comic — if after all this he were to miss *Atropos* on his way back to her, if he were to blunder about in the fog for hours looking for his own ship. The reciprocal of North by East half East was South by West half West, and he kept the gig rigidly on that course. With what still remained of the ebb tide behind them it would only be a few seconds before they ought to sight *Atropos*. It was a very great comfort when they did.

Mr. Jones received Hornblower at the ship's side. A glance had told him that the gig's crew was two men and a coxswain short. It was hard to think of any explanation of that, and Mr. Jones was bursting with curiosity. He could not help but wonder what his captain had been doing, out there in the fog. His curiosity even overcame his apprehension at the sight of the scowl which Hornblower still wore — now that he was back in his ship Hornblower was beginning to feel much more strongly the qualms that should have influenced him regarding what Their Lordships might think of his absence from his ship. He ignored Jones's questions.

"You got those tops'l yards across, I see, Mr. Jones."

"Yes, sir. I sent the hands to dinner when you didn't come back, sir. I thought —"

"They'll have five minutes to finish their dinners. No longer. Mr. Jones, if you were in command of two boats sent to capture a hostile vessel at anchor in this fog, how would you set about it? What orders would you give?"

"Well, sir, I'd — I'd —"

Mr. Jones was not a man of quickness of thought or rapid adaptability to a new situation. He hummed and he hawed. But there were very few officers in the Navy who had not been on at least one cutting-out and boarding operation. He knew well enough what he should do, and it slowly became apparent.

"Very well, Mr. Jones. You will now hoist out the long boat and the launch. You will man them and see that the boats' crews are fully armed. You will proceed North by East half East — fix that in your mind, Mr. Jones, North by East half East — from this ship for a quarter of a mile. There you find a West India brig the *Amelia Jane*. She has just been recaptured from a French prize crew, and my coxswain is on board with two men. From her you will take a new departure. There's a French privateer, the *Vengeance*. She's a Dunkirk trawler disguised as a Ramsgate trawler. She is probably heavily manned — at least fifty of a crew left — and she is anchored approximately three cables' lengths approximately north-west of the *Amelia Jane*. You will capture her, by surprise if possible. Mr. Still will be in command of the second boat. I will listen while you give him his instructions. That will save repetition. Mr. Still!"

The despatch that Hornblower wrote that evening and entrusted to the *Amelia Jane* for delivery to the Admiralty was couched in the usual Navy phraseology.

Sir

I have the honour to report to you for the information of Their Lordships that this day while anchored in dense fog in the Downs I became aware that it seemed likely that some disturbance was taking place near at hand. On investigating I had the good fortune to recapture the brig *Amelia Jane*, homeward bound from Barbados, which was in possession of a French prize crew. From information gained from the prisoners I was able to send my first lieutenant, Mr. Jones, with the boats of H.M. ship under my command, to attack the French private ship of war *Vengeance* of Dunkirk. She was handsomely carried by Mr. Jones and his officers; and men including Mr. Still, second lieutenant, Messrs. Horrocks and Smiley, and His Serene Highness the Prince of Seitz-Bunau, midshipmen, after a brief action in which our loss was two men slightly wounded while the French Captain, Monsieur Ducos, met with a severe wound while trying to rally his crew. The *Vengeance* proved to be a French trawler masquerading as an English fishing boat. Including the prize crew she carried a crew of seventy-one officers and men, and she was armed with one four-pounder carronade concealed under her net.

I have the honour to remain,

Your obed't servant,

H. Hornblower, Captain.

Before sealing it Hornblower read through this report with a lopsided smile on his face. He wondered if anyone would ever read between the lines of that bald narrative, how much anyone would guess, how much anyone would deduce. The fog, the cold, the wet; the revolting scene on the deck of the *Amelia Jane*; the interplay of emotion; could anyone ever guess at all the truth? And there was no doubt that his gig's crew was already spreading round the ship horrible reports about his lust for blood. There was some kind of sardonic satisfaction to be derived from that, too. A knock at the door. Could he never be undisturbed?

"Come in," he called.

It was Jones. His glance took in the quill in Hornblower's fingers, and the inkwell and papers on the table before him.

"Your pardon, sir," he said. "I hope I don't come too late."

"What is it?" asked Hornblower; he had little sympathy for Jones and his undetermined manners.

"If you are going to send a report to the Admiralty, sir — and I suppose you are, sir —"

"Yes, of course I am."

"I don't know if you're going to mention my name, sir — I don't want to ask if you are, sir — I don't want to presume —"

If Jones was soliciting a special mention of himself in the Admiralty letter he would get none at all.

"What is it you're saying to me, Mr. Jones?"

"It's only that my name's a common one, sir. John Jones, sir. There are twelve John Jones's in the lieutenants' list, sir. I didn't know if you knew, sir, but I am John Jones the Ninth. That's how I'm known at the Admiralty, sir. If you didn't say that, perhaps —"

"Very well, Mr. Jones. I understand. You can rely on me to see that justice is done."

"Thank you, sir."

With Jones out of the way Hornblower sighed a little, looked at his report, and drew a fresh sheet towards him. There was no chance of inserting "the Ninth" legibly after the mention of Jones's name. The only thing to do was to take a fresh sheet and write it all over again. An odd occupation for a bloodthirsty tyrant.

Chapter IX

Hornblower watched with a keen eye his crew at work as they took in sail while *Atropos* came gliding into Gibraltar Bay. He could call them well-drilled now. The long beat down the Channel, the battles with the Biscay gales, had made a correlated team of there. There was no confusion and only the minimum number of orders. The men came hurrying off the yards; he saw two figures swing themselves on to the main backstays and come sliding down all the way from the masthead, disdaining to use the shrouds and ratlines. They reached the deck simultaneously and stood grinning at each other for a moment — clearly they had been engaged in a race. One was Smiley, the midshipman of the maintop. The other — His Serene Highness the Prince of Seitz-Bunau. That boy had improved beyond all expectation. If ever he should sit on his throne again in his princely German capital he would have strange memories to recall.

But this was not the time for a captain to let his attention wander.

"Let go, Mr. Jones!" he hailed, and the anchor fell, dragging the grumbling hawser out through the hawsehole; Hornblower watched while *Atropos* took up on her cable and then rode to her anchor. She was in her assigned berth; Hornblower looked up at the towering Rock and over at the Spanish shore. Nothing seemed to have changed since the last time — so many years ago — that he had come sailing into Gibraltar Bay. The sun was shining down on him, and it was good to feel this Mediterranean sun again, even though there was little warmth in it during this bleak winter weather.

"Call away my gig, if you please, Mr. Jones."

Hornblower ran below to gird on his sword and to take the better of his two cocked hats out of its tin case so as to make himself as presentable as possible when he went ashore to pay his official calls. There was a very decided thrill in the thought that soon he would be reading the orders that would carry him forward into the next phase of his adventures — adventures possibly; more probably the mere dreariness of beating about on eternal blockade duty outside a French port.

Yet in Collingwood's orders to him, when he came to read them, there was a paragraph which left him wondering what his fate was to be.

You will take into your ship Mr. William McCullum, of the Honourable East India Company's Service, together with his native assistants, and you will give them passage when, in obedience to the first paragraph of these orders, you come to join me.

Mr. McCullum was awaiting him in the Governor's anteroom. He was a burly, heavy-set man in his early thirties, blue-eyed and with a thick mat of black hair.

"Captain Horatio Hornblower?" there was a roll to the "r's" which betrayed the county of his origin.

"Mr. McCullum?"

"Of the Company's Service."

The two men eyed each other.

"You are to take passage in my ship?"

"Aye."

The fellow carried himself with an air of vast independence. Yet judging by the scantiness of the silver lace on his uniform, and by the fact that he wore no sword, he was not of a very lofty position in the Company's hierarchy.

"Who are these native assistants of yours?"

"Three Sinhalese divers."

"Sinhalese?"

Hornblower said the word with caution. He had never heard it before, at least pronounced in that way. He suspected that it meant something to do with Ceylon, but he was not going to make a display of his ignorance.

"Pearl divers from Ceylon," said McCullum.

So he had guessed right. But he could not imagine for one moment why Collingwood, at grips with the French in the Mediterranean, should need Ceylonese pearl divers.

"And what is your official position, Mr. McCullum?"

"I am wreck-master and salvage director of the Coromandel Coast."

That went far to explain the man's ostentatious lack of deference. He was one of those experts whose skill made them too valuable to be trifled with. He might have drifted out to India as a cabin boy or apprentice; presumably he had been treated like a menial while young, but he had learned a trade so well as now to be indispensable and in a position to repay the slights he had endured earlier. The more the gold lace he was addressing the brusquer was likely to be his manner.

"Very well, Mr. McCullum. I shall be sailing immediately and I shall be glad if you will come on board with your assistants at the earliest possible moment. Within an hour. Do you have any equipment with you to be shipped?"

"Very little besides my chest and the divers' bundles. They are ready, along with the food for them."

"Food?"

"The poor bodies" — McCullum narrowed the vowel sound until the word sounded like "puir" — "are benighted heathen, followers of Buddha. They wellnigh died on the voyage here, never having known what it was to have a full belly before. A scrap of vegetable, a drop of oil, a bit of fish for a relish. That's what they're used to living on."

Oil? Vegetables? Ships of war could hardly be expected to supply such things.

"I've a puncheon of Spanish olive oil for them," explained McCullum. "They've taken kindly to it, although it's far removed from their buffalo butter. Lentils and onions and carrots. Give them salt beef and they'd die, and that would be poor business after shipping them all round the Cape of Good Hope."

The statement was made with apparent callousness, but Hornblower suspected that the manner concealed some consideration for his unfortunate subordinates so far from their homes. He began to like McCullum a little better.

"I'll give orders for them to be well looked after," he said.

"Thank you." That was the first shade of politeness that had crept into McCullum's speech. "The poor devils have been perishing of cold here on the Rock. That makes them homesick, like, and a long way they are from home, too."

"Why have they been sent here in any case?" asked Hornblower. That question had been striving for utterance for some time; he had not asked it because it would have given McCullum too good an opportunity to snub him.

"Because they can dive in sixteen and a half fathoms," said McCullum, staring straight at him.

It was not quite a snub; Hornblower was aware that he owed the modification to his promise that they would be well treated. He would not risk another question despite his consuming curiosity. He was completely puzzled as to why the Mediterranean Fleet should need divers who could go down through a hundred feet of water. He contented himself with ending the interview with an offer to send a boat for McCullum and his men. The Ceylonese when they made their appearance on the deck of the *Atropos* were of an appearance to excite pity. They held their white cotton clothes close about them against the cold; the keen air that blew down from

the snow-clad Spanish mountains set them shivering. They were thin, frail-looking men, and they looked about them with no curiosity, but with only a dull resignation in their dark eyes. They were of a deep brown colour, so as to excite the interest of the hands who gathered to stare. They spared no glances for the white men, but conversed briefly with each other in high piping musical voices.

"Give them the warmest corner of the 'tween decks, Mr. Jones," said Hornblower. "See that they are comfortable. Consult with Mr. McCullum regarding anything they may need. Allow me to present Mr. McCullum — Mr. Jones. I would be greatly obliged if you will extend to Mr. McCullum the hospitality of the wardroom."

Hornblower had to phrase it that way. The wardroom theoretically was a voluntary association of officers, who could make their own choice as to what members they might admit. But it would be a bold set of officers who decided to exclude a wardroom guest recommended by their captain, as Jones and Hornblower both knew. "You must provide a cot for Mr. McCullum, too, Mr. Jones, if you please. You can decide for yourself where you will put it."

It was comforting to be able to say that. Hornblower knew perfectly well — and so did Jones, as his slightly dismayed expression revealed — that in a twenty-two gun sloop there was not a square foot of deck space to spare. Everyone was already overcrowded, and McCullum's presence would add seriously to the overcrowding. But it was Jones who would have to find a way round the difficulty.

"Aye aye, sir," said Jones; the interval that elapsed before he said it was the best indication of the involved train of thought he had been following out.

"Excellent," said Hornblower. "You can attend to it after we're under way. No more time to waste, Mr. Jones." Minutes were always valuable. The wind might always shift, or drop. An hour wasted now might mean the loss of a week. Hornblower was in a fever to get his ship clear of the Gut and into the wider waters of the Mediterranean, where he would have sea room in which to beat against a head wind should a Levanter come blowing out of the East. Before his mind's eye he had a picture of the Western Mediterranean; the north-westerly blowing at present could carry him quickly along the southern coast of Spain, past the dangerous shoal of Alboran, until at Cape de Gata the Spanish coast trended away boldly to the northward. Once there he would be less restricted; until Cape de Gate was left behind he could not be happy. There was also — Hornblower could not deny it — his own personal desire to be up and doing, to find out what was awaiting him in the future, to put himself at least in the possible path of adventure. It was fortunate that his duty and his inclination should coincide in this way; one of the few small bits of good fortune, he told himself with amused grimness, that he had experienced since he had made his original choice of the career of a naval officer.

But at least he had come into Gibraltar Bay after dawn and he was leaving before nightfall. He could not be accused of wasting any time. They had rounded the Rock; Hornblower looked into the binnacle and up at the commission pendant blowing out from the masthead.

"Full and bye," he ordered.

"Full and bye, sir," echoed the quartermaster at the wheel.

A keen gust of wind came blowing town out of the Sierra de Ronda, laying the *Atropos* over as the trimmed yards braced the sails to catch it. Over she lay; a short steep wave came after them, the remnants of an Atlantic roller that had survived its passage through the Gut. *Atropos* lifted her stern to it, heaving jerkily in this unnatural opposition of wind and wave. Spray burst under her counter, and spray burst round her bows as she plunged. She plunged again in the choppy sea. She was only a little ship, the smallest three-masted vessel in the service, the smallest that could merit a captain to command her. The lofty frigates, the massive seventy-fours, could condescend to her. Hornblower looked round him at the wintry Mediterranean, at the fresh clouds obscuring the sinking sun. The waves could toss his ship about, the winds could heel her over, but standing there, braced on the quarter-deck, he was master of them. Exultation surged within him as his ship hurried forward into the unknown.

The exultation even remained when he quitted the deck and descended into the cabin. Here the prospect was cheerless in the extreme. He had mortified his flesh after he had come on board his ship at Deptford. His conscience had nagged at him for the scanty hours he had wasted with his wife and children; and he had never left his ship again for a moment after he had reported her ready for sea. No farewell to Maria lying in childbed,

no last parting from little Horatio and little Maria. And no purchase of cabin equipment. The furniture about him was what the ship's carpenter had made for him, canvas chairs, a rough-and-ready table, a cot whose frame was strung with cordage to support a coarse canvas mattress stuffed with straw. A canvas pillow, straw-filled, to support his head; coarse Navy blankets to cover his skinny body. There was no carpet on the deck under his feet; the light came from a swinging and odorous ship's lantern. A shelf with a hole in it supported a tin wash-basin; on the bulkhead above it hung the scrap of polished steel mirror from Hornblower's meagre canvas dressing-roll. The most substantial articles present were the two sea chests in the corners; apart from them a monk's cell could hardly have been more bare.

But there was no self-pity in Hornblower's mind as he crouched under the low deck beams unhooking his stock preparatory to going to bed. He expected little from this world, and he could lead an inner life of the mind that could render him oblivious to discomfort. And he had saved a good deal of money by not furnishing his cabin, money which would pay the midwife's fee, the long bill at the "George", and the fare for the carrier's cart which would convey Maria and the children to lodge with her mother at Southsea. He was thinking about them — they must be well on their way now as he drew the clammy blankets over himself and rested his cheek on the rough pillow. Then he had to forget Maria and the children as he reminded himself that as the *Atropos*' junction with the fleet was so imminent he must exercise the midshipmen and the signal ratings in signalling. He must devote a good many hours to that, and there would not be much time to spare, for the creaking of the timbers, the heave of the ship, told him that the wind was holding steady.

The wind continued to hold fair. It was at noon on the sixth day that the lookout hailed the deck.

"Sail ho! Dead to loo'ard."

"Bear down on her, Mr. Jones, if you please. Mr. Smiley! Take a glass and see what you make of her."

This was the second of the rendezvous which Collingwood had named in his orders. Yesterday's had been barren, off Cape Carbomara. Not a sail had been sighted since leaving Gibraltar. Collingwood's frigates had swept the sea clear of French and Spanish shipping, and the British Levant convoy was not due for another month. And no one could guess what was going on in Italy at this moment.

"Captain, sir! She's a frigate. One of ours."

"Very well. Signal midshipman! Be ready with the private signal and our number."

Thank Heaven for all the signaling exercise he had been giving during the last few days.

"Captain, sir! I can see mastheads beyond her. Looks like a fleet."

"Very well, Mr. Jones, I'll have the gunner make ready to salute the flag, if you please."

There was the Mediterranean Fleet, a score of ships of the line, moving slowly in two columns over the blue sea under a blue sky.

"Frigate's *Maenad*, 28, sir."

"Very well."

Reaching out like the tentacles of a sea monster, the scouting frigates lay far ahead of the main body of the fleet, four of them, with a fifth far to windward whence most likely would appear ships hostile or friendly. The air was clear; Hornblower on the quarter-deck with his glass to his eye could see the double column of topsails of ships of the line, close hauled, every ship exactly the same distance astern of her predecessor. He could see the vice-admiral's flag at the foremast of the leader of the weather line.

"Mr. Carslake! Have the mail-bags ready for sending off."

"Aye aye, sir."

His own packet of despatches for Collingwood was handy in his cabin.

"Signal midshipman! Can't you see the flagship's making a signal?"

"Yes, sir, but the flags are blowing straight away from us. I can't make them out."

"What do you think the repeating frigate's for? Use your eyes."

"General signal, sir. Number 41. That is 'tack', sir."

"Very well."

As *Atropos* had not yet officially joined the Mediterranean squadron a general signal could not apply to her. Down came the signal from the flagship's yardarm; that was the executive moment. Round came the flagship's yards; round came the yards of the scouting frigates, and of the leader of the lee column. One by one, at precise intervals, the succeeding ships in the columns came round in order; Hornblower could see the

momentary backing and filling of the mizzen-topsails which maintained the ships so exactly spaced. It was significant that the drill was being carried out under all plain sail, and not merely under the "fighting sails". There was something thrilling in the sight of this perfection of drill; but at the same time something a little disturbing. Hornblower found himself wondering, with a qualm of doubt, if he would be able to maintain *Atropos* so exactly in station now that the time had come to join the fleet.

The manoeuvre was completed now; on its new tack the fleet was steadily plunging forward over the blue sea. There was more bunting fluttering at the flagship's yardarm.

"General signal, sir. 'Hands to dinner.'"

"Very well."

Hornblower felt a bubbling of excitement within him as he stood and watched. The next signal would surely be for him.

"Our number, sir! Flag to *Atropos*. Take station to windward of me at two cables' lengths."

"Very well. Acknowledge."

There were eyes turned upon him everywhere on deck. This was the moment of trial. He had to come down past the screening frigates, cross ahead of what was now the weather column, and come to the wind at the right moment and at the right distance. And the whole fleet would be watching the little ship. First he had to estimate how far the flagship would progress towards his starboard hand while he was running down to her. But there was nothing for it but to try; there was some faint comfort in being an officer in a fighting service where an order was something that must be obeyed.

"Quartermaster! Port a little. Meet her. Steady as you go! Keep her at that! Mr. Jones!"

"Aye aye, sir."

No need for an order to Jones. He was more anxious — at least more apparently anxious — than Hornblower was. He had the hands at the braces trimming the yards already. Hornblower looked up at yards and commission pendant to assure himself that the bracing was exact. They had left the *Maenad* behind already; here they were passing *Amphion*, one of the central frigates in the screen. Hornblower could see her lying over as she thrashed to windward, the spray flying from her bows. He turned back to look at the flagship, nearly hull up, at least two of her three rows of checkered gunports visible.

"Port a little! Steady!"

He resented having to give that additional order; he wished he could have headed straight for his station with no alteration of course. The leading ship — she wore a rear admiral's flag — of the weather column was now nearly on his port beam. Four cables' length was the distance between the two columns, but as his station was to windward of the flagship, nearly on her starboard beam, he would be by no means between the two ships, nor equidistant from them. He juggled in his mind with the scalene triangle that could be drawn connecting *Atropos* with the two flagships.

"Mr. Jones! Clue up the mizzen tops'l." Now *Atropos* would have a reserve of speed that he could call for if necessary. He was glad that he had subjected his crew to ceaseless sail drill ever since leaving Deptford. "Stand by the mizzen tops'l sheets."

The reduction in the after-sail would make *Atropos* a little slower in coming to the wind; he must bear it in mind. They were fast approaching their station. His eye darted from one column of ships to the other; he could see all the starboard sides of one and all the port sides of the other. It might be useful to take sextant angles, but he would rather trust his eye in a trigonometrical problem as uncomplicated as this. His judgment told him this must be the moment. The bows were pointing at the flagship's jib-boom.

"Port your helm," he ordered. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps the little ship's response would be delayed.

Perhaps — He had to keep his voice steady. "Bring her to the wind."

The wheel spun over. There was a nervous second or two. Then he felt the heel of the ship alter under his feet; and he saw the flagship come round on *Atropos*' port beam, and he knew *Atropos* was turning.

"Steady! "

The yards were braced up; strong arms were hauling on the tacks. A moment or two while *Atropos* regained the small amount of way she had lost through her turn; but even making allowance for that he could see that the flagship was slowly head-reaching on her.

"Mr. Jones! Sheet home the mizzen tops'l."

With the mizzen topsail drawing full they would head-reach in turn upon the flagship.

"Keep the hands at the braces there!"

Occasionally spilling the wind from the mizzen topsail would enable *Atropos* to keep her speed equal to the flagship's. Hornblower felt the wind on his neck; he looked up at the pendant and at the flagship. He was exactly to windward of her, and there was two cables' lengths between them.

"Mr. Jones! You may begin the salute."

Fifteen guns for a vice-admiral, a minute and a quarter to fire them. That might be long enough for him to regain his composure, and for his heart to resume its normal rate of beating. Now they were part of the Mediterranean Fleet, the tiniest, most insignificant part of it. Hornblower looked down the massive lines of ships ploughing along behind them, three-deckers, two-deckers, ships of a hundred guns and ships of seventy-four, the ships which had fought at Trafalgar, the roar of whose cannons had dashed from Bonaparte's lips the heady cup of world domination. On the invisibly distant Mediterranean shores that encompassed them armies might march, kings might be set up and kings might be pulled down; but it was these ships which in the end would decide the destiny of the world, as long as the men who sailed them retained their skill, as long as they remained ready to endure danger and hardship, as long as the government at home remained resolute and unafraid.

"Our number, sir! Flag to *Atropos*. 'Welcome.'"

"Reply to Flag. 'Respectful greetings.'" Eager hands worked vigorously on the signal halyards.

"Signal '*Atropos* to Flag. Have aboard dispatches and letters for fleet'."

"Flagship acknowledges, sir."

"Flagship's signalling again," announced Still; from a point of vantage on the weather side he could see through his glass enough of the flagship's quarter-deck, despite the fact that she was heeling away from him, to make out that signal ratings were bending fresh flags on the halliards. The dark lumps soared up to the flagship's yardarm and broke into gaily-coloured bunting.

"General signal. 'Heave to on the starboard tack.'"

"Acknowledge, Mr. Jones! Clue up the courses."

Hornblower watched the hands at the clue-garnets and buntlines, the hands at the tacks and sheets.

"Signal's down, sir."

Hornblower had already seen the first movement of descent.

"Back the mizzen tops'l. Let her come up."

Atropos rode easily, just meeting the waves with her bow, as the sharp struggle with the wind changed to yielding acquiescence, like a girl's resistance giving way in her lover's arms. But this was no time for that sort of sentimental simile — here was another long signal from the flagship.

"General signal. 'Send to' — our number, sir — 'for letters.'"

"Mr. Carslake! Have those mail-bags on deck at once. You'll have a boat from every ship in the fleet alongside."

It was at least a month — it might well be two — since any letters had reached the Fleet from England. Not a newspaper, not a word. Possibly some of the ships present had not yet seen the accounts in the press of the victory they had won at Trafalgar four months before. *Atropos* had brought a respite from the dreadful isolation in which a fleet at sea habitually lived. Boats would be hastening as fast as sail or oar could drive them to collect the pitifully lean mail-bags.

Another signal.

"Our number, sir. 'Flag to *Atropos*. Come and report.'"

"Call away my gig."

He was wearing the shabbier of his two coats. There was just time, when he ran below to get the packets of dispatches, change his coat, to pass a comb through his hair, and twitch his neckcloth into position. He was back on deck just as his gig touched the water. Lusty work at the oars carried him round to the flagship. A chair dangled at her side, now almost lipped as a wave rose at it, now high above the water as the wave passed on. He had to watch carefully for his chance; as it was there was an uncomfortable moment when he hung by his arms as the gig went away from under him. But he managed to seat himself, and he felt the chair soar swiftly upwards as the hands above hauled on the tackle. The pipes shrilled as his head reached the level of the maindeck and the chair was swung in. He stepped aboard with his hand to the brim of his hat.

The deck was as white as paper, as white as the gloves and the shirts of the sideboys. Gold leaf gleamed in the sun, the most elaborate Turks' heads adorned the ropework. The King's own yacht could not be smarter than the quarter-deck of the *Ocean* — that was what could be done in the flagship of a victorious admiral. It was as well to remember that Collingwood's previous flagship, the *Royal Sovereign*, had been pounded into a mastless hulk, with four hundred dead and wounded on board her, at Trafalgar. The lieutenant of the watch, his telescope quite dazzling with polished brass and pipe clayed twine, wore spotless and unwrinkled white trousers; the buttons on his well-fitting coat winked in the sunshine. It occurred to Hornblower that to be always as smart as that, in a ship additionally crowded by the presence of an admiral and his staff, could be by no means easy. Service in a flagship might be the quick way to promotion, but there were many crumpled petals in the bed of roses. The flag captain, Rotherham — Hornblower knew his name; it had appeared in a hundred newspaper accounts of Trafalgar — and the flag lieutenant were equally smart as they made him welcome.

"His Lordship is awaiting you below, sir," said the flag lieutenant "Will you come this way?"

Collingwood shook hands with him in the great cabin below. He was a large man, stoop-shouldered, with a pleasant smile. He eagerly took the packets Hornblower offered him, glancing at the superscriptions. One he kept in his hands, the others he gave to his secretary. He remembered his manners as he was about to break the seal.

"Please sit down, captain. Harkness, a glass of Madeira for Captain Hornblower. Or there is some Marsala that I can recommend, sir. Please forgive me for a moment. You will understand when I tell you these are letters from my wife."

It was an upholstered chair in which Hornblower sat; under his feet was a thick carpet; there were a couple of pictures in gilt frames on the bulkheads; silver lamps hung by silver chains from the deck-beams. Looking round him while Collingwood eagerly skimmed through his letters, Hornblower thought of all this being hurriedly bundled away when the *Ocean* cleared for action. But what held his attention most was two long boxes against the great stern windows. They were filled with earth and were planted with flowers — hyacinths and daffodils, blooming and lovely. The scent of the hyacinths reached Hornblower's nostrils where he sat. There was something fantastically charming about them here at sea.

"I've been successful with my bulbs this year," said Collingwood, putting his letters in his pocket and following Hornblower's glance. He walked over and tilted up a daffodil bloom with sensitive fingers, looking down into its open face. "They are beautiful, aren't they? Soon the daffodils will be flowering in England — some time, perhaps, I'll see them again. Meanwhile these help to keep me contented. It is three years since I last set foot on land."

Commanders-in-Chief might win peerages and pensions, but their children, too, grew up without knowing their fathers. And Collingwood had walked shot-torn decks in a hundred fights; but Hornblower, looking at the wistful smile, thought of other things than battles — thirty thousand turbulent seamen to be kept disciplined and efficient, court-martial findings to be confirmed, the eternal problems of provisions and water, convoys and blockade.

"You will give me the pleasure of your company at dinner, Captain?" asked Collingwood.

"I should be honoured, my lord."

It was gratifying to bring that phrase out pat like that, with hardly more than the least feeling of embarrassment.

"That is excellent. You will be able to tell me all the gossip of home. I fear there will be no other opportunity for some time, as *Atropos* will not be staying with the Fleet."

"Indeed, my lord?"

This was a moment of high excitement, when the future was about to be revealed to him. But of course the excitement must not be allowed to appear; only the guarded interest of a self-contained captain ready for anything.

"I fear so — not that you young captains with your saucy little ships want to stay tied to a fleet's apron strings."

Collingwood was smiling again, but there was something in the words that started a new train of thought in Hornblower's mind. Of course, Collingwood had watched the advent of the newest recruit to his fleet with a

keen eye. Hornblower suddenly realized that if *Atropos* had been clumsy in taking up station, or dilatory in answering signals, his reception here might not have been so pleasant. He might be standing at attention at this moment submitting with a tight-shut mouth to a dressing-down exemplary in its drastic quality. The thought caused a little prickling of gooseflesh at the back of his neck. It reduced his reply to a not very coherent mumble.

"You have this man McCullum and his natives on board?" asked Collingwood.

"Yes, my lord."

Only a little self-restraint was necessary to refrain from asking what the mission would be; Collingwood would tell him.

"You are not acquainted with the Levant?"

"No, my lord."

So it was to be the Levant, among the Turks and the Greeks and the Syrians.

"You soon will be, captain. After taking my dispatches to Malta you will convey Mr. McCullum to Marmorice Bay and assist him in his operations there."

Marmorice Bay? That was on the coast of Asia Minor. The fleet and transports which had attacked Egypt some years ago had rendezvoused there. It was a far cry from Deptford.

"Aye aye, my lord," said Hornblower.

"I understand you have no sailing master in *Atropos*."

"No, my lord. Two master's mates."

"In Malta you will have a sailing master assigned to you. George Turner; he is familiar with Turkish waters and he was with the fleet in Marmorice. He took the bearings when *Speedwell* sank."

Speedwell? Hornblower raked back in his memory. She was the transport which had capsized and sunk at her anchors in a sudden gale of wind in Marmorice Bay.

"Yes, my lord."

"She had on board the military chest of the expeditionary force. I don't expect you knew that."

"No, indeed, my lord."

"A very considerable sum in gold and silver coin for the pay and subsistence of the troops a quarter of a million sterling. She sank in water far deeper than any diver in the service could reach. But as no one knew what our gallant allies the Turks might contrive by way of salvage with infinite leisure it was decided to keep the loss a secret. And for once a secret remained a secret."

"Yes, my lord."

Certainly it was not common knowledge that a quarter of a million in coin lay at the bottom of Marmorice Bay.

"So the Government had to send to India for divers who could reach those depths."

"I see, my lord."

"Now it will be your duty to go to Marmorice Bay and with the assistance of McCullum and Turner to recover that treasure."

"Aye aye, my lord."

No imagination could ever compass the possible range of duties of a naval officer. But it was satisfactory that the words he had just uttered were the only ones a naval officer could say in such circumstances.

"You will have to be careful in your dealings with our friend the Turk. He will be curious about your presence in Marmorice, and when he ascertains the object of your visit he may raise objections. You will have to conduct yourself according to the circumstances of the moment."

"Aye aye, my lord."

"You will not find all this in your orders, captain. But you must understand that the Cabinet has no wish for complications with the Turks. Yet at the same time a quarter of a million sterling in cash would be a Godsend to the Government today — or any day. The money is badly needed, but no offense should be offered to the Turks."

It was necessary to steer clear of Scylla and yet not fall into Charybdis, said Hornblower to himself.

"I think I understand, my lord."

"Fortunately it is an unfrequented coast. The Turks maintain very small forces, either military or naval, in the locality. That does not mean that you should attempt to carry off matters with a high hand."

Not in *Atropos* with eleven popguns a side, thought Hornblower, and then he mentally withdrew the sneer. He understood what Collingwood meant.

"No, my lord."

"Very well then, captain, thank you."

The secretary at Collingwood's elbow had a pile of opened despatches in hand, and was clearly waiting for a break in the conversation to give him an opportunity to intervene, and the flag lieutenant was hovering in the background. Both of them moved in at once.

"Dinner will be in half an hour, my lord," said the flag lieutenant.

"These are the urgent letters, my lord," said the secretary.

Hornblower rose to his feet in some embarrassment.

"Perhaps, captain, you would enjoy a turn on the quarterdeck, eh?" asked Collingwood. "Flags here would keep you company, I'm sure."

When a vice-admiral made suggestions to a captain and a flag lieutenant he did not have to wait long before they were acted upon. But out on the quarterdeck, pacing up and down making polite conversation, Hornblower could have wished that Collingwood had not been so thoughtful as to provide him with company. He had a great deal to think about.

Chapter X

Malta; Ricasoli Point on the one hand and Fort St. Elmo returning the salute on the other, and the Grand Harbour opening up between them; Valetta with its palaces on the promontory; gaily painted small craft everywhere; a fresh north-easterly wind blowing. That wind — the Gregale, the sailing directions called it — did not allow Hornblower any leisure at present for sightseeing. In confined waters a sailing ship before the wind always seemed pig-headedly determined to maintain her speed however much her canvas was reduced, even under bare poles. It called for accurate timing to round-to at the right moment, to take her way off her, to clue up, and drop anchor at the right moment.

Nor would there be any leisure for Hornblower, it appeared, during the few hours that he would be here. He could combine his official calls with his personal delivery of the despatches entrusted to him, which would save a good deal of time, but that saving was immediately eaten up — as the fat kine of Pharaoh's dream were eaten up by the lean kine — by the demands on his attention, and, just as the lean kine were no fatter after their meal, so he was just as busy even when his planning had saved that much time. It would be quarter-day, or as near to it as made no matter, by the time letters from Malta would reach England, so that now he could draw against his pay. Not to any great extent, of course — there were Maria and the children to be considered — but enough to provide himself with a few luxuries in this island where bread was dear and luxuries cheap. Oranges and olives and fresh vegetables — the bumboats were already awaiting permission to come alongside.

McCullum, with his salvage operations in mind, was anxious for an indent to be made for supplies he considered necessary. He wanted a mile of half-inch line and a quarter mile of slow match — a fantastic demand, to Hornblower's mind, but McCullum knew more about his business than he did, presumably — and five hundred feet of leather "fuse-hose", which was something Hornblower had hardly heard of. Hornblower signed the indent wondering vaguely whether the Navy Office would surcharge him with it, and turned away to face the inevitable fact that every officer in the ship wished to go ashore and was presenting irrefutable reasons to Jones in favour of his so doing. If *Atropos* had been on fire they could not be more passionately anxious to be out of her.

And here was another complication: a note from His Excellence the Governor. Would Captain Hornblower and one of his officers dine at the Palace this afternoon? It would be impossible to refuse, so no time need be wasted on debate regarding that point — His Excellency was just as anxious as any ordinary mortal to hear the gossip from England and to see a new face — while there was equally no debate regarding which officer he

should take with him. His Excellency would never forgive him if he heard who had been on board *Atropos* and he had not been afforded the opportunity of seating royalty at his table.

"Pass the word for Mr. Prince," said Hornblower, "and the doctor."

It would be necessary to have the doctor to interpret to the Prince exactly what was going to happen; the boy had learned a good deal of English during his month on board, but the vocabulary of the gunroom was hardly inclusive enough to permit of discussions of vice-regal etiquette. The Prince came in a little breathless, still twitching his uniform into some kind of order; Eisenbeiss was breathing hard too — he had to come the whole length of the ship and through a narrow hatchway.

"Please explain to His Serene Highness," said Hornblower, "that he is coming ashore with me to dine with the Governor."

Eisenbeiss spoke in German, and the boy gave his mechanical little bow. The use of German evoked the manners of royalty from under the new veneer of a British midshipman.

"His Serene Highness is to wear his court dress?" asked Eisenbeiss.

"No," said Hornblower, "his uniform. And if ever I see him again with his shoes as badly brushed as those are I'll take the cane to him."

"Sir —" said Eisenbeiss, but words failed him. The thought of the cane being applied to his Prince struck him dumb; fortunately, perhaps.

"So that I am to wear this uniform too, sir?" asked Eisenbeiss.

"I fear you have not been invited, doctor," said Hornblower.

"But I am First Chamberlain to His Serene Highness, sir," exploded Eisenbeiss. "This will be a visit of ceremony, and it is a fundamental law of Seitz-Bunau that I make all presentations."

Hornblower kept his temper.

"And I represent His Britannic Majesty," he said.

"Surely His Britannic Majesty cannot wish that his ally should not be treated with the honours due to his royal position? As Secretary of State it is my duty to make an official protest."

"Yes," said Hornblower. He put out his hand and bent the Prince's head forward. "You might be better employed seeing that His Serene Highness washes behind his ears."

"Sir! Sir!" said Eisenbeiss.

"Be ready and properly dressed in half an hour, if you please, Mr. Prince."

Dinner at the Palace ran the dreary course it might be expected to take. It was fortunate that, on being received by the Governor's aide-de-camp, Hornblower was able to shuffle on to his shoulders the burden of the difficult decision regarding the presentations — Hornblower could not guess whether His Serene Highness should be presented to His Excellency or vice versa, and he was a little amused to note Her Excellency's hurried asides when she heard the quality of her second guest; the seating arrangements for dinner needed hasty revision. So Hornblower found himself between two dull women, one of them with red hands and the other with a chronic sniff. He struggled to make polite conversation, and he was careful with his wine-glass, contriving merely to sip when the others drank deep.

The Governor drank to His Serene Highness the Prince of Seitz-Bunau, and the Prince, with the most perfect aplomb, drank to His Majesty the King of Great Britain; presumably those were the first words of English he had ever learned, long before he had learned to shout "Vast heaving" or "Come on, you no-sailors, you". When the ladies had withdrawn Hornblower listened to His Excellency's comments about Bonaparte's threatening invasion of Southern Italy, and about the chances of preserving Sicily from his clutches; and a decent interval after returning to the drawing-room he caught the Prince's eye. The Prince smiled back at him and rose to his feet. It was odd to watch him receiving the bows of the men and the curtsies of the ladies with the assurance of ingrained habit. Tomorrow the boy would be in the gunroom mess again — Hornblower wondered whether he was able yet to stand up for his rights there and make sure he received no more than his fair share of gristle when the meat was served.

The gig whisked them across the Grand Harbour from the Governor's steps to the ship's side, and Hornblower came on to the quarter-deck with the bos'n's mates' pipes to welcome him. He was conscious even before he had taken his hand from his hat brim that there was something wrong. He looked round him at the ship illuminated by the wild sunset the Gregale had brought with it. There was no trouble with the hands, judging

by their attitudes as they stood crowded forward. The three Ceylonese divers were there in their accustomed isolation by the knight-heads. But the officers grouped aft wore an apprehensive look; Hornblower's eyes moved from face to face, from Jones to Still, the two lieutenants, to Carslake, the purser, and to Silver, the master's mate of the watch. It was Jones as senior officer who came forward to report.

"If you please, sir —"

"What is it, Mr. Jones?"

"If you please, sir, there has been a duel."

No one could ever guess what would be the next burden to be laid on a captain's shoulders. It might be an outbreak of plague, or the discovery of dry rot in the ship's timbers. And Jones's manner implied not merely that there had been a duel, but that someone had been hurt in it.

"Who fought?" demanded Hornblower.

"The doctor and Mr. McCullum, sir."

Well, somewhere they could pick up another doctor, and if the worst came to the worst they could manage without one at all.

"What happened?"

"Mr. McCullum was shot through the lungs, sir."

God! That was something entirely different, something of vital importance. A bullet through the lungs meant death almost for certain, and what was he to do with McCullum dead? McCullum had been sent for all the way from India. It would take a year and a half to get someone out from there to replace him. No ordinary men with salvage experience would do — it had to be someone who knew how to use the Ceylonese divers. Hornblower wondered with sick despair whether a man had ever been so plagued as he was. He had to swallow before he could speak again.

"Where is he now?"

"Mr. McCullum, sir? He's in the hands of the garrison surgeon in the hospital ashore."

"He's still alive?"

Jones spread despairing hands.

"Yes, sir. He was alive half an hour ago."

"Where's the doctor?"

"Down below in his berth, sir."

"I'll see him. No, wait. I'll send for him when I want him."

He wanted to think; he needed time and leisure to decide what was to be done. It was his instinct to walk the deck; that was how he could work off the high internal pressure of his emotions. It was only incidentally that the rhythmic exercise brought his thoughts into orderly sequence. And this little deck was crowded with idle officers — his cabin down below was of course quite useless. That was the moment when Jones came forward with something else to bother him.

"Mr. Turner's come aboard, sir."

Mr. Turner? Turner? That was the sailing master with experience of Turkish waters whom Collingwood had detailed specially to service in *Atropos*. He came from behind Jones as the words were said, a wizened old man with a letter in his hand, presumably the orders which had brought him on board.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Turner," said Hornblower, forcing himself into cordiality while wondering whether he would ever make use of Turner's services.

"Your servant, sir," said Turner with old-fashioned politeness.

"Mr. Jones, see that Mr. Turner's comfortable."

"Aye aye, sir."

That was the only reply Jones could make, however hard of execution the order might be. But clearly Jones meditated some supplementary remark; it could be that was going to suggest putting Turner into McCullum's quarters. Hornblower could not bear the thought of having to listen to anything of the sort while he had yet to reach a decision. It was the final irritation that roused him to the pitch of acting with the arbitrariness of a captain of the old school.

"Get below, all of you," he snapped. "I want this deck clear."

They looked at him as if they had not heard him aright, and he knew they had.

"Get below, if you please," he said, and the "if you please" did nothing to soften the harshness of his request. "Master's mate of the watch, see that this deck is kept clear, and keep out of my way yourself."

They went below — this was an order from the captain who (according to the reports of his gig's crew) had barely been diverted from hanging a dozen French prisoners for no other reason than a desire to see their death struggles. So he had the quarter-deck to himself, on which to stride up and down, from taffrail to mizzen mast and back again, in the fast-fading twilight. He walked rapidly, turning with a jerk at each end, irritation and worry goading him on.

He had to reach a decision. The obvious thing to do was to report to Collingwood and await further orders. But how long would it be before any vessel left Malta with letters for Collingwood, and how long would it be before another returned? A month altogether, probably. No captain worth his salt would keep *Atropos* lying idle in Grand Harbour for a month. He could guess what Collingwood would think of a man who evaded responsibility like that. He could take *Atropos* and seek out Collingwood himself, but the same objections applied. And how would he appear in Collingwood's eyes if he were to arrive off Toulon or Leghorn or wherever the chances of war might have summoned Collingwood, at the moment when he was supposed to be two thousand miles away? No. No. It would never do. At least he had reduced two apparent possibilities to impossibilities.

Then he must proceed with his orders as if nothing had happened to McCullum. That meant he must undertake the salvage operations himself, and he knew nothing about the subject. A wave of fury passed over him as his mind dwelt on the inconvenience and loss occasioned by the duel. The idiotic Eisenbeiss and the bad-tempered McCullum. They had no business incommoding England in her struggle with Bonaparte merely to satisfy their own ridiculous passions. He himself had borne with Eisenbeiss's elephantine nonsense. Why could not McCullum have done the same? And in any event why could not McCullum have held his pistol straighter and killed the ridiculous doctor instead of getting killed himself? But that sort of rhetorical question did not get him any further with his own urgent problems; he must not think along those lines. Moreover, with a grinding feeling of guilt another consideration crept in. He should have been aware of bad blood between the people in his ship. He remembered the lighthearted way in which he had put on Jones's shoulders the responsibility for accommodating McCullum in his crowded little ship. In the wardroom the doctor and McCullum had probably got on each other's nerves; there could be no doubt about that — and presumably ashore, over wine in some tavern, the enmity had flared up and brought about the duel. He should have known about the possibility and nipped it in the bud. Hornblower scourged himself spiritually for his remissness. He experienced bitter self-contempt at that moment. Perhaps he was unfit to be captain of one of His Majesty's ships.

The thought brought about an even greater internal upheaval. He could not bear it. He must prove to himself that there was no truth in it, or he must break himself in the attempt. He must carry through that salvage operation by his own efforts if necessary. He must. He *must*.

So that was the decision. He had only to reach it for the emotion to die down within him, to leave him thinking feverishly but clearly. He must of course do everything possible to ensure success, omit nothing that could help. McCullum had indented for "leather fuse-hose"; that was some indication of how the salvage problem was to be approached. And McCullum was not yet dead, as far as he knew. He might — no, it was hardly possible. No one ever survived a bullet through the lungs. And yet —

"Mr. Nash!"

"Sir!" said the master's mate of the watch, coming at the run.

"My gig. I'm going over to the hospital."

There was still just a little light in the sky, but overside the water was black as ink, reflecting in long, irregular lines the lights that showed in Valetta. The oars ground rhythmically in the rowlocks. Hornblower restrained himself from urging the men to pull harder. They could never have rowed fast enough to satisfy the pressing need for instant action that seethed inside him.

The garrison officers were still at mess, sitting over their wine, and the mess sergeant, at Hornblower's request, went in and fetched out the surgeon. He was a youngish man, and fortunately still sober. He stood with the candle-light on his face and listened attentively to Hornblower's questions.

"The bullet hit him in the right armpit," said the surgeon. "One would expect that, as he would be standing with his shoulder turned to his opponent and his arm raised. The actual wound was on the posterior margin of the armpit, towards the back, in other words, and on the level of the fifth rib."

The heart was on the level of the fifth rib, as Hornblower knew, and the expression had an ominous sound.

"I suppose the bullet did not go right through?" he asked.

"No," replied the surgeon. "It is very rare for a pistol bullet, if it touches bone, to go through the body, even at twelve paces. The powder charge is only one drachm. Naturally the bullet is still there, presumably within the chest cavity."

"So he is unlikely to live?"

"Very unlikely, sir. It is a surprise he has lived so long. The haemoptysis — the spitting of blood, you understand, sir — has been extremely slight. Most chest wounds die of internal bleeding within an hour or two, but in this case the lung can hardly have been touched. There is considerable contusion under the right scapula — that is the shoulder blade — indicating that the bullet terminated its course there."

"Close to the heart?"

"Close to the heart, sir. But it can have touched none of the great vessels there, most surprisingly, or he would have been dead within a few seconds."

"Then why do you think he will not live?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Once an opening has been made in the chest cavity, sir, there is little chance, and with the bullet still inside the chance is negligible. It will certainly have carried fragments of clothing in with it. We may expect internal mortification, in general gathering of malignant humours, and eventual death within a few days."

"You could not probe for the bullet?"

"Within the chest wall? My dear sir!"

"What action have you taken, then?"

"I have bound up the wound of entry to put an end to the bleeding there. I have strapped up the chest to ensure that the jagged ends of the broken ribs do no more damage to the lungs. I took two ounces of blood from the left basilar vein, and I administered an opiate."

"An opiate? So he is not conscious now?"

"Certainly not."

Hornblower felt hardly wiser than he had done when Jones first told him the news.

"You say he may live a few days? How many?"

"I know nothing about the patient's constitution, sir. But he is a powerful man in the prime of life. It might be as much as a week. It might even be more. But on the other hand if events take a bad turn he might be dead tomorrow."

"But if it is several days? Will he retain his senses during that time?"

"Likely enough. When he ceases to, it is a sign of the approaching end. Then we can expect fever, restlessness, delirium, and death."

Several days of consciousness were possible, therefore. And the faintest, remotest chance that McCullum would live after all.

"Supposing I took him to sea with me? Would that help? Or hinder?"

"You would have to ensure his immobility on account of the fractured ribs. But at sea he might even live longer. There are the usual Mediterranean agues in this island. And in addition there is an endemic low fever. My hospital is full of such cases."

Now this was a piece of information that really helped in coming to a decision.

"Thank your doctor," said Hornblower, and he took his decision. Then it was only a matter of minutes to make the arrangements with the surgeon and to take his leave. The gig took him back through the darkness, over the black water, to where *Atropos*' riding light showed faintly.

"Pass the word for the doctor to come to my cabin at once," was Hornblower's reply to the salute of the officer of the watch.

Eisenbeiss came slowly in. There was something of apprehension and something of bravado in his manner. He was prepared to defend himself against the storm he was certain was about to descend on him. What he did

not expect was the reception he actually experienced. He approached the table behind which Hornblower was seated and stood sullen, meeting Hornblower's eyes with the guilty defiance of a man who has just taken another human's life.

"Mr. McCullum," began Hornblower, and the doctor's thick lips showed a trace of a sneer, "is being sent on board here tonight. He is still alive."

"On board here?" repeated the doctor, surprised into a change of attitude.

"You address me as 'sir'. Yes, I am having him sent over from the hospital. My orders to you are to make every preparation for his reception."

The doctor's response was unintelligible German, but there could be no doubt it was an ejaculation of astonishment.

"Your answer to me is 'aye aye, sir'," snapped Hornblower, his pent-up emotion and strain almost making him tremble as he sat at the table. He could not prevent his fist from clenching, but he just managed to refrain from allowing it to pound the table. The intensity of his feelings must have had their effect telepathically.

"Aye aye, sir," said the doctor grudgingly.

"Mr. McCullum's life is extremely valuable, doctor. Much more valuable than yours."

The doctor could only mumble in reply to that.

"It is your duty to keep him alive."

Hornblower's fist unclenched now, and he could make his points slowly, one by one, accentuating each with the slow tap of the tip of a lean forefinger on the table.

"You are to do all you can for him. If there is anything special that you require for the purpose you are to inform me and I shall endeavour to obtain it for you. His life is to be saved, or if not, it is to be prolonged as far as possible. I would recommend you to establish a hospital for him abaft No. 6 carronade on the starboard side, where the motion of the ship will be least felt, and where it will be possible to rig a shelter for him from the weather. You will apply to Mr. Jones for that. The ship's pigs can be taken forward where they will not discommode him."

Hornblower's pause and glance called forth an "aye aye, sir" from the doctor's lips like a cork from out of a bottle, so that Hornblower could proceed.

"We sail at dawn tomorrow," he went on. "Mr. McCullum is to live until we reach our destination, and until long after, long enough for him to execute the duty which has brought him from India. That is quite clear to you?"

"Yes, sir," answered the doctor, although his puzzled expression proved that there was something about the orders which he could not explain to himself.

"You had better keep him alive," continued Hornblower. "You had certainly better. If he dies I can try you for murder under the ordinary laws of England. Don't look at me like that. I am speaking the truth. The common law knows nothing about duels. I can hang you, doctor."

The doctor was a shade paler, and his big hands tried to express what his paralyzed tongue would not.

"But simply hanging you would be too good for you, doctor," said Hornblower. "I can do more than that, and I shall. You have a fat, fleshy back. The cat would sink deeply into it. You've seen men flogged — you saw two flogged last week. You heard them scream. You will scream at the gratings too, doctor. That I promise you."

"No!" said the doctor — "you can't —"

"You address me as 'sir', and you do not contradict me. You heard my promise? I shall carry it out. I can, and I shall."

In a ship detached far from superior authority there was nothing a captain might not do, and the doctor knew it. And with Hornblower's grim face before him and those remorseless eyes staring into his the doctor could not doubt the possibility. Hornblower was trying to keep his expression set hard, and to pay no attention to the internal calculations that persisted in maintaining themselves inside him. There might be terrible trouble if the Admiralty ever heard he had flogged a warranted doctor, but then the Admiralty might never hear of an incident in the distant Levant. And there was the other doubt — with McCullum once dead, so that nothing could bring him to life, Hornblower could not really believe he would torture a human being to no practical purpose. But as long as Eisenbeiss did not guess that, it did not matter.

"That is an quite clear to you now, doctor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then my order is that you start making your arrangements now."

It was a really great surprise to Hornblower when Eisenbeiss still hesitated. He was about to speak more sharply still, cutting into the feverish gestures of the big hands, when Eisenbeiss spoke again.

"Do you forget something, sir?"

"What do you think I have forgotten?" asked Hornblower, playing for time instead of flatly refusing to listen to any arguments — proof enough that he was a little shaken by Eisenbeiss's persistence.

"Mr. McCullum and I — we are enemies," said Eisenbeiss.

It was true that Hornblower had forgotten that. He was so engrossed with his chessboard manipulation of human pieces that he had overlooked a vital factor. But he must not admit it.

"And what of that?" he asked coldly, hoping his discomfiture was not too apparent.

"I shot him," said Eisenbeiss. There was a vivid gesture by the big right hand that had held the pistol, which enabled Hornblower to visualize the whole duel. "What will he say if I attend him?"

"Whose was the challenge?" asked Hornblower, still playing for time.

"He challenged me," said Eisenbeiss. "He said — he said I was no Baron, and I said he was no gentleman. 'I will kill you for that,' he said, and so we fought."

Eisenbeiss had certainly said the thing that would best rouse McCullum's fury.

"You are convinced you are a Baron?" asked Hornblower — curiosity urged him to ask the question as well as the need for time to reassemble his thoughts. The Baron drew himself up as far as the deck-beams over his head allowed.

"I know I am, sir. My patent of nobility is signed by His Serene Highness himself."

"When did he do that?"

"As soon as — as soon as we were alone. Only His Serene Highness and I managed to cross the frontier when Bonaparte's men entered Seitz-Bunau. The others all took service with the tyrant. It was not fit that His Serene Highness should be attended only by a bourgeois. Only a noble could attend him to bed or serve his food. He had to have a High Chamberlain to regulate his ceremonial, and a Secretary of State to manage his foreign affairs. So His Serene Highness ennobled me — that is why I bear the title of Baron and gave me the high offices of State.

"On your advice?"

"I was the only adviser he had left."

This was very interesting and much as Hornblower had imagined it, but it was not the point. Hornblower was more ready now to face the real issue.

"In the duel," he asked, "you exchanged shots?"

"His bullet went past my ear," answered Eisenbeiss.

"Then honour is satisfied on both sides," said Hornblower, more to himself than to the doctor.

Technically that was perfectly correct. An exchange of shots, and still more the shedding of blood, ended any affair of honour. The principals could meet again socially as if there had been no trouble between them. But to meet in the relative positions of doctor and patient might be something different. He would have to deal with that difficulty when it arose.

"You are quite right to remind me about this, doctor," he said, with the last appearance of judicial calm that he could summon up. "I shall bear it in mind."

Eisenbeiss looked at him a little blankly, and Hornblower put on his hard face again.

"But it makes no difference at all to my promise to you. Rest assured of that," he continued. "My orders still stand. They — still — stand."

It was several seconds before the reluctant answer came.

"Aye aye, sir."

"On your way out would you please be good enough to pass the word for Mr. Turner, the new sailing master?"

"Aye aye, sir."

That showed the subtle difference between an order and a request — but both of them had to be obeyed.

"Now, Mr. Turner," said Hornblower when Turner arrived in the cabin, "our destination is Marmorice Bay, and we sail at dawn tomorrow. I want to know about the winds we can expect at this time of year. I want to lose no time at all in arriving there. Every hour — I may say every minute is of importance." Time was of importance, to make the most of a dying man's last hours.

Chapter XI

These were the blue waters where history had been made, where the future of civilization had been decided, more than once and more than twice. Here Greek had fought against Persian, Athenian against Spartan, Crusader against Saracen, Hospitaller against Turk. The penteconters of Byzantium had furrowed the seas here, and the caracks of Pisa. Great cities had luxuriated in untold wealth. Only just over the horizon on the port beam was Rhodes, where a comparatively minor city had erected one of the seven wonders of the world, so that two thousand years later the adjective colossal was part of the vocabulary of people whose ancestors wore skins and painted themselves with woad at the time when the Rhodians were debating the nature of the Infinite. Now conditions were reversed. Here came *Atropos*, guided by sextant and compass, driven by the wind harnessed to her well-planned sails, armed with her long guns and carronades — a triumph of modern invention, in short — emerging from the wealthiest corner of the world into one where misgovernment and disease, anarchy and war, had left deserts where here had been fertile fields, villages where there had been cities, and hovels where there had been palaces. But there was no time to philosophize in this profound fashion. The sands in the hour-glass beside the binnacle were running low, and the moment was approaching when course should be altered.

"Mr. Turner!"

"Sir!"

"We'll alter course when the watch is called."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Doctor!"

"Sir!"

"Stand by for a change of course"

"Aye aye, sir."

McCullum's invalid bed was disposed athwart ships between Nos. 6 and 7 carronades on the starboard side; a simple tackle attached to the bedhead enabled the level of the bed to be adjusted with the change of course, so that the patient lay as horizontal as might be, whichever way the ship might be heeling. It was the doctor's responsibility to attend to that.

The watch was being called.

"Very good, Mr. Turner."

"Headsail sheets! Hands to the braces!"

Turner was an efficient seaman, despite his age. Hornblower could be sure of that by now. He stood by and watched him lay the ship close to the wind. Still came and touched his hat to Turner to take over the watch.

"We ought to raise the Seven Capes on this tack, sir," said Turner, coming over to Hornblower.

"I fancy so," said Hornblower.

The passage from Malta had been comfortingly rapid. They had lain becalmed for a single night to the south of Crete, but with the morning the wind had got up again from a westerly quarter. There had not been a single breath of Levanter — the equinox was still too far off for that, apparently — and every day had seen at least a hundred miles made good. And McCullum was still alive.

Hornblower walked forward to where he lay. Eisenbeiss was bending over him, his fingers on his pulse, and with the cessation of the bustle of going about the three Ceylonese divers had returned, to squat round the foot of the bed, their eyes on their master. To have those three pairs of melancholy eyes gazing at him would, Hornblower thought, have a most depressing effect, but apparently McCullum had no objection.

"All well, Mr. McCullum?" asked Hornblower.

"Not — quite as well as I would like."

It was distressing to see how slowly and painfully the head turned on the pillow. The heavy beard that had sprouted over his face could not conceal the fact that McCullum was more hollow-checked, more feverish eyed, than yesterday. The decline had been very marked; the day they sailed McCullum had appeared hardly more than slightly wounded, and the second day he had seemed better still — he had protested against being kept in bed, but that night he had taken a turn for the worse and had sunk steadily ever since, just as the garrison surgeon and Eisenbeiss had gloomily predicted.

Of course those had not been his only protests. McCullum had been as angry as his muddled condition would allow when he emerged from his narcotic to find he was under the treatment of the man who had shot him. He had struggled against his weakness and his bandages. It had called for Hornblower's personal intervention — fortunately *Atropos* was clear of the harbour mouth when McCullum regained consciousness — to calm him down. "It's a blackguard trick to pursue an affair of honour after an exchange of shots," Hornblower had said, and "It's the Doctor who's attending to you, not the Baron," and then the clinching argument "Don't be a fool, man. There's no other surgeon within fifty miles. Do you want to die?" So McCullum had yielded, and had submitted his tortured body to Eisenbeiss's ministrations, perhaps deriving some comfort from the ignoble things the doctor had to do for him.

And now all that spirit had gone. McCullum was a very sick man. He closed his eyes as Eisenbeiss laid his hand on his forehead. The pale lips muttered, and Hornblower, stooping, could only hear disjointed phrases. There was something about "fuses under water". McCullum was thinking, then, of the salvage operation ahead. Hornblower looked up and met Eisenbeiss's eyes. There was deep concern in them, and there was the least perceptible shake of the head. Eisenbeiss thought McCullum was going to die.

"It hurts — it hurts," said McCullum, moaning a little.

He moved restlessly, and Eisenbeiss's large powerful hands eased him into a more comfortable position on his left side. Hornblower noticed that Eisenbeiss laid one hand, as if inquiringly, over McCullum's right shoulder-blade, and then lower down, towards the short ribs, and McCullum moaned again. There was no change in the gravity of Eisenbeiss's expression.

This was horrible. It was horrible to see this magnificently constructed creature dying. And it was equally horrible that Hornblower was aware that his deep sympathy was allayed with concern for himself. He could not imagine how he would carry through the salvage operation with McCullum dead, or even with McCullum as helpless as he was at present. He would return empty-handed, to face Collingwood's wrath and contempt. What was the use of all his endeavours? Hornblower suddenly boiled with exasperation at the duelling convention which had claimed the life of a valuable man and at the same time had imperilled his own professional reputation. Within himself he was a whirlpool of emotions conflicting with each other.

"Land! Land ho! Land on the starboard bow!"

The cry came ringing down from the fore topmast head. No one could hear it without at least a little excitement. McCullum opened his eyes and turned his head again, but Eisenbeiss, stooping over him, endeavoured to soothe him. Hornblower's place was aft, and he turned away from the bed and walked back, trying to restrain himself from appearing too eager. Turner was already there, brought up from his watch below at the cry, and by the lee bulwark the other officers were rapidly assembling in a group.

"A good landfall, sir," said Turner.

"An hour earlier than I was led to expect," answered Hornblower.

"The current sets northerly here with steady winds from the West, sir," said Turner. "We'll raise Atairo in Rhodes to port soon, and then we'll have a cross-bearing."

"Yes," replied Hornblower. He was aware of his shortness of manner, but only dimly aware of its cause; he was uneasy with a sailing master on board who knew more about local conditions than he did, although that sailing master had been assigned to him to save him from uneasiness.

Atropos was shouldering her way valiantly through the short but steep seas that came hurrying forward to assail her port bow. Her motion was easy; she was carrying exactly the right amount of sail for that wind. Turner put a telescope in his pocket and walked forward to ascend the main shrouds, while Hornblower stood on the weather side with the wind blowing against his sunburned cheeks. Turner came aft again, his smile denoting self-satisfaction.

"That's the Seven Capes, sir," he said. "Two points on the starboard bow."

"There's a northerly set here, you say?" asked Hornblower.

"Yes, sir."

Hornblower walked over and looked at the compass, and up at the trim of the sails. The northerly set would help, and the wind was coming from the southward of west, but there was no sense in going unnecessarily far to leeward.

"Mr. Still! You can come closer to the wind than this. Brace her up."

He did not want to have to beat his way in at the last, and he was making allowance for the danger of the current setting in on Cape Kum.

Now here was the doctor, touching his hat to demand attention.

"What is it, doctor?" asked Hornblower.

The hands were hauling on the maintack.

"May I speak to you, sir?"

That was exactly what he was doing, and at a moment by no means opportune. But of course what he wanted was a chance to speak to him in privacy, and not on this bustling deck.

"It's about the patient, sir," supplemented Eisenbeiss. "I think it is very important."

"Oh, very well," said Hornblower, restraining himself from using bad language. He led the way down into the cabin, and seated himself to face the doctor. "Well? What do you have to say?"

Eisenbeiss was nervous, that was plain.

"I have formed a theory, sir."

He failed, as ever, with the "th" sound, and the word was so unusual and his pronunciation of it was so odd that Hornblower had to think for a moment before he could guess what it was Eisenbeiss had said.

"And what is this theory?"

"It is about the position of the bullet, sir," answered Eisenbeiss; he, too, took a moment to digest what was the English pronunciation of the word.

"The garrison surgeon at Malta told me it was in the chest cavity. Do you know any more than that?"

That expression "chest cavity" was an odd one, but the garrison surgeon had used it. It implied an empty space, and was an obvious misnomer. Lungs and heart and the great blood-vessels must fill that cavity full.

"I believe it may not be in there at all, sir," said Eisenbeiss, clearly taking a plunge.

"Indeed?" This might be exceedingly important news if it were true. "Then why is he so ill?"

Now that Eisenbeiss had committed himself he became voluble again. Explanations poured out of him, accompanied by jerky gestures. But the explanations were hard to follow. In this highly technical matter Eisenbeiss had been thinking in his native language even more than usual, and now he was having to translate into technical terms unfamiliar to him and still more unfamiliar to Hornblower, who grasped despairingly at one contorted sentence.

"You think that the bullet, after breaking those ribs, may have bounced off again?" he asked. At the last moment he substituted the word "bounce" for "ricochet" in the hope of retaining clarity.

"Yes, sir. Bullets often do that."

"And where do you say you think it went then?"

Eisenbeiss tried to stretch his left hand far under his right armpit; his body was too bulky to permit it to go far enough to make his demonstration quite complete.

"Under the scapula, sir — the — the shoulder-blade."

"Land ho! Land on the port bow?"

Hornblower heard the cry come down through the skylight from above. That must be Rhodes they had sighted. Here they were heading into Rhodes Channel, and he was down below talking about ribs and scapulas. And yet the one was as important as the other.

"I can't stay down here much longer, doctor. Tell me why you think this is the case?"

Eisenbeiss fell into explanation again. He talked about the patient's fever, and about his comparative wellbeing the morning after he had been wounded, and about the small amount of blood he had spat up. He was in the full flood of his talk when a knock at the door interrupted him.

"Come in," said Hornblower.

It was His Serene Highness the Prince of Seitz-Bunau, with a speech that he had obviously prepared carefully on his way down.

"Mr. Still's respects, sir," he said. "Land in sight on the port bow."

"Very well, Mr. Prince. Thank you."

It was a pity there was not time to compliment the boy on his rapid acquirement of English. Hornblower turned back to Eisenbeiss.

"So I think the bullet went round the back, sir. The skin is — is tough, sir, and the ribs are — are elastic."

"Yes?" Hornblower had heard of bullets going round the body before this.

"And the patient has much muscle. Much."

"And you think the bullet has lodged in the muscles of the back?"

"Yes. Deep against the ribs. Under the lower point of the scapula, sir."

"And the fever? The illness?"

They could be accounted for, according to Eisenbeiss's torrential explanation, by the presence of the foreign body deep inside the tissues, especially if, as was probable, it had carried fragments of clothing in along with it. It all seemed plausible enough.

"And you are trying to say that if the bullet is there and not inside the chest you might be able to extract it?"

"Yes, sir."

Eisenbeiss showed by his manner that he knew that those words had finally committed him.

"You think that you can do that? It means using the knife?"

As soon as Hornblower finished asking the second question he was aware that it was impolitic to ask two questions at once of a man who had enough trouble answering one. Eisenbeiss had to think a long time over the phrasing of his answers.

"It means using the knife," he said at length. "It means a difficult operation. I do not know if I can do it."

"But you hope you can?"

"I hope so."

"And do you think you will be successful?"

"I do not think. I hope."

"And if you are not successful?"

"He will die."

"But you think he will die in any case if you do not attempt the operation?"

That was the point. Eisenbeiss twice opened his mouth and shut it again before he answered.

"Yes."

Down through the skylight, as Hornblower sat studying Eisenbeiss's expression, came a new cry, faintly borne from the weather main-chains.

"No bottom! No bottom with this line!"

Turner and Still had very properly decided to take a cast of the lead; they were still out of soundings, as was to be expected. Hornblower brought his mind back from the situation of the ship to the decision regarding McCullum. The latter might have some claim to be consulted on the matter, but the claim was specious. His life was his country's. A seaman was not consulted first when he was carried into the ordeal of battle.

"So that is your opinion, doctor. If you operate and fail you will only have shortened the patient's life by a few hours?"

"A few hours. A few days."

A few days might suffice for the salvage operation; but with McCullum as sick as he was he would be no use during those few days. On the other hand there was no knowing at present whether or not he might possibly recover after those few days, without being operated on.

"What are the difficulties of the operation?" asked Hornblower.

"There are several layers of muscle there," explained Eisenbeiss. "Infraspinatus. Subscapularis, many of them. In each case the — the threads run in a different direction. That makes it difficult to work quickly and yet without doing great damage. And there is the big artery, the subscapular. The patient is weak already and unable to withstand much shock."

"Have you everything you need for this operation if you carry it out?"

Eisenbeiss hunched his thick shoulders.

"The two attendants — loblolly boys, you call them, sir — are experienced. They have both served in ships in action. I have my instruments. But I should like —"

Eisenbeiss clearly wanted something he believed to be difficult to grant.

"What?"

"I should like the ship to be still. At anchor. And a good light."

That turned the scale of the decision.

"Before nightfall," said Hornblower, "this ship will be at anchor in a landlocked harbour. You can make your preparations for the operation."

"Yes, sir." Again a pause before Eisenbeiss asked an important question. "And your promise, sir?"

Hornblower did not have to think very long about the question as to whether Eisenbeiss would work more efficiently or not if he were faced with the certainty of flogging and hanging if he failed. The man would do all he could out of sheer professional pride. And the thought that his life was at stake might possibly make him nervous.

"I'll take my promise back," said Hornblower. "You'll suffer no harm, whatever happens."

"Thank you, sir."

"No bottom!" called the leadsman in the chains.

"Very well, then. You have until this evening to make what preparations you can."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

With Eisenbeiss out of the cabin Hornblower sat for hardly a moment retracing the grounds of his decision. His ship was entering Rhodes Channel and he must be on deck.

"Wind's come southerly a point, sir," said Still, touching his hat.

The first thing, of course, that Hornblower had noticed as he came up the companion was that *Atropos* was still braced up as close to the wind as she would lie. Still and Turner had acted correctly without troubling him about it.

"Very well, Mr. Still."

Hornblower put his glass to his eye and swept the horizon. A bold, wildly rugged coast on the one hand; on the other a low sandy shore. He bent to study the chart.

"Cape Angistro to starboard, sir," said Turner at his side. "Cape Kum abaft the port beam."

"Thank you."

Everything was as it should be. Hornblower straightened up and turned his glass upon the Turkish coast. It was steep, with bold cliffs, behind which rose a chain of steeply undulating hills.

"They're only green at this time of year, sir," explained Turner. "The rest of the year they're brown."

"Yes."

Hornblower had read all he could about the Eastern Mediterranean, and he knew something of the climatic conditions.

"Not many people live there now, sir," went on Turner. "Farmers, a few. Shepherds. Little fishing villages in some of the coves. A little coasting trade in caiques from Rhodes — not so much of that now, sir. There's piracy in all these waters, on account of the feuds between the Greeks and the Turks. There's a bit of trade in honey an' timber, but precious little."

"Yes."

It was fortunate the wind had backed southerly, even by so little. It eased one of the myriad complications in his complicated life.

"Ruins a-plenty along that coast, though, sir," droned on Turner. "Cities — temples — you'd be surprised." Ancient Greek civilization had flourished here. Over there had stood Artemisia and a score of other Greek cities, pulsating with life and beauty.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"The villages mostly stand where the old cities were," persisted Turner. "Ruins all round 'em. Half the cottages are built of marble from the temples."

"Yes."

In other circumstances Hornblower could have been deeply interested, but as it was Turner was merely distraction. There was not merely the immediate business in hand of taking *Atropos* up into Marmorice harbour; there was the business of how to deal with the Turkish authorities; of how to set about the problems of salvage; there was the question — the urgent, anxious question — as to whether McCullum would live. There was the routine of the ship; when Hornblower looked round him he could see the hands and the officers clustered along the ship's sides gazing out eagerly at the shores. There were Greeks dwelling among the Mohammedans of the mainland — that would be important when it came to a question of keeping liquor from the men. And he would like to fill his water barrels; and there was the matter of obtaining fresh vegetables. Here was Still with a routine question. Hornblower nodded in agreement.

"Up spirits!"

The cry went through the little ship, and when they heard it the men had no ears for any siren song from the shore. This was the great moment of the day for most of them, when they would pour their tiny issue of rum-and-water down their eager throats. To deprive a man of his ration was like barring a saint from Paradise. The speculations that went on among the men, their dealings with their rum rations, the exchanging, the buying, the selling, made the South Sea Bubble seem small by comparison. But Hornblower decided he need not vaunt himself above the herd, he need not look down with condescension at the men as if they were Circe's hogs swilling at a trough; it was perfectly true that this was the great moment of their day, but it was because they had no other moment at all, for months and for years, confined within the wooden walls of their little ship, often seeing not a shilling of money in all that time, not a fresh face, not a single human problem on which to exercise their wits. Perhaps it was better to be a captain and have too many problems.

The hands went to dinner. Cape Kum went by on the one hand and the Turkish coast on the other, the breeze freshening with the bright sunny day, and Turner droning on as the landmarks went by.

"Cape Marmorice, sir," reported Turner.

The coast dipped here, revealing mountains more lofty close behind. Now was the time to take in sail, ready to enter. It was the time when decisive action had to be taken, too; when *Atropos* changed from a peaceful ship, cruising placidly along outside territorial waters, to a stormy petrel, whose entrance into a foreign harbour might send despatches hastening from embassies, and might cause cabinets to assemble at opposite ends of Europe. Hornblower tried to give his orders as if he had no care for the importance of the moment.

"All hands! All hands shorten sail! All hands!"

The watch below came running to their posts. The officers, at the call of all hands, went to their stations, the one or two who had been dozing down below coming hastily on deck. Courses and top gallants were got in.

"Mr. Jones!" said Hornblower harshly.

"Sir!"

"Ease that sheet and take the strain off the tack! Where did you learn your seamanship?"

"Aye aye, sir," answered Jones rather pathetically, but he ran up both clues smartly together.

The reprimand was deserved, but Hornblower wondered if he would have administered it in just that way if he had not been anxious to show that the responsibilities he was carrying could not distract him from any detail of the management of the ship. Then he decided bitterly that it was unnecessary in any event; not one of those hurrying figures on deck gave a single thought to the responsibilities of his captain, or of what international crisis this shortening of sail might be the preliminary.

"Red Cliff Point, sir," said Turner. "Passage Island. Cape Sari over there. The east passage is better, sir — there's a rock in the middle of the west passage."

"Yes," said Hornblower. There was not much detail in the chart, but that much was clear. "We'll take the east passage. Quartermaster! Port your helm. Steady! Steady as you go!"

With the wind on her quarter *Atropos* headed for the entrance like a stag, even with her sail reduced to topsails and headsails. The entrance became better defined as she approached; two bold points running to meet each other with a lofty island in between. It was obvious why Red Cliff Point was so named; elsewhere there was a dark, straggling growth of pine trees on capes and island, while on the summits could just be seen the rectangular outlines of small forts.

"They don't keep those manned, sir," said Turner. "Gone to rack and ruin like everything else."

"You say the east passage is absolutely clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well."

Atropos headed in, with Hornblower giving his orders to the wheel. There was no flag flying on shore, and until one could be seen there was no question of firing a salute. From point to island the entrance extended a scant half mile, possibly less; now they could see through it, to the wide waters of Marmorice Bay, with high mountains surrounding it on nearly every side, except to the northward.

"There's the town, sir," said Turner. "Not much of a place."

A white tower — a minaret — caught the afternoon sun.

"You can see the red mound behind the town now, sir."

"Where did the *Speedwell* go down?" asked Hornblower.

"Over to port, there, sir. Right in line between the red mound and the fort on Passage Island. The fort on Ada bore sou'-sou' east half south."

"Take the bearing now," ordered Hornblower.

They were through the entrance now. The water was smooth, not smooth enough to reflect the blue sky. Turner was calling the bearing of the fort on Capa Ada. With his own eye Hornblower could judge the other cross-bearing. There was no harm in anchoring close to the projected scene of operations; that would attract less attention than to anchor in one place first and to move to another anchorage later. Jones took in fore and main topsails and headsails smartly enough. *Atropos* glided quietly on.

"Hard a-starboard," said Hornblower to the quartermaster. Round came *Atropos*, the mizzen topsail helping the turn as Jones clued it up. The ship's way died away almost imperceptibly, the tiny waves lapping against her bows.

"Let go!"

The hawser rumbled out. *Atropos* swung to her anchor, in Turkish waters. The crossing of the three-mile limit, even the entrance through the Pass, had been actions that might be argued about, disavowed. But that anchor, its flukes solidly buried in the firm sand, was something of which a diplomatic note could take definite notice.

"Pass the word for the doctor," said Hornblower.

There were many things to do; it was his duty to make contact with the Turkish authorities if they did not make contact with him. But first of all, without wasting a moment, it was necessary to make arrangements for the operation on McCullum. The man's life hung in the balance, and far more than his life.

Chapter XII

Hornblower sat waiting in his cabin. "A few minutes" had been Eisenbeiss's estimate of the time necessary for the operation. It was necessary, Hornblower knew, to work as quickly as possible, so as to minimize the shock to the patient.

"In the old *Hannibal*, sir," said the sickberth attendant whom Hornblower had questioned regarding his experience, "we took off eleven legs in half an hour. That was at Algeciras, sir."

But amputations were relatively simple. A full half of all amputation cases survived — Nelson himself had lost an arm, amputated on a dark night in a moderate storm at sea, and he had lived until a musket bullet killed him at Trafalgar. This was not an amputation. It was something which would be worse than useless if Eisenbeiss's diagnosis was incorrect and which could easily fail in any case.

The ship was very still and quiet. Hornblower knew that all his crew were taking a morbid interest in the fate of the "poor gentleman". They were sentimental about McCullum, lying at death's door as a result of a bullet wound he need never have received; the fact that he was going to be cut about with a knife had an unholy attraction for them; the fact that in a few minutes he might be dead, might have gone through those mysterious doors they all feared to go through invested his personality with some special quality in their eyes. Sentries had to be posted to keep out all the sentimental, the inquisitive and the morbid-minded among the crew, and now Hornblower could tell by the silence that his men were waiting in shuddering silence for the

climax, hoping perhaps to hear a scream or a groan, waiting as they would wait to see a condemned criminal turned off the hangman's cart. He could hear the heavy ticking of his watch as he waited.

Now there were distant sounds, but sounds in the little wooden ship were susceptible to so many possible interpretations that he would not at first allow himself to think that they might arise as a result of the ending of the operation. But then there were steps and voices outside his cabin door, the sentry speaking and then Eisenbeiss, and then came a knock.

"Come in," said Hornblower, trying to keep his voice indifferent; the first sight of Eisenbeiss as he entered was enough to tell Hornblower that all was as well as could be hoped. There was an obvious lightheartedness about the doctor's elephantine movements.

"I found the bullet," said Eisenbeiss. "It was where I thought — at the inferior angle of the scapula."

"Did you get it out?" asked Hornblower; the fact that he did not correct Eisenbeiss for omitting the "sir" was proof — if anyone had been present to notice it — that he was not as calm as he appeared.

"Yes," said Eisenbeiss.

He laid something on the table in front of Hornblower, with a gesture positively dramatic. It was the bullet, mis-shapen, flattened to an irregular disc, with a raw scratch on one surface.

"That is where my scalpel cut into it," said Eisenbeiss proudly. "I went straight to the right place."

Hornblower picked the thing up gingerly to examine it.

"You see," said Eisenbeiss, "it was as I said. The bullet struck the ribs, breaking them, and then glanced off, passing back between the bone and the muscle."

"Yes, I see," said Hornblower.

"And there are these as well," went on Eisenbeiss, laying something else in front of Hornblower with the same sort of conscious pride as a conjuror at a fair bringing the rabbit out of the hat.

"Is this the wad?" asked Hornblower, puzzled, and making no attempt to pick up the horrid little object.

"No," said Eisenbeiss, "that is how my forceps brought it out. But see —"

Eisenbeiss's large fingers plucked the object into successive layers.

"I have looked at these through my lens. That is a piece of a blue coat. That is a piece of silk lining. That is a piece of linen shirt. And those are threads of a knitted undershirt."

Eisenbeiss beamed with triumph.

"The bullet carried these in with it?" asked Hornblower.

"Exactly. Of course. Between the bullet and the bone these portions were cut off, as they might be between the blades of scissors, and the bullet carried them on with it. I found them all. No wonder the wound was suppurating."

"You address me as 'sir'," said Hornblower, realizing, now that the tension had eased, that Eisenbeiss had been omitting the honorific. "The operation was otherwise successful as well?"

"Yes — sir," said Eisenbeiss. "The removal of these foreign bodies and the draining of the wound brought immediate relief to the patient."

"He did not suffer too much?"

"Not too much. The men who were ready to hold him still had hardly anything to do. He submitted with good spirit, as he promised you he would. It was well that he lay still. I feared further injury to the lung from the broken ribs if he struggled."

"You address me as 'sir'," said Hornblower. "That is the last time, doctor, that I shall overlook the omission."

"Yes — sir."

"And the patient is going on well?"

"I left him as well as I could hope — sir. I must return to him soon, of course."

"Do you think he will live?"

Some of the triumph evaporated from Eisenbeiss's expression as he concentrated on phrasing his reply.

"He is more likely to live now, sir," he said. "But with wounds — one cannot be sure."

There was always the likelihood, the unpredictable likelihood, of a wound taking a turn for the worse, festering and killing.

"You cannot say more than that?"

"No, sir. The wound must remain open to drain. When applying the sutures I inserted a bristle —"

"Very well," said Hornblower, suddenly squeamish. "I understand. You had better return to him now. You have my thanks, doctor, for what you have done."

Even with Eisenbeiss gone there was no chance of quietly reviewing the situation. A knock on the door heralded the appearance of Midshipman Smiley.

"Mr. Jones' compliments, sir, and there are boats heading for us from the shore."

"Thank you. I'll come up. And if Mr. Turner's not on deck tell him I want to see him there."

Some of the gaily-painted boats in the distance were under oars, but the nearest one was under a lateen sail, lying very close to the wind. As Hornblower watched her she took in her sail, went about, and reset it on the other tack. The lateen rig had its disadvantages. On the new tack the boat would fetch up alongside *Atropos* easily enough.

"Now listen to me, Mr. Turner," said Hornblower, reaching the decision he had had at the back of his mind — overlain until now by a host of other considerations — for the last two days. "When you speak to them you are to tell them that we are looking for a French squadron."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"We are looking for a French squadron. Two sail — that will do. A ship of the line and frigate, escaped from Corfu three weeks back. The first thing you ask is whether they have touched here."

"Aye aye, sir."

Turner was not very clear on the point yet.

"Admiral — Admiral Harvey has sent us in for news. He's cruising off Crete looking for them with four sail of the line. Four will do. Enough force to make them respect us."

"I see, sir."

"You're quite sure you do?"

"Yes, sir."

It was irksome being dependent on Turner to interpret for him. With Spanish authorities, or French, Hornblower could have conducted his own negotiations, but not with Turks.

"Remember, that's the first thing you ask, the very first. Have two French ships touched here? Then you can go on to get permission to fill the water casks. We'll buy fresh vegetables, too, and a couple of bullocks, if we can."

"Yes, sir."

"Keep it in your mind all the time that we're scouting for Admiral Harvey. Don't forget it for a moment, and then everything will be all right."

"Aye aye, sir."

The lateen boat was nearing them fast, making surprising speed with the small evening wind; there was a respectable bubble of foam under her bow. She came running close alongside and hove-to, the lateen sail flapping until they brailed up the upper portion.

"Turks, sir, not Greeks," said Turner.

Hornblower could have guessed that without Turner's help; the boat's crew was dressed in dirty white gowns; they wore on their heads round red hats wreathed in dirty white turbans. The gray-bearded man who stood up in the stern wore a red sash about his waist, from which hung a curved sword. He hailed *Atropos* in a thin high voice. Turner hailed back; the jargon he spoke was the lingua franca of the Levant, and Hornblower tried to guess at what was being said. Italian, French, English, Arabic, Greek, all contributed to the language, he knew. It was a little strange to hear the words "Horatio Hornblower" come clearly through the incomprehensible remainder.

"Who is this fellow?" he asked.

"The Mudir, sir. The local Jack-in-office. Harbour master — preventive officer. He is asking about our bill of health, sir."

"Don't forget to ask about the French ships," said Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir."

The shouted conversation went on; Hornblower caught the word "fregata" more than once. The gray-beard in the boat extended his hands in a negative gesture and went on to supplement it with a further sentence.

"He says there have been no French ships in here for years, sir," said Turner.

"Ask him if he has heard about any along the coast or in the islands?"

The gray-beard clearly disclaimed all knowledge.

"Tell him," said Hornblower, "I'll give him five pieces of gold for news of the French."

There was something infectious in the atmosphere, in this Oriental talk — that was the only explanation Hornblower could think of for his using the outlandish expression "pieces of gold". There was no reason why he should not have said "guineas" to Turner. The gray-beard shook his head again; Hornblower, looking keenly at him fancied that the offer impressed him nevertheless. He asked another question and Turner answered.

"I've told him about the British squadron in the offing, sir," he reported.

"Good."

There was no harm in having the Turks believe he had a powerful force to back him up. Now the gray-beard was gesturing with the fingers of one hand outstretched as he answered some question of Turner's.

"He says he wants five piastres a hogshead for us to fill our water casks, sir," said Turner. "That's a shilling each."

"Tell him — tell him I'll give him half."

The conversation continued; the western sky was beginning to redden with the sunset as the sun sank lower. At last the gray-beard waved in farewell, and the boat turned away and unfurled her sail to the dying wind.

"They've gone back to spread their mats for the evening prayer, sir," said Turner. "I've promised him ten guineas for everything. That gives us the right to land at the jetty over there, to fill our water casks, and to buy in the market that he'll open in the morning. He'll take his share of what we pay there, you can be sure, sir."

"Very well, Mr. Turner. Mr. Jones!"

"Sir!"

"With the first light in the morning I'm going to start sweeping for the wreck. I'll have the sweep prepared now."

"Er — aye aye, sir."

"A hundred fathoms of one-inch line, if you please, Mr. Jones. Two nine-pounder shot. Have a net made for each, and attach them ten fathoms apart at equal distances from the ends of the line. Is that clear?"

"Not—not quite, sir."

Because he was honest about it Hornblower refrained from remarking on his slowness of comprehension.

"Take a hundred fathoms of line and attach one shot forty-five fathoms from one end and another forty-five fathoms from the other end. Is that clear now?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can get the launch and long boat into the water now, ready for the morning. They'll carry the sweep between them, dragging the bottom for the wreck. Tell off the boats' crews for duty. I want to start work at first dawn, as I said. And we'll need grapnels and buoys to mark what we find. Nothing conspicuous — planks will do, with seventeen fathoms of line to each. You understand all that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Carry on, then, Mr. Turner, report in my cabin in fifteen minutes' time, if you please. Messenger! My compliments to the doctor, and I'd like to see him in my cabin immediately."

Hornblower felt like a juggler at a fair, keeping half a dozen balls in the air at once. He wanted to hear from the doctor how McCullum was progressing after the operation; he wanted to discuss with Turner the question of what local authorities might be likely to be present in Marmorice to interfere with his work there; he wanted to make all preparations for the next morning; he wanted to be ready with his own plans for raising the treasure if McCullum was unable to give advice; and night orders for the care of the ship in this harbour of doubtful neutrality had to be written; it was only late in the evening that he remembered something else — something of which he was reminded only by a suddenly noticed feeling of emptiness inside him. He had eaten nothing since breakfast. He ate biscuit and cold meat, crunching the flinty fragments hurriedly at his cabin table before hurrying on deck again into the darkness.

It was a chilly night, and the young moon had already set. No breath of air now ruffled the black surface of the water of the bay, smooth enough to bear faint reflections of the stars. Black and impenetrable was the water, beneath which lay a quarter of a million pounds sterling. It was as impenetrable as his future, he decided, leaning on the bulwark. An intelligent man, he decided, would go to bed and sleep, having done all that his

forethought and ingenuity could devise, and an intelligent man would worry no further for the moment. But he had to be very firm with himself to drive himself to bed and allow his utter weariness of body and mind to sweep him away into unconsciousness.

It was still dark when he was called, dark and cold, but he ordered coffee for himself and sipped it as he dressed. Last night when he had given the time for his being called he had allowed for a leisurely dressing before daylight, but he felt tense and anxious as he got out of bed, much as he had felt on other occasions when he had been roused in the night to take part in a cutting-out expedition or a dawn landing, and he had to restrain himself from putting on his clothes in haphazard fashion and hurrying on deck. He forced himself to shave, although that was an operation which had mostly to be carried out by touch because the hanging lamp gave almost no illumination to the mirror. The shirt he pulled on felt clammy against his ribs; he was struggling with his trousers when a knock at the door brought in Eisenbeiss, reporting in obedience to overnight orders.

"The patient is sleeping well, sir," he announced.

"Is his condition good?"

"I thought I should not disturb him, sir. He was sleeping quietly, so I could not tell if he had fever nor could I examine the wound. I can wake him if you wish, sir —"

"No, don't do that, of course. I suppose it's a good symptom that he's sleeping in any case?"

"A very good one, sir."

"Then leave him alone, doctor. Report to me if there is any change."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower buttoned his trousers and thrust his feet into his shoes. His eagerness to be on deck overcame his self-restraint to the extent that he was still buttoning his coat as he went up the companion. On deck as well the atmosphere seemed to be charged with that feeling of impending attack at dawn. There were the dimly-seen figures of the officers, silhouetted against the sky. To the east there was the faintest illumination, a little light reaching half-way up to the zenith, so faint as almost to be unnoticed, and its colour, in its turn, was so faint a shade of pink as hardly to be called that.

"Morning," said Hornblower in response to the touched hats of his subordinates.

In the waist he could hear orders being quietly given — just like manning the boats for a cutting-out expedition.

"Longboat's crew starboard side," said Smiley's voice.

"Launch's crew port side." That was the Prince's voice. He was acquiring a better accent than Eisenbeiss's.

"There's some surface mist, sir," reported Jones. "But it's very patchy."

"So I see," replied Hornblower.

"Last night we were lying two cables' lengths from the wreck as near as makes no matter, sir," said Turner.

"We've swung during the night, with the wind dropping, but little enough."

"Tell me when it's light enough for you to get your bearings."

"Aye aye, sir."

In that short time the eastern sky had changed. One might almost have said it had darkened, but perhaps that was because with the tiny increase in the general illumination the contrast was not so marked.

"You took a third bearing at the time when *Speedwell* went down, Mr. Turner?"

"Yes, sir. It was —"

"No matter."

Turner could be relied upon to manage a simple piece of business of that sort.

"I don't expect the wreck has moved an inch, sir," said Turner. "There's no tide here. No scour. The two rivers that run into the Bay don't set up any current you can measure."

"And the bottom's firm sand?"

"Firm sand, sir."

That was something to be thankful for. In mud the wreck might have sunk beyond discovery.

"How the devil did *Speedwell* come to capsized?" asked Hornblower.

"Sheer bad luck, sir. She was an old ship and she'd been at sea a long time. The weeds and the barnacles were thick along her waterline — she wasn't coppered high enough, sir. So they were heeling her, cleaning her port side, with the guns run out to starboard and all the weights they could shift over to starboard too. It was a still

day, baking hot. Then, before you could say Jack Robinson, there came a gust out of the mountains. It caught her square on the port beam and laid her over before she could pay off. The gun ports were open and the water came up over the sills. That laid her over still more — at least, that's what the court of inquiry found, sir — and with her hatchways open the water rose over the coamings and down she went."

"Did she right herself as she sank?"

"No, sir. I looked over at her when I heard the shout, and I saw her keel. Bottom upwards she went. Her top-masts were snapped clean off. They came up soon enough, main and fore top-masts still anchored to the wreck by a shroud or two. That was a help when it came to taking the bearings."

"I see," said Hornblower.

Dawn was coming up fast. It actually seemed — an optical illusion, of course — as if great arms of colour were climbing up the sky from the eastern horizon at a pace perceptible to the eye.

"It's light enough now, sir," said Turner.

"Thank you. Mr. Jones! You can carry on."

Hornblower watched them go, Turner leading the way in the gig with his instruments and compass, Still following behind in the launch with Smiley in the longboat attached to the launch by the sweep. Hornblower became acutely aware that despite the cup of coffee he had drunk he wanted his breakfast. It seemed almost against his will that he lingered. This dead still calm at dawn was the ideal time for an operation of this sort; it enabled the gig to take up and maintain a position with the least possible effort. The ripples caused by the boat's passage, slow though it was, spread far over the glassy surface of the Bay before dying out at last. He saw the gig stop, and clearly over the water came the sound of Turner's voice as he spoke through his speaking trumpet to the other boats. They jockeyed round into position awkwardly, like two beetles tied together with a thread, and then they paid out the sweep between them, manoeuvred awkwardly again for a moment as they laid themselves exactly upon the correct bearing, and then the oars began to swing rhythmically, slowly, like the pendulum of Fate, as the boats began to sweep the area ahead of them. Hornblower's heart beat faster despite himself, and he swallowed with excitement. Around him the ship was beginning her normal life. Amid the peculiar patter of bare feet on wooden planking — a sound unlike any other on earth — the watch below were bringing their hammocks to stow in the nettings. Swabs and holystones, buckets and pump; the hands not at work in the boats began the eternal daily routine of washing down the decks. Not for the first time on the voyage Hornblower found himself experiencing a momentary envy of the seamen at their work. Their problems were of the simplest, their doubts were minute. To holystone a portion of planking to the whiteness demanded by a petty officer, to swab it off, to swab it dry, working in amicable companionship with friends of long standing, dabbling their naked feet in the gush of clear water — that was all they had to do, as they had done for an infinity of mornings in the past and would do for an infinity of mornings in the future. He would be glad to exchange with them his loneliness, his responsibility, the complexity of his problems; so he felt for a moment before he laughed at himself, knowing perfectly well he would be horrified if some freak of Fate forced such an exchange on him. He turned away, changing the subject of his thoughts; a generous slice of fat pork, fried to a pale brown — there had been a leg in soak for him for the past two days, and the outside cut would be not too salty now. It would smell delicious — he could almost smell it at this very moment. Holy Jerusalem, unless it was still spluttering on his plate when it was put before him despite the journey from galley to cabin he'd make someone wish he had never been born. And he would have biscuit crumbs fried with it, and he would top it off with black treacle smeared on a biscuit, thick. That was a breakfast worth thinking about.

Chapter XIII

Hornblower stood with his purse in his hand, having taken it from his sea chest where it had lain in the inner compartment. He knew exactly how many guineas there were in it, and he was trying not to wish there were more. If he were a wealthy captain he would be generous towards his ship's company, and to the wardroom

and gunroom. But as it was — He shook his head. He did not want to appear miserly or mean, but he certainly did not want to be foolish. He walked along to the wardroom door and paused there; Still caught his eye.

"Please come in, sir."

The other officers rose from their chairs; there was nowhere for them to sit unless they sat round the table in the tiny wardroom.

"I was hoping," said Hornblower to Carslake the purser, "that you would be kind enough to make some purchases for me."

"Of course, sir. Honoured, I'm sure," said Carslake. He could say nothing else, in any case.

"A few chickens — half a dozen, say, and some eggs."

"Yes, sir."

"Is it the intention of the wardroom to buy fresh meat for itself?"

"Well, sir —"

That had been the subject under discussion at his entrance.

"At this time of year there might be lambs to sell. I could have one — two young ones, if they're cheap. But an ox — what am I to do with a whole ox?"

Everyone in the wardroom had been up against this problem at some time or other.

"If the wardroom decides to buy an ox I would be glad to pay a quarter of the price," said Hornblower, and the wardroom cheered up perceptibly.

A captain who bought a share in an animal would always get the best cuts — that was in the course of nature. And they had all known captains who would pay no more than their share. But with five wardroom officers Hornblower's offer was generous.

"Thank you very much, sir," said Carslake. "I think I can sell a couple of joints to the gunroom."

"On advantageous terms, I trust?" said Hornblower, with a grin.

He could remember well enough as a midshipman occasions when wardroom and gunroom had gone shares in an animal.

"I expect so, sir," said Carslake and then, changing the subject, "Mr. Turner says that it'll be goat here, mainly. Do you care for goat, sir?"

"Young kid, stewed with turnips and carrots!" said Jones. "You can do worse than that, sir."

Jones's lantern-jawed face was alight with appetite. These grown men, continuously fed on preserved food, were like children at a gingerbread stall at a fair with the thought of fresh meat.

"Do what you can," said Hornblower. "I'll eat kid or lamb, or I'll share in an ox, as you find the market provides. You know what you're buying for the crew?"

"Yes, sir," said Carslake.

The penny-pinching clerks of a penurious government at home would scrutinize those expenditures in time. Nothing very generous could be bought for the hands.

"I don't know what vegetables we'll find, sir, at this time of year," went on Carslake, "winter cabbage, I suppose."

"Nothing wrong with winter cabbage," interposed Jones.

"Carrots and turnips out of winter store," said Carslake. "They'll be pretty stringy, sir."

"Better than nothing," said Hornblower. "There won't be enough in the market for all we need, nor will there be until the word goes round the countryside. So much the better. Then we'll have an excuse to linger. You're going to interpret, Mr. Turner?"

"Yes, sir."

"Keep your eyes open. And your ears."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Mr. Jones, you will attend to the water casks, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

That was the transition between the social visit and the official issuing of orders.

"Carry on."

Hornblower went to the bedside where McCullum lay. Sailcloth pillows supported him in a position half on his side. It was a comfort to see how comparatively well he looked. The fever and its accompanying distortion of thought had left him.

"Glad to see you looking so well, Mr. McCullum," said Hornblower.

"Well enough," answered McCullum.

He croaked a little, but his speech was almost normal.

"A full night's sleep," said Eisenbeiss, hovering on the far side of the bed. He had already made his report to Hornblower — the wound showed every sign of healing, the sutures had not at least as yet caused undue inflammation, and the draining where the bristle kept the wound in the back open had been apparently satisfactory.

"And we've started a full morning's work," said Hornblower. "You have heard that we have located the wreck?"

"No. I had not heard that."

"It's located and buoyed," said Hornblower.

"Are you sure it is the wreck?" croaked McCullum. "I've known some queer mistakes made."

"It is exactly where the bearings were taken when she sank," said Hornblower. "It is the right size as far as the sweep can show. And no other obstructions were found by the sweep, either. The bottom here is firm sand, as I expect you know."

"It sounds plausible," said McCullum grudgingly. "I could have wished I'd had the direction of the sweeping, nevertheless."

"You must trust me, Mr. McCullum," said Hornblower patiently.

"'Tis little that I know about you and your capabilities," answered McCullum.

Hornblower, swallowing his irritation at that remark, wondered how McCullum had managed to live so long without previously being shot in a duel. But McCullum was the irreplaceable expert, and even if he were not a sick man it would be both foolish and undignified to quarrel with him.

"I presume the next thing to do is to send your divers down to report on the condition of the wreck," he said, trying to be both firm and polite.

"Undoubtedly that will be the first thing I do as soon as I am allowed out of this bed," said McCullum.

Hornblower thought of all that Eisenbeiss had told him about McCullum's wound, about gangrene and suppuration and general blood-poisoning, and he knew there was a fair chance that McCullum would never rise from his bed.

"Mr. McCullum," he said, "this is an urgent matter. Once the Turks get wind of what we want to do, and can assemble sufficient force to stop us, we will never be allowed to conduct salvage operations here. It is of the first importance that we get to work as quickly as we can. I was hoping that you would instruct your divers in their duties so that they could start now, immediately."

"So that is what you were thinking, is it?" said McCullum.

It took some minutes of patient argument to wear McCullum down, and the grudging agreement that McCullum gave was tempered by an immediate pointing out of the difficulties.

"That water's mortal cold," said McCullum.

"I'm afraid so," answered Hornblower, "But we have always expected that."

"The Eastern Mediterranean in March is nothing like the Bay of Bengal in summer. My men won't stand it for long."

It was a great advance that McCullum should admit that they might stand it at all.

"If they work for short intervals — ?" suggested Hornblower.

"Aye. Seventeen fathoms beside the wreck?"

"Seventeen fathoms all round it," said Hornblower.

"They can't work for long at that depth in any case. Five dives a day will be all. Then they bleed at the nose and ears. They'll need lines and weights — nine-pounder shot will serve."

"I'll have them got ready," said Hornblower.

Hornblower stood by while McCullum addressed his divers. He could guess at the point of some of the speeches. One of the divers was raising objections; it was clear, when he clasped his arms about his chest and

shuddered dramatically with a rolling of his pathetic dark eyes, what he was saying. All three of them talked at once for a space in their twittering language. A sterner note came into McCullum's voice when he replied, and he indicated Hornblower with a gesture, directing all eyes to him for a moment. All three clung to each other and shrank away from him like frightened children. McCullum went on speaking, energetically — Eisenbeiss leaned over him and restrained the left hand that gesticulated; the right was strapped into immobility against McCullum's chest.

"Do not move," said Eisenbeiss. "We shall have an inflammation."

McCullum had winced more than once after an incautious movement, and his appearance of well-being changed quickly to one of fatigue.

"They'll start now," he said at length, his head back on his pillow. "You can take 'em. Looney, here — that's what I call him — will be in charge. I've told 'em there are no sharks. Generally when one of 'em's down at the bottom the other two pray against sharks — they're all three of 'em shark doctors. A good thing they've seen men flogged on board here. I promised 'em you'd give 'em a taste of the cat if there was any nonsense."

Hornblower had seen very plainly what the reactions of these twittering, bird-like creatures had been to that horror.

"Take 'em away," said McCullum, lying back on his pillow.

With longboat and launch over at the far side of the Bay for stores and water only the gig and the tiny jolly boat were available. The gig was uncomfortably crowded but it served, with four hands at the oars, Hornblower and Leadbitter in the stern — Hornblower felt he could not possibly endure not taking part in this first essay — and the Ceylonese crowded into the bows. Hornblower had formed a shrewd notion about the extent of McCullum's ability to speak the divers' language. He had no doubt that McCullum made no attempt to speak it accurately or with any attempt at inflection. He made his points, Hornblower guessed, with a few nouns and verbs and some energetic gestures. McCullum's command of the Ceylonese tongue could not compare with Hornblower's Spanish, nor even with his French. Hornblower felt a sense of grievance about that, as he sat with his hand on the tiller and steered the gig over the dancing water — already the flat calm of dawn had given way to a moderate breeze that ruffled the surface.

They reached the first of the buoys — a plank wallowing among the wavelets at the end of its line — and Hornblower stood to identify the others. A stroke or two of the oars carried the gig into the centre of the area, and Hornblower looked down the boat to where the divers huddled together.

"Looney," he said.

Now that he had been paying special attention to them he could distinguish each of the three divers from the others. Until that time they might as well have been triplets as far as his ability went to tell them apart.

"Looney," said Hornblower again.

Looney rose to his feet and dropped the grapnel over the side. It went down fast, taking out the coiled-down line rapidly over the gunwale. Slowly Looney took off his clothes until he stood naked. He sat himself on the gunwale and swung his legs over. As his feet felt the cold of the water he cried out, and the other two joined with him in cries of alarm or commiseration.

"Shall I give 'im a shove, sir?" asked the hand at the bow oar.

"No," said Hornblower.

Looney was sitting systematically inflating and deflating his chest, inhaling as deeply as he could, forcing air into his lungs. Hornblower could see how widely the ribs moved at each breath. One of the other two Ceylonese put a cannon-ball into Looney's hands, and he clasped it to his naked chest. Then he let himself slip from the gunwale and disappeared below the surface, leaving the gig rocking violently.

Hornblower took out his watch; it had no second hand — watches with second hands were far too expensive for him to afford — but he could measure the time roughly. He watched the tip of the minute hand creep from one mark to the next, from there to the next, and into the third minute. He was concentrating so deeply on the task that he did not hear Looney break water; his attention was called by a word from Leadbitter. Looney's head was visible twenty yards astern, his long thick switch of black hair, tied with a string, beside his ear.

"Back water!" said Hornblower promptly. "Pay out that line, there!"

The second order was understood clearly enough by the Ceylonese, or at least they knew their business, for as a vigorous stroke or two sent the gig down to Looney one of them attended to the line over the bows. Looney

put his hands up to the gunwale and the other two pulled him on board. They talked volubly, but Looney at first sat still on the thwart, his head down by his thighs. Then he lifted his head, the water streaming from his wet hair. Clearly he talked about the cold — that sharp breeze must have been icy upon his wet skin — for the others towelled him and assisted him to cover himself with his clothes.

Hornblower wondered how he would set them to work again, but there was no need for him to interfere. As soon as Looney had his white garments about his shoulders he stood up in the bows of the gig and looked about him, considering. Then he pointed to a spot in the water a few yards away, looking round at Hornblower.

"Give way!" said Hornblower.

One of the Ceylonese hauled in on the grapnel and let it go again when the boat reached the spot indicated. Now it was his turn to strip, to inflate and deflate his chest, and to take a cannonball into his hands and drop over the side. Cannonballs cost money, thought Hornblower, and a time might come when he would need them to fire at the enemy. It would be better in the future to play in a supply of small rocks gathered on the shore. The diver came up to the surface and scrambled on board, to be received by his companions just as Looney had been. There was some kind of discussion among the divers, which was ended by the third one going down in the same place, apparently to settle the point in dispute. What he discovered led on his return to Looney requesting by signs a further shifting of the gig, and then Looney took off his clothes again to go down.

The divers were working industriously and, as far as Hornblower could see, intelligently. Later on Looney and one of his mates made a simultaneous descent, and it was on this occasion that Hornblower noticed that Looney's legs and feet, when he climbed in, were scratched and bleeding. For a moment Hornblower thought of sharks and similar underwater perils, but he revised his opinion at once. Looney must have been scrambling about on the wreck itself. There were decaying timbers down there, deep in the bright water, overgrown with barnacles and razor-edged sea shells. Hornblower felt confirmed in his opinion when Looney desired to buoy this particular spot. They anchored a plank there by a grapnel, and then dived more than once again in the neighbourhood.

Now the divers were exhausted, lying doubled up and huddled together beside the bow thwart.

"Very well, Looney," said Hornblower, and he pointed back to the ship.

Looney gave him a weary nod.

"Up anchor," ordered Hornblower, and the gig pulled back towards *Atropos*.

A mile away were visible the lug sails of longboat and launch also on their return journey, coming down with the freshening wind abeam. It seemed to Hornblower as if things could never happen to him one at a time; he had hardly set foot on the deck of the *Atropos* before they were running alongside, and as the Ceylonese made their weary way forward to report to McCullum here were Carslake and Turner demanding his attention.

"The water casks are refilled, sir," said Carslake. "I used the little stream that comes in half a mile from the town. I thought that would be better than those in the town."

"Quite right, Mr. Carslake," said Hornblower. On account of what he had seen in North Africa, Hornblower agreed with Carslake that a water supply that had not passed through a Turkish town would be preferable.

"What stores did you get?"

"Very little, sir, today, I'm afraid."

"There was only the local market, sir," supplemented Turner. "The Mudir has only sent out word today. The goods will be coming in for sale tomorrow."

"The Mudir?" asked Hornblower. That was the word Turner had used before.

"The head man, sir, the local governor. The old man with the sword who came out to us in the boat yesterday."

"And he is the Mudir?"

"Yes, sir. The Mudir is under the Kaimakam, and the Kaimakam is under the Vali, and the Vali is under the Grand Vizier, and he's under the Sultan, or at least that's how it's supposed to be — all of 'em try to be independent when they get the chance."

"I understand that," said Hornblower.

No one who had given any study at all to the military and naval history of the last few years in the Eastern Mediterranean could be ignorant of the anarchy and disintegration prevailing in the Turkish Empire. What Hornblower wanted to hear about was the effect these were producing locally and today. He turned back to Carslake to listen patiently first to his account of what had been bought and what would be available later. "I bought all the eggs there were, sir. Two and a half dozen," said Carslake in the course of his report. "Good," said Hornblower, but without any fervour, and that was clear proof that his mind was not on what Carslake was saying. Normally the thought of eggs, boiled, scrambled, or poached, would have excited him. The untoward events at Malta had prevented his buying any there for himself. He had not even laid in a store of pickled eggs at Deptford.

Carslake droned himself to a stop.

"Thank you, Mr. Carslake," said Hornblower. "Mr. Turner, come below and I'll hear what you have to say." Turner had apparently kept his eyes and ears open, as Hornblower had ordered him to.

"The Mudir has no force here at all worth mentioning, sir," said Turner, his wizened old face animated and lively. "I doubt if he could raise twenty-five armed men all told. He came down with two guards as old as himself."

"You spoke with him?"

"Yes, sir. I gave him — Mr. Carslake and I gave him — ten guineas to open the market for us. Another ten guineas tomorrow, is what we've promised him."

No, harm in keeping local authority on his side as long as possible, thought Hornblower.

"And was he friendly?" he asked.

"We-ell, sir. I wouldn't say that, not exactly, sir. Maybe it was because he wanted our money. I wouldn't call him friendly, sir."

He would be reserved and cautious, Hornblower decided, not anxious to commit himself without instructions from superior authority, and yet not averse to pocketing twenty pieces of gold — pickings for an average year, Hornblower guessed — when the opportunity presented itself.

"The Vali's carried off the local army, sir," went on Turner. "That was plain enough from the way the Mudir talked. But I don't know why, sir. Maybe there's trouble with the Greeks again. There's always trouble in the Archipelago."

Rebellion was endemic among the Greek subjects of Turkey. Fire and Sword, massacre and desolation, piracy and revolt, swept islands and mainland periodically. And nowadays with French influence penetrating from the Seven Islands, and Russia taking a suspiciously humanitarian interest in the welfare of Turkey's Orthodox subjects, there were fresh sources of trouble and unrest.

"One point's clear, anyway," said Hornblower, "and that is that the Vali's not here at present."

"That's so, sir."

It would take time for a message to reach the Vali, or even the Vali's subordinate, the — the Kaimakam, decided Hornblower, fishing the strange title out of his memory with an effort. The political situation was involved beyond any simple disentanglement. Turkey had been Britain's enthusiastic ally recently, when Bonaparte had conquered Egypt and invaded Syria and threatened Constantinople. But Russia and Turkey were chronic enemies — they had fought half a dozen wars in the last half century — and now Russia and England were allies, and Russia and France were enemies, even though since Austerlitz there was no way in which they could attack each other. There could be no doubt in the world that the French ambassador in Constantinople was doing his best to incite Turkey to a fresh war with Russia; no doubt at all that Russia since the days of Catherine the Great was casting covetous eyes on Constantinople and the Dardanelles.

The Greek unrest was an established fact. So was the ambition of the local Turkish governors. The tottering Turkish government would seize any opportunity to play off one possible enemy against the other, and would view with the deepest suspicion — there was even the religious factor to be borne in mind — any British activity amid Turkish possessions. With England and France locked in a death struggle the Turks could hardly be blamed if they suspected England of buying Russia's continued alliance with a promise of a slice of Turkish territory; luckily France, with a far worse record, was liable to be similarly suspected. When the Sultan heard — if ever he did hear — of the presence of a British ship of war in Marmorice Bay, he would wonder what intrigues were brewing with the Vali, and if Sultan or Vali heard that a quarter of a million in gold and silver lay

at the bottom of Marmorice Bay it could be taken for granted that none would be salvaged unless the lion's share went into Turkish hands.

There was just no conclusion to be reached after all this debate, except for the one he had reached a week ago, and that was to effect as prompt a recovery of the treasure as possible and to leave the diplomats to argue over a *fait accompli*. He walked forward to hear from McCullum's lips how much had been learned regarding this possibility.

McCullum had just finished hearing what the divers had reported to him. They were squatting round his cot, with all the attention of their big eyes concentrated on his face, and with all their clothes draped about them until they looked something like beehives.

"She is there," said McCullum. Apparently he had been quite prepared to find that some gross blunder or other had been committed, either in plotting the original bearings or in the recent sweeping operations.

"I'm glad to hear it," replied Hornblower, as politely as he could make himself endure these temperamental liberties of an expert and an invalid.

"She's greatly overgrown, except for her copper, but she shows no sign of breaking up at all."

A wooden ship, fastened together with wooden pegs, and untouched by storm or current, might well lie for ever on a sandy bed without disintegration.

"Did she right herself?" asked Hornblower.

"No. She's nearly bottom up. My men could tell bow from stern."

"That's fortunate," said Hornblower.

"Yes." McCullum referred to some pages of written notes that he held in his free hand. "The money was in the lower lazarette, aft, abaft the mizzen mast and immediately below the main deck. A ton and a half of coined gold in iron chests and nearly four tons of coined silver in bags."

"Ye-es," said Hornblower, trying to look as if that exactly agreed with his own calculations.

"The lazarette was given an additional lining of oak to strengthen it before the treasure was put on board," went on McCullum. "I expect the money's still there."

"You mean — ?" asked Hornblower, quite at a loss.

"I mean it will not have fallen through the deck on to the sea bottom," aid McCuUum, condescending to explain to this ignorant amateur.

"Of course," said Hornblower, hastily.

"*Speedwell*'s main cargo was half the battering train of the army," went on McCullum. "Ten long eighteen pounders. Bronze guns. And the shot for them. Iron shot."

"That's why she went down the way she did," said Hornblower brightly. As he spoke he realized as well the implications of the words "bronze" and "iron" which McCullum had accented. Bronze would endure under water longer than iron.

"Yes," said McCullum. "As soon as she heeled, guns and shot and all would shift. I'll wager on that, from what I know of first mates in these days. With the war, any jumped-up apprentice is a first mate."

"I've seen it myself," said Hornblower, sorrowfully.

"But that's neither here nor there," went on McCullum. "Looney here says she is still, most of her, above the sand. He could get in under the break of the poop, just."

From McCullum's significant glance when he made this announcement Hornblower could guess that it was of great importance, but it was hard to see just why this should be.

"Yes?" said Hornblower, tentatively.

"Do you think they can break in through the ship's side with crowbars?" asked McCullum testily. "Five minutes' work on the bottom a day each for three men! We'd be here a year."

Hornblower suddenly remembered the "leather fuse-hoses" for which McCullum had indented at Malta. He made a hasty guess, despite the fantastic nature of what he had to say.

"You're going to blow up the wreck?" he said.

"Of course. A powder charge in that angle should open the ship at exactly the right place."

"Naturally," said Hornblower. He was dimly aware that it was possible to explode charges under water, but his knowledge of the technical methods to be employed was dimmer still.

"We'll try the fuse-hoses first," announced McCullum. "But I've little hope of them at that depth. The joints can't resist the pressure."

"I suppose not," said Hornblower.

"I expect it'd mean a flying fuse in the end," said McCullum. "These fellows here are always afraid of 'em. But I'll do it."

The bulky figure of Eisenbeiss loomed up beside the cot. He put one hand on McCullum's forehead and the other on his wrist.

"Take your hands off me!" snarled McCullum. "I'm busy."

"You must not do too much," said Eisenbeiss. "Excitement increases the morbid humours."

"Morbid humours be damned!" exclaimed McCullum. "And you be damned, too."

"Don't be a fool, man," said Hornblower, his patience exhausted. "He saved your life yesterday. Don't you remember how sick you were? 'It hurts. It hurts.' That's what you were saying."

Hornblower found his voice piping in imitation of McCullum's yesterday, and he turned his face feebly from side to side like McCullum's on the pillow. He was aware that it was an effective bit of mimicry, and even McCullum was a trifle abashed by it.

"Sick I may have been," he said, "but I'm well enough now."

Hornblower looked across at Eisenbeiss.

"Let Mr. McCullum have five more minutes," he said. "Now, Mr. McCullum, you were talking about leather fuse-hoses. Will you please explain how they are used?"

Chapter XIV

Hornblower came forward to where the gunner and his mates were squatting on the deck at work upon the fuse-hose in accordance with McCullum's instructions.

"You are making a thorough job of those seams, I hope, Mr. Clout," he said.

"Aye aye, sir," said Clout.

They had an old sail spread out to sit on, for the purpose of saving the spotless deck from the warm pitch in the iron pot beside them.

"Five seconds to the foot, this quick match burns, sir. You said one foot of slow match, sir?"

"I did."

Hornblower bent to look at the work. The leather hose was in irregular lengths, from three to five feet; it was typical of the cross-grained ways of nature that animals could not provide longer pieces of leather than that. One of the gunner's mates was at work with a slender wooden bodkin, dragging the end of a vast length of quick match through a section of hose. When the bodkin emerged he proceeded to slip the hose along the quick match until it joined the preceding section.

"Easy with that, now," said Clout. "We don't want a break in that match."

The other gunner's mate set to work with needle and palm to sew and double sew the new length to its neighbour. The joint completed, Clout proceeded to apply warm pitch liberally over the joint and down the seam of the new section. Eventually there would be a hundred and twenty feet of hose joined and pitched and with quick match threaded all the way through it.

"I've picked a couple of sound kegs, sir," said Clout. "Fifty-pound kegs, they are. I have bags of dry sand to fill 'em up."

"Very well," said Hornblower.

Thirty pounds of powder was what McCullum wanted for his explosive charge, no more and no less.

"I don't want to shatter the wreck to pieces," McCullum had said. "I only want to split her open."

That was a part of McCullum's special knowledge; Hornblower could not possibly have guessed how much powder, at a depth of a hundred feet would achieve this result. In a long nine-pounder, he knew, three pounds of powder would throw the shot a mile and a half, random shooting, but this was something entirely different,

and in the incompressible medium of water, too. With a fifty-pound keg and only thirty pounds of powder it was necessary to have some indifferent substance like sand to fill the keg full.

"Send me word the moment you are ready," said Hornblower, and turned back aft again.

Here was Turner, newly come from the shore, hovering about to attract his attention.

"Well, Mr. Turner?"

Turner kept his distance, his manner indicating that he had something very private to say. He spoke in a low voice when Hornblower walked over to him.

"Please, sir, it's the Mudir. He wants to visit you. I can't make him out, but there's something he wants."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said — I'm sorry, sir, but I didn't know what else to do — I said you'd be delighted. There's something fishy, I think. He said he'd come at once."

"He did, did he?"

Things were bound to be fishy in these troubled waters, thought Hornblower, with a simultaneous disapproval of the style of that sentiment.

"Midshipman of the watch!"

"Sir!"

"What do you see over towards the town?"

Smiley trained his glass across the Bay.

"Boat putting out, sir. She's the same lateen we saw before."

"Any flag?"

"Yes, sir. Red. Turkish colours, it looks like."

"Very well. Mr. Jones, we're going to have an official visitor. You may pipe the side for him."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Now, Mr. Turner, you don't know what the Mudir wants?"

"No, sir. He wanted to see you, urgently, it seems like. 'Il capitano' was all he'd say when we landed — the market was supposed to be ready for us, but it wasn't. What he wanted was to see the Captain, and so I said you'd see him."

"He gave no hint?"

"No, sir. He wouldn't say. But he was agitated, I could see."

"Well, we'll know soon enough," said Hornblower

The Mudir mounted to the deck with a certain dignity, despite the difficulties the awkward ascent presented to his old legs. He looked keenly about him as he came on board; whether or not he understood the compliment that was being paid him by the bos'n's mates and the sideboys could not be determined. There was a keen hawk-like face above the white beard, and a pair of lively dark eyes took in the scene about him without revealing whether it was a familiar one or not. Hornblower touched his hat and the Mudir replied with a graceful gesture of his hand to his face.

"Ask him if he will come below," said Hornblower. "I'll lead the way."

Down in the cabin Hornblower offered a chair, with a bow, and the Mudir seated himself. Hornblower sat opposite him with Turner at his side. The Mudir spoke and Turner translated.

"He hopes God has given you the gift of health, sir," said Turner.

"Make the correct reply," said Hornblower.

As he spoke he met the glance of the sharp brown eyes and smiled politely.

"Now he's asking you if you have had a prosperous voyage, sir," reported Turner.

"Say whatever you think fit," answered Hornblower.

The conversation proceeded from one formal politeness to another. This was the way of the Levant, Hornblower knew. It could be neither dignified nor tactful to announce one's business in one's opening sentences.

"Should we offer him a drink?" asked Hornblower.

"Well, sir, it's usual over business to offer coffee."

"Then don't you think we'd better?"

"You see, sir, it's the coffee — it'll be different from what he calls coffee."

"We can hardly help that. Give the order, if you please."

The conversation continued, still without reaching any point. It was interesting to note how an intelligent and mobile face like the Mudir's could give no hint at all of any emotion behind it. But the coffee brought about a change. The sharp eyes took in the thick mugs, the battered pewter coffee pot, while the face remained impassive, and while the Mudir was going through the ceremony of polite refusal and then grateful acceptance; but the tasting of the coffee effected a transformation. Willy nilly, the Mudir could not prevent an expression of surprise, even though he instantly brought his features under control again. He proceeded to sweeten his coffee to a syrup with sugar, and he did not touch the cup, but raised it to his lips by means of the saucer.

"There ought to be little cakes and sweetmeats, too, sir," said Turner. "But we couldn't offer him blackstrap and biscuit."

"I suppose not," said Hornblower.

The Mudir sipped cautiously at his coffee again, and resumed his speech.

"He says you have a very fine ship, sir," said Turner. "I think he is coming to the point soon."

"Thank him and tell him what a wonderful village he has, if you think that's the right thing," said Hornblower.

The Mudir sat back in his chair — it was plain that he was not accustomed to chairs — studying first Hornblower's face and then Turner's. Then he spoke again; his voice was well modulated, well controlled.

"He's asking if *Atropos* is going to stay long, sir," said Turner.

It was the question Hornblower was expecting.

"Say that I have not completed my stores yet," he said.

He was quite sure that the preliminary operations of salvage, sweeping for the wreck, buoying it, and sending down the divers, had escaped observation, or at least would be quite unintelligible from the shore. He did not take his eyes from the Mudir's face as Turner translated and the Mudir replied.

"He says he presumes you will be leaving as soon as you've done that," said Turner.

"Tell him it's likely."

"He says this would be a good place to wait for information about French ships, sir. The fishing boats often come in with news."

"Tell him I have my orders."

The suspicion began to form in Hornblower's mind that the Mudir did not want *Atropos* to leave. Perhaps he wanted to keep him here until an ambush could be laid, until the guns at the fort could be manned, until the Vali returned with the local army. This was a good way to carry on a diplomatic conversation. He could watch the Mudir all the time, while any unguarded statement of Turner's could be disavowed on the grounds of poor translation if no other way.

"We can keep an eye on the Rhodes Channel from here, sir, he says," went on Turner. "It's the most likely course for any Frenchy. It looks as if he wants to get his twenty guineas, sir."

"Maybe so," said Hornblower, trying to convey by his tone that he saw no need for Turner to contribute to the conversation. "Say that my orders give me very little discretion."

With the conversation taking this turn it was obvious that the best tactics would be to display a reluctance that might with great difficulty be overcome. Hornblower hoped that Turner's command of lingua franca was equal to this demand upon it.

The Mudir replied with more animation than he had previously shown; it was as if he were about to show his hand.

"He wants us to stay here, sir," said Turner. "If we do there'll be much better supplies coming in from the country."

That was not his real reason, obviously.

"No," said Hornblower. "If we can't get the supplies we'll go without them."

Hornblower was baring to be careful about the expression on his face; he had to say these things to Turner as if he really meant them — the Mudir was not letting anything escape his notice.

"Now he's coming out in the open, sir," said Turner. "He's asking us to stay."

"Then ask him why he wants us to."

This time the Mudir spoke far a long time.

"So that's it, sir," reported Turner. "Now we know. There are pirates about."

"Tell me exactly what he said, if you please, Mr. Turner."

"There are pirates along the coast, sir," explained Turner, accepting the rebuke. "A fellow called Michael — Michael the — the Slayer of Turks, sir. I've heard of him. He raids these coasts. A Greek, of course. He was at Fettech two days back. That's just along the coast, sir."

"And the Mudir's afraid this'll be the next place he raids?"

"Yes, sir. I'll ask him so as to make sure, sir," added Turner, when Hornblower glanced at him.

The Mudir was quite eloquent now that he had taken the plunge Turner had to listen for a long time before he could resume his translation.

"Michael burns the houses, sir, and takes the women and cattle. He's the sworn enemy of the Mohammedans. That's where the Vali is with the local army, sir. He went to head off Michael, but he guessed wrong. He went to Adalia, and that's a week's march away, sir."

"I see."

With *Atropos* lying in Marmorice Bay a pirate would never venture in, and the Mudir and his people were safe as long as she stayed there. The purpose of the Mudir's visit was plain; he wanted to persuade Hornblower to stay until this Michael was at a safe distance again. It was a remarkable piece of good fortune; it was, thought Hornblower, ample compensation for the freak of fate which had left McCullum wounded in a duel. In the same way that in a long enough session the whist player found that the luck evened itself out, so it was with war. Good luck followed bad — and for Hornblower that was an astonishing admission, although he was ready enough to admit that bad luck followed good. But he must on no account show any pleasure.

"It's a stroke of luck for us, sir," said Turner.

"Please keep your conclusions to yourself, Mr. Turner," said Hornblower bitingly.

The tone of his voice and Turner's crestfallen expression puzzled the Mudir, who had not ceased to watch them closely. But he waited patiently for the unbelievers to make the next move.

"No," said Hornblower decisively, "tell him I can't do it."

At Hornblower's shake of the head the Mudir actually showed a little dismay even before Turner translated. He stroked his white beard and spoke again, choosing his words carefully.

"He's offering to bribe us, sir," said Turner. "Five lambs or kids far every day we stay here."

"That's better," said Hornblower. "Tell him I'd rather have money."

It was the Mudir's turn to shake his head when he heard what Turner had to say. He looked, to Hornblower's searching eye, like a man quite sincere.

"He says there isn't any money, sir. The Vali took all there was when he was here last."

"He has our twenty guineas, anyway. Tell him I want them back, and six lambs a day — no kids — and I'll stay."

That was how it was decided in the end. With Turner escorting the Mudir back in the launch Hornblower went forward to inspect the gunner's work. It was nearly completed. A hundred odd feet of hose, carefully coiled, lay on the deck, and one end disappeared into a powder keg covered over with canvas which the gunner was smearing thickly with pitch. Hornblower stooped to examine what must be the weakest point, where the canvas cover of the keg was sewn round the hose.

"That's as good as I can make it, sir," said the gunner. "But it's a mighty long length of hose."

At a hundred feet below water the pressures were enormous. A minute, indetectable pinprick anywhere in the fabric and water would be forced in.

"We can try it," said Hornblower. "The sooner the better."

That was how it always was — "the sooner the better" might be found written on a naval officer's heart like Queen Mary's Calais. Man the gig, see that all necessary equipment was packed into it, herd the divers into the bows after their last-minute instructions from McCullum, and start off without a minute wasted. Drink coffee with a Turkish Mudir at one hour, and dabble in underwater explosives the next. If variety was the spice of life, thought Hornblower, his present existence must be an Oriental curry.

"Easy!" he ordered, and the gig drifted slowly up to the moored plank which marked the accessible point of the wreck underneath.

Looney knew his business. The canvas-covered powder keg lay beside him; it was bound with line, and Looney took another short length of line, secured one end to the keg, passed the line round the mooring line of the

buoy, and secured the other end to the keg again. He checked to see that the free end of the fuse-hose was properly fastened to the empty keg that was to buoy it up, and then gave a piping order to one of his colleagues, who stood up to take off his clothes. Looney laid hold of the powder keg, but it was too heavy for his spindly arms.

"Help him, you two," said Hornblower to the two seamen nearest. "See that the line's clear and see that the hose is clear, too."

Under Looney's direction the powder keg was lifted up and lowered over the side.

"Let go! Handsomely! Handsomely!" ordered Hornblower.

It was a tense moment — one more tense moment — to watch the powder keg sink below the choppy surface. By the line attached to it the seamen lowered it slowly down, the fuse-hose uncoiling after it as the keg sank. The loop of line which Looney had passed round the mooring line of the buoy made certain that the keg would sink to the right place.

"Bottom, sir," said a seaman, as the lowering line went slack in his hands. Several feet of hose remained in the boat.

The diver was sitting on the opposite gunwale; he carried a sheath knife on a string round his naked waist, and he took in his hands the cannon ball that Looney gave him. Then he lowered himself over and vanished under the surface. They waited until he came up; they waited while the next diver went down and came up again, they waited while Looney took his turn too. Dive succeeded dive; apparently it was not too easy an operation to move the powder keg to exactly the right place under the break of the *Speedwell's* poop. But presumably, down below the surface, the thing was achieved in the end. Looney came up from what seemed to be an extra long dive; he had to be helped over the gunwale and he lay gasping in the bows for some time recovering. Then at last he sat up and made to Hornblower the unmistakable gesture of handling flint and steel.

"Strike a light," said Hornblower to Leadbitter. In all his life he had never properly acquired the knack of it. Leadbitter opened the tinder box, and struck, and struck again. It did not take Leadbitter more than six times before he succeeded. He bent and blew the spark on the tinder into life, took the piece of slow match and caught the fire on it, blew that into life too, and looked to Hornblower for further orders.

"I'll do it," said Hornblower.

Leadbitter handed him the glowing match, and Hornblower sat with it in his hand for a second while he checked once more to see that all was ready. He was tingling with excitement.

"Stand by with the cask!" he said. "Leadbitter, have the stopper ready."

There were four or five inches of quick match hanging out of the fuse-hose; Hornblower dabbed the glowing match upon it. A second's hesitation and it took fire. Hornblower watched the spark run along the quick match and vanish down into the hose.

"Stopper it!" said Hornblower, and Leadbitter forced the wooden stopper into the end of the hose, grinding down upon the brittle ashes of the match.

At five seconds to the foot the fire was now, he hoped, travelling down the hose, down, down, far below the level of the sea. At the far end, next to the powder keg, there was a foot of slow match. That burned at five minutes to the foot; they had plenty of time — no need for feverish haste, however great the urge to hurry.

"Over with it!" said Hornblower, and Leadbitter picked up the empty cask and lowered it gently into the water. It floated there, holding up above the surface the stoppered end of the fuse-hose.

"Oars!" said Hornblower. "Give way!"

The gig swung away from the floating keg. The spark was still travelling along the quick match, Hornblower presumed; it would be some seconds yet before it even reached the slow match down there by the wreck of the *Speedwell*. He remembered to take the time by his watch.

"Take her back to the ship," he ordered Leadbitter; he looked back to where the empty cask bobbed on the surface.

McCullum had said, "I advise you to keep clear of the explosion." Apparently the explosion of a barrel of powder, even far down under the water, created a turmoil on the surface that would endanger the gig. Beside the ship they would be a quarter of a mile away; that should be safe enough. When the bowman hooked on to the main chains of the *Atropos*, Hornblower looked at his watch again. It was exactly five minutes since he had seen the spark passing into the end of the fusehose. The explosion could be expected at any time from now.

Naturally the side of the ship was lined with every idler who could find a place there. The preparation of the charge and the fuse had excited gossip throughout the ship.

Hornblower changed his mind about awaiting the explosion in the gig and mounted to the deck.

"Mr. Jones!" he bellowed. "Is this a raree-show? Keep the hands at work, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

He very much wanted to see the explosion himself, but he feared to display curiosity inconsonant with his dignity. And there was the chance — a likely chance, according to McCullum — that there would be no explosion at all. A glance at his watch showed him that it was by now overdue. With an appearance of the utmost indifference he strolled forward to McCullum's bedside, where McCullum was listening to the reports of his divers.

"Nothing as yet?" said McCullum.

"Nothing."

"I never trust a fuse-hose beyond five fathoms," said McCullum, "even when I handle it myself."

Hornblower kept back an irritated answer, and gazed out towards the scene of his recent activities. In the choppy water he could just perceive at intervals the dark spot which was the keg that floated the end of the fuse-hose. He glanced at his watch again.

"Long overdue," he said.

"Water's in that hose. You'll have to use a flying-fuse after all."

"The sooner the better," said Hornblower. "How do I set about it?" He was glad for the sake of his precious dignity that he had not waited in sight of the men.

Chapter XV

This time so many men were wanted for the operation that Hornblower was using the launch instead of the gig. As usual the three Ceylonese divers were huddled in the bows, but next to them in the bottom of the boat stood an iron pot of melted pitch, and beside it squatted a sailmaker's mate, and Mr. Clout, the gunner, sat amidships with the powder keg between his legs. The canvas covering to the keg was incompletely sewn, gaping wide at the upper end. They dropped the grapnel and the launch rode on the little waves beside the little keg that floated with the end of the useless fuse-hose, a monument to the previous failure.

"Carry on, Mr. Clout," said Hornblower.

This was something more than exciting. This was dangerous. The divers stripped themselves for their work, and sat up to begin their exercises of inflating and deflating their lungs. There would not be any time to spare later. Clout took the tinderbox and proceeded to strike a spark upon the tinder, crouching low to shelter it from the small breeze which blew over the surface of the Bay. He caught fire upon the slow match, brought it to a glow, and looked over at Hornblower.

"Carry on, I said," said Hornblower.

Clout dabbed the slow match upon the fuse that protruded through a hole in the end of the powder keg. Hornblower could hear the faint irregular hissing of the fuse as Clout waited for it to burn down into the hole. Among them now, in the middle of the boat, fire was creeping towards thirty pounds of gunpowder. If there were a few powder grains out of place, if the fuse were the least faulty, there would come a sudden crashing explosion which would blow them and the boat to fragments. There was not a sound in the boat save the hissing of the fuse. The spark crept down into the hole. The powder keg at this upper end had a double head, the result of the most careful work by the ship's cooper. In the space between the two heads was coiled the fuse, whose farther end penetrated the inner head to rest amid the powder. Along that coil stapled to the inner head the fire was now moving unseen, creeping round on its way to dive down along its final length through the inner head.

Clout took from his pocket the canvas-covered stopper, and dipped it into the warm pitch.

"Make sure of it, Mr. Clout," said Hornblower.

Clout rammed the stopper into the hole in the outer head. The action cut off the sound of the hissing fuse, but everyone in the boat knew that the fire was still pursuing its inexorable way inside. Clout smeared pitch thickly about the stopper and then moved out of the way.

"Now, my hearty," he said to the sailmaker's mate.

This last needed no urging. Needle and palm in hand, he took Clout's place and sewed up the canvas cover over the top of the keg.

"Keep those stitches small," said Hornblower; the sailmaker's mate, crouching over instant death, was not unnaturally nervous. So was Hornblower, but the irritation caused by the previous failure made him anxious that the work should be well done.

The sailmaker's mate finished the last stitch, oversewed it, and, whipping out his sheath knife, cut the twine. There could be hardly anything more harmless in appearance than that canvas-covered keg. It looked a stupid, a brainless object, standing there in the boat. Rout was already daubing pitch over the newly-sewn end; the sides and the other end had been thickly pitched before the keg was put into the launch.

"Now the line," said Hornblower.

As on the previous occasion a loop of line attached to the keg was passed round the mooring line of the buoy and secured to the keg again.

"Hoist it, you two. Lower away. Handsomely."

The keg sank below the surface, dangling on the lowering line as the men let it down hand over hand. There was a sudden relief from tension in the boat, marked by a sudden babble of talk.

"Silence!" said Hornblower.

Even though the thing was invisible now, sinking down to the bottom of the Bay, it was still deadly — the men did not understand that. One of the divers was already sitting on the gunwale, a cannon-ball in his hands — that was a ridiculous moment for Hornblower to remember that he had not carried out his earlier resolution to get in a store of rocks for that purpose — and his chest expanding and contracting. Hornblower would have liked to tell him to make certain to place the powder keg to the best advantage, but that was impossible owing to the difficulties of language. He had to content himself with a glance, half encouragement and half threat.

"Bottom, sir," announced the seaman at the lowering line.

The diver slipped from the gunwale and vanished under the surface. Down there with the powder charge and the glowing fuse he was in worse peril even than before. "They've seen one of their mates blown to bits using a flying fuse off Cuddalore," McCullum had said. Hornblower wanted nothing like that to happen now. It occurred to him that if it were to happen the launch, with him in it, would be on top of the explosion and turmoil, and he wondered what was the mysterious force that always drove him into voluntarily taking part in dangerous adventures. He thought it must be curiosity, and then he realized that it was a sense of shame as well; and it never occurred to him that a sense of duty had something to do with it too.

The second diver was sitting on the gunwale, cannon-ball in hand and breathing deeply, and the moment the first diver's head broke water he let himself slip down and vanished. "I've put the fear of God into 'em," McCullum had said. "I've told 'em that if the charge explodes without being properly placed they'll all get two dozen. An' I've said we're here to stay. No matter how long we try to get the money up. So you can rely on 'em. They'll do their best."

And they certainly were doing their best. Looney was waiting on the gunwale now, and down he went as soon as the second diver appeared. They wanted to waste no time at all. Not for the first time Hornblower peered overside in the attempt to see down through the water, unsuccessfully again. It was clear, and the loveliest deep green, but there was just sufficient lop and commotion on the surface to make it impossible to see down. Hornblower had to take it for granted that deep down below, in semi-darkness at least, and amid paralysing cold, Looney was dragging the powder charge towards the wreck and shoving it under the break of the poop. That powder keg under water could weigh little enough, thanks to the upthrust that Archimedes discovered, twenty centuries ago.

Looney reappeared, and the first diver instantly went down to replace him. This business was for the divers a gamble with life and death, a losing lottery. If the charge were to explode prematurely it would be chance that would dictate who would happen to be down there with it at that moment. But surely it could not take long to move the charge a few yards along the bottom and into the right place. And down there, he hoped, the fire

was creeping along the coils of the fuse, sandwiched tight between the two barrel-heads. The philosophers had decided that fuses were able to burn in the absence of air — unlike candles — because the nitre that permeated the cord supplied the same combustible substance that air supplied. It was a discovery that went close to solving the problem of life — a human being's life went out like a candle's in the absence of air. It might be reasonably expected soon that the discovery might be made as to how to maintain life without air. Yet another dive. The fire was hurrying along the fuse. Clout had allowed enough for an hour's burning — it must not be too little, obviously, but also it must not be too much, for the longer the keg was exposed to the water pressure the greater the chance of a weak point giving way and water seeping in. But Clout had pointed out that in that confined space between the barrel-heads the heat would not be able to escape; it would grow hotter and hotter in there and the fuse would burn faster — the fire might even jump from one part of the coil to another. The rate of burning, in other words, was unpredictable.

The diver who had just appeared gave a sharp cry, in time to prevent the next one — Looney — from going down. An eager question and answer, and Looney turned to Hornblower with a waving of hands.

"Get that man on board," ordered Hornblower. "Up anchor!"

A few strokes of the oars got the launch under weigh; the Ceylonese in the bows were chattering like sparrows at dawn.

"Back to the ship," ordered Hornblower.

He would go straight on board without looking back once; he would not compromise his dignity by awaiting an explosion which might never come. The tiller was put over and the launch began her steady course towards *Atropos*.

And then it happened, while Hornblower's back was turned to it. A sullen, muffled roar, not very loud, as if a gun had been fired in a distant cave. Hornblower swung round in his seat just in time to see a bulging wave overtake them, heaving up the stern of the launch. The stern sank and bow rose, the launch pitching violently, like a child's toy boat in a tub. The water that surged round them was discoloured and dark. It was only for a few seconds that the violent commotion lasted, and then it passed on, leaving the launch rocking jerkily.

"She's gone up, sir," said Clout, quite unnecessarily.

The hands were chattering as much as the Ceylonese.

"Silence in the boat!" said Hornblower.

He was angry with himself because the unexpected sound had caused him to leap in his seat. He glowered at the men, and they fell into a hushed silence.

"Starboard your helm," growled Hornblower. "Give way!"

The launch swung round and retraced its course towards the scene of the explosion, marked by a dirty patch of water. Half a dozen big bubbles rose to the surface and burst as he watched. Then something else came up, and something else, dead fish floating up to the surface, their white bellies gleaming under the sky. The launch passed one which was not quite dead; it was making feeble efforts, just perceptible, to right itself and descend again.

"Silence!" said Hornblower again — the irrepressible chatter had broken out again. "Easy!"

In silence the launch floated over the scene of the explosion. Dead fish, a stain, and nothing else. Nothing else at all. Hornblower felt a sick feeling of disappointment; there should be fragments from the wreck covering the surface, shattered bits of timber to show that the powder charge had done its work. The fact that there was none was proof that no gap had been blown in the wreck. His mind was racing into the future. Another charge with another flying fuse would have to be used, he supposed, and the most brutal threats would have to be employed towards the divers to make them put it into position. They had escaped the last explosion by not more than thirty seconds, he supposed, and they would be chary of running the risk again.

There was a bit of timber! No, it was the plank which had been used as a marker buoy.

"Haul in on that line," said Hornblower to the man pulling stroke oar. There was only ten feet of line attached to the plank — the line had been broken at that point; so the explosion had effected something, at least. It was ironical that that was all — just a marker buoy torn loose.

"Put on another grapnel and line," ordered Hornblower. They must still be close enough to the spot for the marker to be better than nothing.

Hornblower caught Looney's eye; he seemed willing enough to all appearance. It would save time if an examination of the scant results were made now.

"Looney," said Hornblower, and pointed overside. He had only to point a second time for Looney to nod his agreement and pull off his clothes again. As far as Hornblower could remember Looney had not yet made his daily quota of five dives yet. Looney inflated his chest and slipped in, and the launch lay drifting. The little waves that slapped against her sides had a different quality from usual; they had not even the small amount of system arising from the wind that agitated the surface — they seemed to come from all points at once. Hornblower realized that they were the last dying remnants of turbulence which the explosion had set up. Up came Looney, his slender bundle of black hair bobbing beside his face. His white teeth showed in what might almost be thought to be a smile, except that of course he was gasping for breath. He struck out towards the launch saying something to his colleagues as he did so which set them off twittering volubly. Apparently the explosion which had torn the marker buoy loose had not driven it any distance from its position. They hauled Looney on board into the bows. The chattering went on; now Looney was making his way aft over the thwarts and between the men. He was rubbing something in a portion of his clothing as he came — something which he put into Hornblower's hand with a broad grin. Something disc-shaped and heavy, tarnished, encrusted, and yet — and yet —

"God bless my soul," said Hornblower.

It was a shilling; Hornblower could only stare at it, and turn it over in his fingers. Every eye in the boat was directed at it; the men were quick enough to guess even if they could not see it clearly. Someone started to cheer, and the others took it up. Hornblower looked down the boat at the grinning faces. Even Clout was waving his hat and yelling.

"Silence!" shouted Hornblower. "Mr. Clout, you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

But the noise did not stop instantly as before; the men were too excited. But it died away at length, and the men waited. Hornblower had to think now about the next moves completely at a loss — this development had taken him by surprise and he had no idea for the moment what to do next. It would have to be anti-climax, he decided at last. For the recovery of the treasure fresh equipment would be necessary; that was certain. The divers had made nearly as many dives that day as they could. Moreover, McCullum must be informed of the results of the explosion and his decision heard regarding further steps. Hornblower even realized that there was no certainty that subsequent operations would be easy. One shilling did not make a quarter of a million sterling. There might be much further work necessary.

"Oars!" he snapped at the waiting men. The oar-looms clattered into the rowlocks and the men bent forward ready to pull. "Give way!"

The oar-blades bit into the water and the launch slowly gathered way.

"Head for the ship!" he growled at the coxswain.

He sat glowing in the stern-sheets. Anyone seeing his face might well have thought that the launch was returning after a complete failure, but it was merely that he was annoyed with himself at not being quick-witted enough to have had the appropriate orders ready at once when that astonishing shilling was put into his hand. The whole boat's crew had seen him at a loss. His precious dignity was hurt. When he got on board he was inclined to sulk in his cabin, but common sense made him go forward soon to discuss the situation with McCullum.

"There's a cascade of silver," said McCullum, who had been listening to the reports of the divers. "The bags have rotted, and when the treasure room was blown open the silver poured out. I think that's clear enough."

"And the gold?" asked Hornblower.

"Looney can't tell me as yet," said McCullum. "If I had been in the launch I daresay I should have acquired more information."

Hornblower bit back an angry retort. Nothing would please McCullum better than a quarrel, and he had no wish to indulge him.

"At least the explosion served its purpose," he said pacifically.

"Like enough."

"Then why," asked Hornblower — the question had been awaiting the asking for a long time — "if the wreck was blown open why didn't wreckage come to the surface?"

"You don't know?" asked McCullum in reply, dearly gratified at possessing superior knowledge.

"No."

"That's one of the elementary facts of science. Timber submerged at great depths soon becomes waterlogged."

"Indeed?"

"Wood only floats — as I presume you known — virtue of the air contained in the cavities in its substance. Under pressure that air is squeezed out, and, deprived of this upthrust, the residual material has no tendency to rise."

"I see," said Hornblower. "Thank you, Mr. McCullum."

"I am accustomed by now," said McCullum, "to supplementing the education of King's officers."

"Then I trust," said Hornblower, still keeping his temper, "you will continue with mine. What is the next step to take?"

McCullum pursed his lips.

"If that damned Dutch doctor," he said, "would only have the sense to allow me out of this bed I could attend to it all myself."

"He'll have the stitches out of you soon," said Hornblower. "Meanwhile time is of importance."

It was infuriating that a captain in his own ship should have to endure this sort of insolence. Hornblower thought of the official complaints he could make. He could quarrel with McCullum, abandon the whole attempt, and in his report to Collingwood he would declaim that "owing to the complete lack of co-operation on the part of Mr. William McCullum, of the Honourable East India Company's Service" the expedition had ended in failure. No doubt McCullum would then be rapped on the knuckles officially. But it was better to achieve success, even without receiving any sympathy for the trials he was enduring, than to return with the best of excuses empty-handed. It was just as meritorious to pocket his pride and to coax McCullum into giving clear instructions as it was to head a boarding party on to an enemy's deck. Just as meritorious — although less likely to achieve a paragraph in the Gazette. He forced himself to ask the right questions and to listen to McCullum's grudging explanations of what should next be done.

And it was pleasant, later, when eating his dinner, to be able to congratulate himself on his duty done, orders given, all prepared. Those words of McCullum's, "a cascade of silver," ran in his mind as he sat and ate. It called for little imagination to conjure up a mental picture of the wreck down there in the translucent water, with her strong-room torn open and the silver in a frozen stream pouring out of it. Gray could have written a poem about it; and somewhere in that strong-room there was the gold. Life was good, and he was a fortunate man. He slowly consumed his last mouthful of roast lamb, and addressed himself to his lettuce salad, tender young plants, sweet and delicious, the first fruits of the Turkish spring.

Chapter XVI

The Turkish spring was not going to give way to summer without a last struggle, without calling the vanished winter back to her aid. The wind blew wildly and cold from the north-westward; the skies were grey, and the rain lashed down torrentially. It drummed upon the deck, streaming out through the scuppers; it poured in unexpected streams down from points in the rigging; even though it grudgingly gave to the crew the chance to wash their clothes in fresh water it denied them the opportunity of drying them again. *Atropos* swung fitfully to her anchor as the gusts blowing down from the surrounding mountains backed and veered, whipping the surface of the Bay into turbulent white-caps. Wind and rain seemed peculiarly searching. Everyone seemed to be colder and wetter than if the ship were battling a storm in mid-Atlantic, with the deck leaking as she worked in a sea way and the waves crashing down upon it; sulkiness and bad temper made their appearance among the ship's company along with the cold and wet — lack of exercise and lack of occupation combined with the constant drumming of the rain to bring that about.

Walking upon the quarterdeck with the raindrops rattling upon his oilskin seemed to Hornblower to be a cheerless business, the more so until this gale dropped there would be no chance of continuing the salvage

operations. Boxes of gold lay over there under that wind-whipped surface; he hated having to wait through these empty hours before knowing if they could be recovered. He hated the thought of having to rouse himself from his inertia and exert himself to re-establish the good spirits of the ship's company, but he knew he must. "Messenger!" he said, "my compliments to Mr. Smiley and Mr. Horrocks, and I'll see them at once in my cabin."

Half an hour later both watches were assembled on deck by divisions ("Half an hour I'll give you to get it all arranged," Hornblower had said) wearing only their duck trousers in the rain, the cold drops beating on their bare chests and feet. There was plenty of growling at the discomfort, but there was amusement among the topmen because every idler in the ship was there — "I'll have 'em all," Hornblower had said, "waisters and holders, gunner's crew and sailmaker's crew." And there was the excitement always attendant upon a race; and there was the compensation of seeing the three senior watch-keeping officers, Jones and Still and Turner, climbing the ratlines to take their places in the cross-trees to see that the racing was fair. Hornblower stood forward by the knightheads with his speaking trumpet so that the wind would carry his voice plainly along the deck.

"One to get steady!" he shouted. "Two to be ready! Three — and you're *off*!"

It was a relay race, up the rigging of each mast in turn and down again, port watch against starboard; it was the inclusion of the men who rarely, if ever, went aloft that gave spice to the proceedings. Soon divisions down on deck were dancing with excitement as they watched the slow ascent and descent of some lumbering gurneys mate or ship's corporal; until he completed the journey they were not free to dash to the next mast and start again.

"Come on, Fatty!"

The Pegasus-winged topmen to whom the ascent was a trifle leaped up and down on deck with never a thought for the streaming rain as some rival division, set free by the eventual descent of its last man, rushed loyally along the deck to the next mast while they were forced to stand and witness the cautious movements of the slowest of their own side.

Up went the men and down, round and across. The Prince of Seitz-Bunau came shrieking round the deck, wild with excitement; Horrocks and Smiley, captains of the two sides, were croaking like crows, their voices failing them with the continual shouting as they organized and encouraged. The cook's mate, who was the last man of the port watch, was already close to the mainmast head when Horrocks, who had reserved himself to be the last of the starboard watch, began the ascent on the other side. Everyone in the ship seemed to be shouting and gesticulating. Up ran Horrocks, the shrouds vibrating with the ape-like speed of his passage. The cook's mate reached the cross-trees and started down again.

"Come on, Fatty!"

The cook's mate did not even look to see where to put his feet, and he was coming down two ratlines at a time. Horrocks reached the crosstrees and leaped for the deck stay. Down he came, sliding at a speed that must burn his hands. Cook's mate and midshipman reached the deck together, but Horrocks had farther to run to reach his place with his division than did the cook's mate. There was a final yell as both of them staggered gasping to their places, but the cook's mate was first by a full yard, and every eye was turned towards Hornblower.

"Port watch wins!" he announced. "Starboard watch provides the entertainment tomorrow night!"

The port watch cheered again, but the starboard watch — Hornblower was observing them closely — was not humiliated. He could guess that there were plenty of men among them who were not too displeased at the thought of tomorrow exhibiting their talents to an audience and who were already planning their turns. He put his speaking trumpet to his lips again.

"Attention! Mr. Horrocks! Mr. Smiley! Dismiss your teams."

Aft, beside the wardroom door, as Hornblower was returning to his cabin, there was an unusual figure, walking with slow steps under the supervision of the doctor.

"This is a pleasure, Mr. McCullum," said Hornblower. "It's good to see you out of your bed."

"The incision has entirely healed, sir," said Eisenbeiss, proudly. "Not only are the sutures removed, but I have judged it safe to remove the bristle from the wound, as the drainage was complete."

"Excellent!" said Hornblower. "Then that arm will come out of its sling soon?"

"Within a few days. The broken ribs seem to have knitted well."

"Still a bit stiff round here," said McCullum, feeling his right armpit with his left hand. He was displaying none of his usual ill temper; but a convalescent, making his first attempt to walk, and with his wound under discussion, could feel so much in the centre of the picture as to be well disposed towards humanity.

"Well it might be," said Hornblower. "A pistol bullet at twelve paces is not a welcome visitor. We thought we had lost you. At Malta they thought that bullet was in your lungs."

"It would have been easier," said Eisenbeiss, "if he had not been so muscular. The bullet could not be felt in that mass of muscle."

McCullum fished from his left trouser pocket a small object which he handed to Hornblower.

"D'you see that?" asked McCullum. It was the bullet which Eisenbeiss had extracted, flattened and irregular. Hornblower had seen it before, but this was not the moment to say so. He marvelled over it in suitable terms, much to McCullum's gratification.

"I think," said Hornblower, "that this occasion should be observed with a fitting ceremony. I shall invite the wardroom to dine with me, and I can ask you two gentlemen first of all."

"Honoured, I'm sure," said McCullum, and Eisenbeiss bowed.

"Let us say tomorrow, then. We can dine in comfort before the entertainment which the starboard watch is providing."

He retired to his cabin well pleased with himself. He had exercised his crew; he had given them something to think about; he had found a suitable occasion to entertain his officers socially; his salvage expert had returned from the jaws of death and in a better temper than usual — all this, and the *Speedwell's* treasure lay on the Tom Tiddler's Ground of the sandy bottom of the Bay, with gold and silver only waiting to be picked up. His good opinion of himself even enabled him to endure the tedium of the concert given by the starboard watch that night. There were the sentimental songs which a handsome young fore-topman sang; Hornblower found their glutinous sentimentality as wearisome to his soul as the music was to his tone-deaf ear. "The Flowers on Mother's Grave" and "The Empty Cradle" — the young seaman squeezed out every lugubrious drop from their funereal substance, and his audience, with the exception of Hornblower, revelled in it. And an elderly bos'n's mate sang sea songs in a thunderous bass while Hornblower marvelled that a seagoing audience could tolerate the misuse of nautical terms in those songs; if his "good sail" were to "rustle" with a following wind, his officer of the watch would hear from him in good round terms, and there was, of course, the usual landsman's confusion between the sheet and the sail, and Dibdin had never bothered to find out that a "sheer hulk" was still leading a useful existence thanks to its sheers — the term did not imply a complete hulk or anything like it. And of course the song laid stress on the statement that Tom Bowling was dead, like the fore-topman's mythical mother and baby. He had "Gone aloft" and everybody in the ship's company, apparently, felt the better for it.

The hornpipes were more agreeable; Hornblower could admire the lightness and grace of the dancers and could manage to ignore the squeaky sweetness of the flute that accompanied them, played by the same cook's mate whose final effort had won the race for the port watch — his services as accompanist were so necessary, apparently, that they were called for even though the port watch were officially the guests at the concert. To Hornblower the most amusing part of the evening's entertainment, in fact, was the difference in attitude between the two watches, the starboard watch as anxious hosts and the port watch as critical guests. He could congratulate himself again at the end of the evening on a successful piece of work. He had a willing and orderly crew, and a satisfied complement of officers.

And next morning came the real triumph, no less satisfactory in that Hornblower stayed on board the ship and allowed McCullum, his arm still in a sling, to go out with launch and longboat and all the new apparatus that had been constructed for the salvage operations. Hornblower stood at the side of the ship, warmed by the newly returned sunshine, as the boats returned. McCullum pointed with his left hand to a vast heap piled between the centre thwarts of the launch, and turned and pointed to another in the longboat. Silver! The divers must have worked fast down in the depths, shovelling the coins with their hands into the lowered buckets.

The boats came alongside and a working party prepared to hoist the mass of silver on board. A sudden sharp order by McCullum halted the three Ceylonese divers as they were about to make their way forward to their

own particular lair. They looked at him a little sheepishly as he gave a further order in their strange tongue, and he repeated it. Then slowly they began to take off their clothes; Hornblower had seen them stripping themselves so often before in the days — they seemed weeks ago — when the salvage operations had begun. The voluminous cotton garments came off one by one.

"I'll lay a bet," said McCullum, "they've got fifty pounds between them."

One of the garments gave out a mysterious chink as it was laid on the deck, despite the care of the owner.

"Master at arms!" said Hornblower, "search those clothes!"

With a grinning crew looking on the seams and folds of the clothing were emptied of coins, dozens of them.

"They never make a dive," said McCullum, "without trying this on."

Hornblower could only wonder how a naked man climbing from the sea into a boat could possibly manage to convey silver coins into his clothing unobserved, but anything was possible to human ingenuity.

"That would have made them rich for life if they could have taken it back to Jaffra," said McCullum. Reverting to the foreign speech he dismissed the divers, who picked up their clothes again and vanished, while McCullum turned back to Hornblower. "It might be quicker to weigh this than to count it. If we get it all up there'll be four tons altogether."

Silver by the ton! The sailmaker stitched sacks out of new canvas to hold it, and just as in the lost *Speedwell*, the lower lazarette was cleared to store it. And Hornblower found there was a profound truth in the story of Midas, who received the gift of the Golden Touch not so very far from where *Atropos* swung at anchor. Just as Midas lost his happiness at a moment when the world must have deemed him the happiest man on earth, so Hornblower lost his happiness at this moment of success. For as the silver was piled in the lazarette so he came to worry about the coins. He was in no doubt about the ingenuity and persistence and skill of the seamen under his orders; nor was he in doubt about the criminal pasts of many of them, the sweepings of Newgate Gaol. Tales innumerable were told about the remarkable ways in which seamen managed to steal liquor, but the man who stole liquor inevitably revealed himself sooner or later. This was money, English coins, and there was only a frail wooden bulkhead to keep out thieves. So, as in the *Speedwell*, the bulkheads and decks were reinforced by stout timbers nailed across them; the careful and well-planned arrangement of the stores in the hold had to be altered so that the biggest beef casks, the ones that could only be moved by block and tackle, were ranged outside the bulkheads to hinder thieves from breaking through. And even then Hornblower spent wakeful nights visualizing the situation of the lower lazarette and wondering first how he would set about breaking into it and second how he would defeat such an attempt. These feelings intensified each day as the piles of sacks of silver grew larger; and they grew ten times more intense on the triumphant day when McCullum's divers reached the gold.

McCullum knew his work, no doubt about that. One day he told Hornblower of the discovery of one of the chests of gold; the next morning Hornblower watched launch and longboat start off with strong-backs erected in their sterns, and blocks and tackles rigged on them, miles of line coiled in readiness, timbers, buckets, everything that human ingenuity could think of for use in this new task. Hornblower watched through his glass as the boats lay together over the wreck. He saw the divers go down and come up again, time after time. He saw the weighted lines lowered from the tackles; more than once he saw the hands begin to haul in on the falls and then desist while another diver went down, presumably to clear the line. Then at the end he saw the hands haul in again, and stay at work, hauling in, coiling down, until at last, between the two boats, something broke water and a yell of exultation came echoing over to the ship.

It was something quite large which was gingerly swung into the stern of the launch — Hornblower could see the stern of the launch sink and the bows rise as the weight was transferred. His calculations had already told him that a cubic foot of gold weighed half a ton — and gold was at a premium, five guineas in paper or more to the ounce. That was a king's ransom; Hornblower looked at it as the launch came pulling back alongside, a strange object lying in the bottom of the boat, half obscured by weed.

"Those must be wrought iron bars on it," said McCullum, standing beside him while Jones fussily supervised the transfer to the ship, "and best Sussex iron at that. Steel would have rusted to nothing a year ago, but some of those bars are still whole. The weeds growing from the oak must have been a yard long — my boys had to trim 'em off before they got the tackles round."

"Easy there! Easy!" shouted Jones.

"Vast heaving at the yardarm! " shouted the bos'n. "Now, you at the stay tackle, walk away with it! "

The chest dangled over the deck, balancing on its supporting lines.

"Easy! Lower away, yardarm! Easy! Lower away stay tackle! Handsomely! "

The chest sank to the deck; there were little dribbles of water still flowing from inside it. The gold that lay concealed inside it would have built, armed, and equipped the whole *Atropos*, have filled her holds with stores for a year, have provided a month's advance pay for the crew, and still have left a handsome balance.

"Well, that's one of them," said McCullum. "I have a feeling that it won't be so easy to get up the other two. This is the easiest job I've ever done, so far. We've been lucky — inexperienced as you are, you will never know how lucky."

But Hornblower knew how lucky he was. Lucky that McCullum had survived a pistol shot in the ribs; lucky that the Ceylonese divers had survived the journey all round Africa from India to Asia Minor; lucky — incredibly lucky — that the Turks had been so complacent, allowing him to carry out the salvage operation in the Bay without guessing what he was doing and without interfering. It was consideration of this good fortune that reconciled him at last to the worry regarding the guarding of the treasure in the lower lazarette. He was the most fortunate man on earth; fortunate (he told himself) and yet at the same time he owed some of his success to his own merits. He had been clever in his handling of the Mudir. It had been a cunning move to accept a bribe to stay here anchored in the Bay, to appear reluctant to do the very thing he wanted most to do. Collingwood would approve, no doubt. He had recovered the silver; he had recovered one-third of the gold already. He would receive a pat on the back from authority even if McCullum should find it impossible to recover the rest.

Chapter XVII

These Mediterranean mornings were beautiful. It was a pleasure to come on deck as the dawn brightened into daylight; usually the night wind had died down, leaving the Bay glassy smooth, reflecting, as the light increased, the intense blue of the sky as the sun climbed up over the mountains of Turkey. There was a refreshing chill in the air — not enough to necessitate wearing a pea-jacket — so that the increasing warmth of the sun brought a sensuous pleasure with it. During a walk on deck with his mind leisurely working out the plans for the day, Hornblower soaked in the beauty and freshness; and right at the back of his mind, flavouring his pleasure as a sauce might give the finishing touch to some perfect dish, was the knowledge that when he went below he could sit down to a plate of fried eggs and a pot of coffee. Beauty all round him, a growing appetite and the immediate prospect of satisfying it — at least they brought the realization that he was a fortunate man.

Today he was not quite as fortunate as usual, because instead of indulging in solitary thought he had to give some attention to McCullum and his problems.

"We'll have one more try along the present lines," said McCullum. "I'll send the boys down again today, and hear what they have to say. But I'm afraid that chest is out of reach at present. I came to suspect that yesterday."

Two days ago the second of the three chests of gold had been recovered, but only after an explosive charge had blown a wide entrance into the wreck.

"Yes," said Hornblower, "that was the substance of your report."

"It's not easy to make 'em go down right in among the wreckage."

"I shouldn't think it was," said Hornblower.

In the dimly-lit depths, under the intolerable weight of a hundred feet of water, to hold one's breath, suffocating, and to make one's way in among the tangled timbers, must be a frightful thing to do.

"The deck sloped away from the gap in the side, and I fancy the last explosion sent that third chest through and down. The whole wrecks on top of it now," said McCullum.

"Then what do you propose to do?"

"It'll be a couple of weeks' work, I expect. I'll use half a dozen charges — with flying fuses, of course — and blow the whole wreck to pieces. But I must inform you officially that the result may still be unsatisfactory."

"You mean you may not recover the gold even then?"

"I may not."

Two thirds of the gold and nearly all the silver lay already in the lower lazarette of the *Atropos* — a good second best, but as unsatisfactory as any other second best.

"I'm sure you'll do the best you can, Mr. McCullum," said Hornblower.

Already the morning breeze was blowing. The first gentle breaths had swung *Atropos* round from where she lay completely inert upon the water. Now she rode to her anchor again, with a fair breeze coursing along her deck. Hornblower felt it about his ears.

And for the last few seconds something had been troubling him. Subconsciously he had become aware of something, while he had addressed that final sentence to McCullum, like a gnat seen out of the corner of his eye. He looked over at the pineclad slopes of Ada peninsula, at the square outline of the fort on the summit. The beauty of the morning seemed suddenly to turn harsh and grey; the feeling of intense wellbeing was suddenly replaced by sharp apprehension.

"Give me that glass," he snapped at the master's mate of the watch. There was really no need for the glass; Hornblower's powers of deduction had already reinforced his naked eye, and the telescope merely revealed what he was sure he would see. There was a flag waving over the fort on the peninsula — the red flag of Turkey, where no flag had flown yesterday, nor ever since his arrival in the Bay of Marmorice. There could be only one conclusion. There was a garrison in that fort now; troops must have come back to Marmorice — they must have manned the guns of the fort. He was a fool, a stupid, insensitive idiot, blinded by his own complacency. Now that the revelation had come to him his mind worked feverishly. He had been utterly deceived; the Mudir with his white beard and his innocent anxiety had played upon him the very trick he thought he was playing himself — had lulled him into self-confidence, gaining time for troops to be gathered while he thought he was gaining time to carry out the salvage operation. With bitter self-contempt it dawned upon him that all the work on the wreck must have been carefully noted from the shore. Even the Turks had telescopes — they must have seen all that was done. They must know of the treasure being recovered, and now they had manned the guns guarding the exit shutting him in.

From where he stood aft he could not see Passage Island — Red Cliff Point lay in line with it. Without a word to the astonished master's mate he ran forward and threw himself into the foremast shrouds. He ran up them, gasping for breath, as fast as any of the competitors in that foolish relay race; back downward, he went up the futtock shrouds, and then up the fore topmast shrouds to the fore topmast head. There was a flag flying above the fort on Passage Island too; the glass revealed a couple of boats drawn up on the beach in the little cove there, showing how during the night, or at first dawn, the garrison had been conveyed there. The guns on Passage Island could cross their fire with those on Ada and sweep the entrances and could sweep also the tortuous passage between the island and Kaia Rock. The cork was in the bottle. He and the *Atropos* were trapped.

Not by guns alone. The easterly sun, shining behind him, was reflected back from far off in the Rhodes Channel by three geometrical shapes dose together on the horizon, two rectangles and a triangle — the sails of a big ship, a Turkish ship, obviously. Equally obvious was the fact that it could not be pure coincidence that the hoisting of the flags on the forts occurred at the same moment that those sails appeared. The flags had been hoisted as soon as the lofty fort on Ada had perceived the sails; the despised Turk was perfectly capable of executing a well-planned coup. In an hour — in less — that ship would be stemming the entrance to the Bay. With the wind blowing straight in he could not hope to escape, even discounting the fact that if he tried to beat out of the entrance the guns on Ada would dismast him. Hornblower was sunk in despair as he clung to his lofty perch, glass in hand; to the despair of a man faced by overwhelming odds was added the frightful self-contempt of a man who found himself out-tricked, out-deceived. The memory of his recent self-congratulation was like the echoing laughter of a crowd of scornful spectators, drowning his thoughts and paralysing his mental processes.

It was a bad moment, up there at the fore topmast head, perhaps the worst moment Hornblower had ever known. Self-control came back slowly, even though hope remained quite absent. Looking again through his

glass at the approaching sails Hornblower found that the telescope was trembling with the shaking of his hands, the eyepiece blinding him by vibrating against his eyelashes. He could admit to himself that he was a fool — bitter though such an admission might be — but he could not admit to himself that he was a coward, at least that kind of coward. And yet was anything worth the effort? Did it matter if a grain of dust in a whirlwind retained its dignity? The criminal in the cart on the way to Tyburn strove to retain his self-control, strove not to give way to his pitiful human fears and weaknesses, tried to "die game" for the sake of his own self-respect under the gaze of the heartless crowd, and yet did it profit him when in five minutes he would be dead? There was a horrible moment when Hornblower thought how easy something else would be. He had only to let go his hold, to fall, down, down, to a final crash upon the deck and the end of all this, no need for further effort, the end, oblivion; that would be far easier than to face, trying to appear not to notice, the pity or contempt of his fellow men. He was being tempted to cast himself down, as Christ had been by Satan.

Then he told himself again that he was not that kind of coward. He was calm now; the sweat that had streamed down him lay cold upon his skin. He shut the telescope with a click that sounded clear amid the noise of the wind about his ears. He had no idea what he was going to do, but it was a healing mechanical exercise to set himself to descend the rigging, to lodge first one foot and then the other upon the ratlines, to make sure that despite the weakness he felt he accomplished the descent in safety. And, having set foot on deck, it was further good exercise to try to appear quite unruffled and unperturbed, the grain of dust unchanging in the whirlwind, even though he had a feeling that his cheeks were pale under their sunburn. Habit was a useful thing too; to put back his head and bellow an order could set his mechanism working again, as the stopped clock would start to tick again and would go on ticking after a single shake.

"Mr. McCullum! Belay those arrangements, if you please. Officer of the watch! Pipe all hands. Get the launch hoisted in. Leave the longboat for the present."

A surprised Jones came hurrying on deck at the call of all hands.

"Mr. Jones! Get a hawser passed out through a stern port. I want a spring on the cable."

"A spring, sir? Aye aye, sir."

It was a minute compensation for his own misery to see how a glance called forth the last three words after the astonished utterance of the first three. Men who went to sea, and ten times more so men who went to sea in a fighting ship, must be ready for the execution of the most unexpected orders, at any moments even the shattering of the routine of a peaceful morning by an order to put a spring on the cable — a hawser passed out through a stern port and made fast to the anchor cable, so that by hauling in on the spring with the capstan the ship could be swung even though she was stationary, and her guns trained to sweep a different arc at will. It happened to be very nearly the only exercise in which Hornblower had not drilled his ship's company so far.

"You're too slow, Mr. Jones! Master-at-arms, take the names of those three men there!"

Midshipman Smiley went off with the hawser end in the longboat; Jones, running forward, bellowed himself hoarse through his speaking trumpet with instructions to Smiley, to the man beside him at the capstan, to the man aft with the hawser. Cable was taken in; cable was paid out.

"Spring's ready, sir."

"Very well, Mr. Jones. Hoist in the longboat and clear for action."

"Er — aye aye, sir. Pipe 'hands to quarters'. Clear for action. Drummer! Beat to quarters."

There was no marine detachment in a little ship like *Atropos*. The ship's boy who had been appointed drummer set his sticks rolling on his drumhead. That warlike sound — there was nothing quite as martial as the rolling of a drum — would drift over the water and would bear a message of defiance to the shore. The longboat came swaying down on the chocks; excited men, with the drum echoing in their ears, braced the lines about her and secured her; already the pump crew were directing a stream of water into her to fill her up — a necessary precaution against her catching fire while providing a convenient reservoir of water to fight other fires. The hands at the tackles broke off and went racing away to their other duties.

"Guns loaded and run out, if you please, Mr. Jones!"

"Aye aye, sir."

Mr. Jones was startled again. In a mere exercise of clearing for action it was usual merely to simulate the loading of the guns; otherwise when the exercise ended there was the difficulty and waste of drawing wads and charges. At the cry the powder boys went scurrying to bring up from below the cartridges that Mr. Tout

was laying out in the magazine. Some gun captain gave a yell as he flung his weight on the tackle to run out his gun.

"Silence!"

The men were well enough behaved; despite the excitement of the moment they had worked in silence save for that one yell. Much drill and relentless discipline showed their effects.

"Cleared for action, sir!" reported Jones.

"Rig the boarding netting, if you please."

That was a harassing, irritating exercise. The nettings had to be roused out, laid in position along the ship's sides, and their lower edges made fast in the chains all round. Then lines from the yardarms and bowsprit end had to be rove through the upper edges. Then with steady hauling on the falls of the tackles the nettings rose into position, sloping up and out from the ship's sides from bow to stern, making it impossible for boarders to come in over the ship's side.

"Belay!" ordered Jones as the tricing lines came taut.

"Too taut, Mr. Jones! I told you that before. Slack away on those falls!"

Taut boarding nettings, triced up trimly as far as they would go, might look seamanlike, but were not as effective when their function as obstacles was considered. A loose, sagging netting was far more difficult to climb or to cut. Hornblower watched the netting sag down again into lubberly festoons.

"Belay!"

That was better. These nettings were not intended to pass an admiral's inspection, but to keep out boarders.

"Boarding nettings rigged, sir," reported Jones, after a moment's interval, to call his captain's attention to the fact that the ship's company was awaiting further orders; Hornblower had given the last one himself.

"Thank you, Mr. Jones."

Hornblower spoke a trifle absently; his gaze was not towards Jones, but was directed far away. Automatically Jones followed his glance.

"Good God!" said Jones.

A big ship was rounding Red Cliff Point, entering into the bay. Everyone else saw her at the same moment, and a babble of exclamation arose.

"Silence, there!"

A big ship, gaudily painted in red and yellow, coming in under topsails, a broad pendant at her mainmast head and the flag of the Prophet at her peak. She was a great clumsy craft, old-fashioned in the extreme, carrying two tiers of guns so that her sides were unnaturally high for her length; and her beam was unnaturally wide, and her bowsprit steved higher than present fashions in European navies dictated. But the feature which first caught the eye was the lateen rig on the mizzen mast; it was more than thirty years since the last lateen mizzen in the Royal Navy had been replaced by the square mizzen topsail. When Hornblower had first seen her through his glass the triangular peak of her mizzen beside her two square topsails had revealed her nationality unmistakably to him. She looked like something in an old print; without her flag she could have taken her place in the fighting line in Blake's navy or Van Tromp's without exciting comment. She must be almost the last survivor of the small clumsy ships of the lime that had now been replaced by the stately 74; small, clumsy, but all the same with a weight of metal that could lay the tiny *Atropos* into a splintered Wreck at one broadside.

"That's a broad pendant, Mr. Jones," said Hornblower. "Salute her."

He spoke out of the side of his mouth, for he had his glass trained on her. Her gun ports were closed; on her lofty forecastle he could see men scurrying like ants making ready to anchor. She was crowded with men; as she took in sail it was strange to see men balanced across the sloping mizzen yard — Hornblower had never expected to see a sight like that in his life, especially as the men wore long loose shirts like gowns which flapped round them as they hung over the yard.

The nine-pounder forward gave its sharp bang — some powder boy must have run fast below to bring up the one-pound saluting charges — and a puff of smoke, followed by a report, showed that the Turkish ship was replying. She had goose-winged her main topsail — another outlandish sight in these circumstances — and was slowly coming into the Bay towards them.

"Mr. Turner! Come here please, to interpret. Mr. Jones, send some hands to the capstan, if you please. Take in on the spring if necessary so that the guns bear."

The Turkish ship glided on.

"Hail her," said Hornblower to Turner.

A shout came back from her.

"She's the *Mejidieh*, sir," reported Turner. "I've seen her before."

"Tell her to keep her distance."

Turner hailed through his speaking trumpet, but the *Mejidieh* still came on.

"Tell her to keep off. Mr. Jones! Take in on the spring. Stand by at the guns, there!"

Closer and closer came the *Mejidieh*, and as she did so the *Atropos* swung round, keeping her guns pointed at her. Hornblower picked up the speaking trumpet.

"Keep off, or I'll fire into you!"

She altered course almost imperceptibly and glided by, close enough for Hornblower to see the faces that lined the side, faces with moustaches and faces with beards; mahogany-coloured faces, almost chocolate-coloured faces. Hornblower watched her go by. She rounded-to, with the goose-winged main topsail close-hauled, held her new course for a few seconds, and then took in her sail, came to the wind and anchored, a quarter of a mile away. The excitement of action ebbed away in Hornblower, and the old depression returned. A buzz of talk went up from the men clustered at the guns — it was quite irrepressible by now, with this remarkable new arrival.

"The lateener's heading this way, sir," reported Horrocks.

From the promptitude with which she appeared she must have been awaiting the *Mejidieh*'s arrival.

Hornblower saw her pass close under the *Mejidieh*'s stern; he could almost hear the words that she exchanged with the ship, and then she came briskly up close alongside the *Atropos*. There in the stern was the white-bearded Mudir, hailing them.

"He wants to come on board, sir," reported Turner.

"Let him come," said Hornblower. "Unlace that netting just enough for him to get through."

Down in the cabin the Mudir looked just the same as before. His lean face was as impassive as ever; at least he showed no signs of triumph. He could play a winning game like a gentleman; Hornblower, without a single trump card in his hand, was determined to show that he could play a losing game like a gentleman, too.

"Explain to him," he said to Turner, "that I regret there is no coffee to offer him. No fires when the ship's cleared for action."

The Mudir was gracious about the absence of coffee, as he indicated by a gesture. There was a polite interchange of compliments which Turner hardly troubled to translate, before he approached the business in hand.

"He says the Vali is in Marmorice with his army," reported Turner. "He says the forts at the mouth are manned and the guns loaded."

"Tell him I know that."

"He says that ship's the *Mejidieh*, sir, with fifty-six guns and a thousand men."

"Tell him I know that too."

The Mudir stroked his beard before taking the next step.

"He says the Vali was very angry when he heard we'd been taking treasure from the bottom of the Bay."

"Tell him it is British treasure."

"He says it was lying in the Sultan's waters, and all wrecks belong to the Sultan."

In England all wrecks belonged to the King.

"Tell him the Sultan and King George are friends."

The Mudir's reply to that was lengthy.

"No good, sir," said Turner. "He says Turkey's at peace with France now and so is neutral. He said — he said that we have no more rights here than if we were Neapolitans, sir."

There could not be any greater expression of contempt anywhere in the Levant.

"Ask him if he has ever seen a Neapolitan with guns run out and matches burning."

It was a losing game that Hornblower was playing, but he was not going to throw in his cards and yield all the tricks without a struggle, even though he could see no possibility of winning even one. The Mudir stroked his

beard again; with his expressionless eyes he looked straight at Hornblower, and straight through him, as he spoke.

"He must have been watching everything through a telescope from shore, sir," commented Turner, "or it may have been those fishing boats. At any rate, he knows about the gold and the silver, and it's my belief, sir, that they've known there was treasure in the wreck for years. That secret wasn't as well kept as they thought it was in London."

"I can draw my own conclusions, Mr. Turner, thank you."

Whatever the Mudir knew or guessed, Hornblower was not going to admit anything.

"Tell him we have been delighted with the pleasure of his company."

The Mudir, when that was translated to him, allowed a flicker of a change of expression to pass over his face. But when he spoke it was with the same flatness of tone.

"He says that if we hand over all we have recovered so far the Vali will allow us to remain here and keep whatever else we find," reported Turner.

Turner displayed some small concern as he translated, but yet in his old man's face the most noticeable expression was one of curiosity; he bore no responsibility, and he could allow himself the luxury — the pleasure — of wondering how his captain was going to receive this demand. Even in that horrid moment Hornblower found himself remembering Rochefoucauld's cynical epigram about the pleasure we derive from the contemplation of our friends' troubles.

"Tell him," said Hornblower, "that my master King George will be angry when he hears that such a thing has been said to me, his servant, and that his friend the Sultan will be angry when he hears what his servant has said."

But the Mudir was unmoved by any suggestion of international complications. It would take a long, long time for a complaint to travel from Marmorice to London and then back to Constantinople. And Hornblower could guess that a very small proportion of a quarter of a million sterling, laid out in the proper quarter, would buy the support of the Vizier for the Vali. The Mudir's face was quite unrelenting — a frightened child might have a nightmare about a face as heartless as that.

"Damn it," said Hornblower, "I won't do it."

There was nothing he wanted more in this world than to break through the iron serenity of the Mudir.

"Tell him," said Hornblower, "I'll drop the gold back into the Bay sooner than hand it over. By God, I will. I'll drop it down to the bottom and they can fish for it themselves, which they can't do. Tell him I swear that, by — by the Koran or the beard of the Prophet, or whatever they swear by."

Turner nodded in surprised approval; that was a move he had not thought of, and he addressed himself eagerly to the task of translation. The Mudir listened with his eternal patience.

"No, it's no good, sir," said Turner, after the Mudir had replied. "You can't frighten him that way. He says —" Turner was interrupted by a fresh sentence from the Mudir.

"He says that after this ship has been seized the idolaters — that's the Ceylonese divers, sir — will work for him just as they work for us."

Hornblower, desperate, thought wildly of cutting the divers' throats after throwing the treasure overboard; that would be consonant with this Oriental atmosphere, but before he could put the frightful thought into words the Mudir spoke again, and at considerable length.

"He says wouldn't it be better to go back with *some* treasure, sir — whatever more we can recover — than to lose everything? He says — he says — I beg your pardon, sir, but he says that if this ship is seized for breaking the law your name would not be held in respect by King George."

That was phrasing it elegantly. Hornblower could well imagine what their Lordships of the Admiralty would say. Even at the best, even if he fought it out to the last man, London would not look with favour on the man who had precipitated an international crisis and whose behaviour necessitated sending a squadron and an army into the Levant to restore British prestige at a moment when every ship and man was needed to fight Bonaparte. And at worst — Hornblower could picture his little ship suddenly overwhelmed by a thousand boarders, seized, emptied of the treasure, and then dismissed with contemptuous indulgence for him to take back to Malta with a tale possibly of outrage but certainly of failure.

It took every ounce of his moral strength to conceal his despair and dismay — from Turner as well as from the Mudir — and as it was he sat silent for a while, shaken, like a boxer in the ring trying to rally after a blow had slipped through his guard. Like a boxer, he needed time to recover.

"Very well," he said at length, "tell him I must think over all this. Tell him it is too important for me to make up my mind now."

"He says," translated Turner when the Mudir replied, "he says he will come tomorrow morning to receive the treasure."

Chapter XVIII

In the old days, long ago, Hornblower as a midshipman had served in the *Indefatigable* on cutting-out expeditions more numerous than he could remember. The frigate would find a coaster anchored under the protection of shore batteries, or would chase one into some small harbour; then at night — or even in broad day — the boats would be manned and sent in. The coaster would take all the precautions she could; she could load her guns, rig her boarding nettings, keep her crew on the alert, row guard round the ship, but to no avail. The boarders would fight their way on board, clear the decks, set sail, and carry off the prize under the nose of the defences. Often and often had Hornblower seen it close, had taken part. He had noted with small enough sympathy the pitiful precautions taken by the victim.

Now the boot was on the other leg; now it was even worse, because *Atropos* lay in the broad Bay of Marmorice without even the protection of shore batteries and with ten thousand enemies around her.

Tomorrow, the Mudir had said, he would come for the treasure, but there was no trusting the Turks. That might be one more move to lull the *Atropos* into security. She might be rushed in the night. The *Mejidieh*, over there, could put into her boats more men than *Atropos* could boast altogether, and they could be supplemented with soldiers crammed into fishing boats from the shore. If she were attacked by twenty boats at once, from all sides, by a thousand Moslem fanatics, what could she do to defend herself?

She could rig her boarding nettings — they were already rigged. She could load her guns — they were already loaded, grape on top of round shot, depressed so as to sweep the surface of the Bay at close range round the ship. She could keep anxious watch — Hornblower was going round the ship himself, to see that the lookouts were all awake, the guns' crews dozing no more deeply than the hard decks would allow as they lay at their posts, the remainder of the hands stationed round the bulwarks with pike and cutlass within easy reach.

It was a novel experience to be the mouse instead of the cat, to be on the defensive instead of the offensive, to wait anxiously for the moon to rise instead of hurrying to the attack while darkness endured. It might be counted as another lesson in war, to know how the waiting victim thought and felt — some day in the future Hornblower might put that lesson to use, and, paralleling the thought of the ship he was going to attack, contrive to circumvent the precautions she was taking.

That was one more proof of the levity and inconstancy of his mind, said Hornblower to himself, bitterness and despair returning in overwhelming force. Here he was thinking about the future, about some other command he might hold, when there was no future. No future. Tomorrow would see the end. He did not know for certain yet what he would do; vaguely in his mind he had the plan that at dawn he would empty the ship of her crew — non-swimmers in the boats, swimmers sent to seek refuge in the *Mejidieh* — while he went down below to the magazine, with a loaded pistol, to blow the ship and the treasure, himself with his dead ambitions, his love for his children and his wife, to blow it all to fragments. But would that be better than bargaining? Would it be better than returning not only with *Atropos* intact but with whatever further treasure McCullum could retrieve? It was his duty to save his ship if he could, and he could. Seventy thousand pounds was far less than a quarter of a million, but it would be a godsend to an England at her wits' ends for gold. A Captain in the Navy should have no personal feelings; he had a duty to do.

That might be so, but all the same he was convulsed with anguish. This deep, dark sorrow which was rending him was something beyond his control. He looked across at the dark shape of the *Mejidieh*, and sorrow was joined to an intense hatred, like some ugly pattern of red and black before his mind's eye. The vague shape of

the *Mejidieh* was drawing back abaft the *Atropos*' quarter — the soft night wind was backing round, as might be expected at this hour, and swinging the ships at their anchors. Overhead there were stars, here and there obscured by patches of cloud whose presence could just be guessed at, moving very slowly over the zenith. And over there, beyond the *Mejidieh*, the sky was a trifle paler; the moon must be rising above the horizon beyond the mountains. The loveliest night imaginable with the gentle breeze — this gentle breeze! Hornblower glowered round in the darkness as if he feared someone might prematurely guess the thought that was forming in his mind.

"I am going below for a few minutes, Mr. Jones," he said, softly.

"Aye aye, sir."

Turner, of course, had been talking. He had told the wardroom all about the quandary in which their captain found himself. One could hear curiosity in the tone of even those three words of Jones's. Resolution came to lacquer over the pattern of red and black.

Down in the cabin the two candles he sent for lit the whole little space, save for a solid shadow here and there. But the chart that he laid out between them was brightly illuminated. He stooped over it, peering at the tiny figures that marked the soundings. He knew them already, as soon as he came to think about them; there was really no need to refresh his memory. Red Cliff Point, Passage Island, Kaia Rock; Point Sari beyond Kaia Rock — he knew them all. He could weather Kaia Rock with this breeze if it should hold. God, there was need for haste! He blew out the candles and felt his way out of the cabin.

"Mr. Jones! I want two reliable bos'n's mates. Quietly, if you please."

That breeze was still blowing, ever so gently, a little more fitful than might be desired, and the moon had not cleared the mountains yet.

"Now, you two, pay attention. Go quietly round the ship and see that every man is awake. Not a sound — you hear me? Topmen are to assemble silently at the foot of the masts. Silently."

"Aye aye, sir," was the whispered reply.

"Carry on. Now, Mr. Jones —"

The gentle patter of bare feet on the deck as the men assembled acted as accompaniment to the whispered orders Hornblower was giving to Jones. Over there was the vast bulk of the *Mejidieh*; two thousand ears which might catch the slightest unusual noise — an axe being laid ready on the deck, for instance, or capstan bars being gently eased into their sockets. The boatswain came aft again to rejoin the little group of officers round Hornblower and to make his report in a whisper that accorded ill with his bulk and power.

"The capstan pawl's thrown out, sir."

"Very good. Yours is the first move. Go back, count a hundred, and take up on the spring. Six turns, and hold it. Understand?"

"Aye aye, sir."

"Then off you go. You others are clear about your duties? Mr. Carslake, with the axe at the cable. I'll attend to the axe at the spring. Mr. Smiley, fore tops'l sheets. Mr. Hunt, main tops'l sheets. Go to your stations."

The little ship lay there quietly. A tiny rim of the moon came up over the mountains, and broadened momentarily, revealing her lying peacefully at anchor. She seemed inert, incapable of action. Silent men had swarmed up the rigging and were waiting for the signal. There was a gentle creaking as the spring to the cable tightened, but there was no clank from the capstan, for the pawl had been thrown out from the ratchet; the men at the capstan bars walked silently round, and when their six turns had been completed they stood, breasts against the bars, feet braced on the deck, holding the ship steady. Under the pull of the spring she lay at an angle to the breeze, so that when sail should be set not a moment would be wasted gathering stern way and paying off. She would be under command at once.

The moon had cleared the mountains; the seconds went slowly by.

Ting-ting went the ship's bell — two bells; the signal.

Feet pattered in unison. Sheaves squealed in blocks, but even as the ear caught that sound topsail yards and forestay had blossomed into sail. Forward and aft came brief sullen thumpings as axe blades cut through cable and spring — with the sudden end of the resistance of the spring the capstan spun round, precipitating the men at the bars to the deck. There were bruises and grazes, but nobody paid attention to the injuries; *Atropos* was under way. In five seconds, without giving any warning at all, she had transformed herself from something

stationary and inert to a living thing, gliding through the water towards the entrance to the Bay. She was clear of the peril of the *Mejidieh's* broadside, for the *Mejidieh* had no spring on her cable to swing her round. She would have to weigh her anchor, or cut or slip her cable; she would have to set sail enough to give her steerage way, and then she would have to yaw round before she could fire. With an alert crew, awake and ready for the summons, it would be at least several minutes before she could turn her broadside upon *Atropos*, and then it would be at a range of half a mile or more.

As it was *Atropos* had gathered speed, and was already more than clear before *Mejidieh* gave her first sign of life. The deep booming of a drum came sounding over the water; not the high-pitched rattle of the *Atropos'* side-drum, but the far deeper and slower tone of a bass drum monotonously beaten.

"Mr. Jones!" said Hornblower. "Rig in those boarding nettings, if you please."

The moon was shining brightly, lighting the water ahead of them.

"Starboard a point," said Hornblower to the helmsman.

"Starboard a point," came the automatic reply.

"You're taking the west pass, sir?" asked Turner.

As sailing master and navigator his station in action was on the quarter-deck beside his captain, and the question he asked was strictly within his province.

"I don't think so," said Hornblower.

The booming of the *Mejidieh's* drum was still audible; if the sound reached the batteries the guns' crews there would be on the alert. And when he reached that conclusion there was an orange flash from far astern, as if momentarily a furnace door had been opened and then closed. Seconds later came the heavy report; the *Mejidieh* had fired a gun. There was no sound of the passage of the shot — but if it had even been a blank charge it would serve to warn the batteries.

"I'm going under Sari Point," said Hornblower.

"Sari Point, sir!"

"Yes."

It was surprise and not discipline that limited Turner's protests to that single exclamation. Thirty years of service in the merchant navy had trained Turner's mind so that nothing could induce him to contemplate subjecting his ship voluntarily to navigational hazards; his years of service as sailing master in the Royal Navy had done little to change that mental attitude. It was his duty to keep the ship safe from shoal and storm and let the captain worry about cannon-balls. He would never have thought for a moment of trying to take *Atropos* through the narrow channel between Sari Point and Kaia Rock, not even by daylight, and ten times never by night, and the fact that he had not thought of it left him without words.

Another orange flash showed astern; another report reached their ears.

"Take a night glass and go for'rard," said Hornblower. "Look out for the surf."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Take a speaking trumpet as well. Make sure I hear you."

"Aye aye, sir."

The gunfire from *Mejidieh* would have warned the garrisons of the batteries; there would be plenty of time for the men to rouse themselves to wakefulness at their guns, to get their linstocks well alight, so as to sweep the channels with their salvos. Turkish gunners might not be efficient, but the cross fire at East Pass could hardly miss. The West Pass, between Kaia Rock and Passage Island, would not be so efficiently swept; but on the other hand the range was negligible, and with the double turn that had to be made (*Atropos* would be like a sitting duck) there would be no chance of coming through uninjured. Dismasted, or even only crippled, *Atropos* would fall an easy prey to *Mejidieh* coming down through East Pass at her leisure. And, crippled and out of control, *Atropos* might run aground; and she was only a little ship, her scantlings were frail — a salvo from the huge stone cannon-balls that the Turks favoured, plunging from a height, could tear her to pieces, tear open her bottom and sink her in a minute. He would have to take her under Sari Point; that would double, treble the range from the guns on Passage Island; it would be a surprise move; and very likely the guns there would be trained upon Kaia Rock, to sweep the narrowest passage — their aim would have to be hurriedly changed and for a moment at least he would have the rock itself to shelter him. It was his best chance.

"Starboard a point," he said to the quartermaster. That was the moment, like playing his King as third player to the first trick in hand of whist; it was the best thing to do, taking all chances into consideration, and so, the decision taken, there was no room for second thoughts.

The moderate breeze was holding; that meant not merely that he had *Atropos* under full command, but also that wavelets would be breaking at the foot of Kaia Rock and Sari Point, reflecting back the moonlight visibly to Turner's night glass. He could see Ada Peninsula plainly enough. At this angle it looked as if there was no exit at all from the Bay; *Atropos* seemed to be gliding down, unhurried, as though to immolate herself upon an unbroken coast.

"Mr. Jones, hands to the braces and head sail sheets, if you please." The gunners on Ada would be able to see the ship plainly enough now, silhouetted against the moon; they would be waiting for her to turn. Passage Island and Sari Point were still blended together. He held on.

"Breakers on the port bow!"

That was Turner hailing from forward.

"Breakers ahead!" A long pause, and then Turner's high, thin voice again, sharpened with anxiety. "Breakers ahead!"

"Mr. Jones, we'll be wearing ship soon."

He could see well enough. He carried the chart before his mental eyes, and could superimpose it upon the shadowy landscape before him.

"Breakers ahead!"

The closer he came the better. That shore was steep-to.

"Now, Mr. Jones. Quartermaster — hard a-starboard."

She was coming round on her heel like a dancer. Too fast!

"Meet her! Steady!"

He must hold on for a moment; and it would be as well, too, for then *Atropos* could regain the way and handiness of which the sharp turn had deprived her.

"Breakers ahead! Breakers on the starboard bow! Breakers to port!" A chain of long, bright flashes over port quarter; a thunder-roll of reports, echoing again from the hills.

"Hard a-starboard. Brace her up, Mr. Jones. Full and by!"

Coming round now, with Sari Point close alongside; not merely alongside but right ahead with the hollow curve of it.

"Keep your luff!"

"Sir — sir —"

The quartermaster at the wheel was croaking with anxiety; she would be in irons in a moment. The headsails were flapping. From the feel of her she was losing her way, sagging off to leeward; she would be aground before long.

"Port a little."

That would keep her going for a moment. The black bulk of Kaia was plainly visible to port. Sari was ahead and to starboard, and the wind was in their teeth. They were creeping forward to destruction. But there must be — there *must* be — a back lash of wind from Sari Point. It could not be otherwise with that land formation. The headsails flapped again as the quartermaster at the wheel vacillated between going aground and being taken aback.

"Keep her going."

"Sir — !"

It would be close under the land that air would be found if at all. Ah! Hornblower could feel the transition with the acute sensitivity of the seaman; the cessation of wind and then the tiny gentle breath on the other cheek. The headsails flapped again, but in a different mood from before; before Hornblower could speak the quartermaster was turning the wheel in agonized relief. It would only be a second or two that would be granted them, small enough time in which to gather steerage way to get the ship under command again, to gain distance from the cliffs.

"Stand by to go about!"

Steerage way so that the rudder would bite; that was what was wanted now. A flash and a roar from Passage Island — Kaia Rock nearly intercepted the flash; perhaps the shot was intercepted as well. That would be the first gun to be reloaded. The others would undoubtedly follow soon. Another flash, another roar, but no time to think about them, for Hornblower's perceptions told him of the fresh alteration in the feel of the ship. They were passing out into the wind again.

"Headsail sheets!"

One moment more. Now!

"Hard a-starboard!"

He could feel the rudder bite. She was coming round. She would not miss stays. As she emerged into the wind she was on her new tack.

"Breakers right ahead!"

That was Kaia Rock, of course. But they must gather way again.

"Stand by to go about!"

They must hold on until the bowsprit was almost touching. Wait. Now!

"Hard over!"

The wheel spurn. She was shuggish. Yes — no — yes. The fore staysail was drawing. She was coming round. The yards turned as the hands came aft with the lee-braces. One moment's hesitation, and then she gathered way on the fresh tack, leaving Kaia close beside them, Sari Point ahead; no chance of weathering it on this tack.

"Stand by to go about!"

Hold on as far as possible; this would be the last tack that would be necessary. A howl close overhead. That was a cannon-ball from Passage Island.

"Standby! Hard over!"

Round she came, the rocks at the foot of Sari Point clearly visible as she wheeled away from them. A flaw, an eddy in the wind again, but only a second's hesitation as she caught the true breeze. Hold on for safety a moment more, with Kaia close abeam. Now all was safe.

"Mr. Jones! Course South by East."

"Course South by East, sir!"

They were heading into the open sea, with Rhodes to starboard and Turkey left behind, and with a King's ransom in the lazarette. They were leaving behind a prince's ransom, so to speak, but Hornblower could think of that with hardly a twinge.

Chapter XIX

His Majesty's sloop of war *Atropos*, admittedly, was the smallest ship in the British Navy. There were brigs of war smaller than she was, and schooners and cutters smaller still, but she was the smallest ship in the technical sense, with three masts and a captain in command, that King George owned, yet Hornblower was well content with her. There were times when he looked at the captains' list, and saw below his name those of the fifty captains junior to him, and when he noted above his name the slowly dwindling number of captains senior to him — as captains died or attained flag rank — and it occurred to him that some day, with good fortune, he might be posted to a frigate or even a ship of the line, yet at the moment he was content. He had completed a mission and was entering upon another one. He had discharged at Gibraltar two hundred thousand pounds sterling in gold and silver coin, and he had left there the unpleasant Mr. McCullum and his Ceylonese divers. The money was to await shipment to London, where it would constitute some part of the "British gold" that sustained the fainting spirits of England's allies and against which Bonaparte raved so violently in his bulletins; McCullum and his men would wait for an opportunity to travel in the opposite direction, round Africa back to India. And *Atropos* was running before a heavy westerly gale in a third direction, back up the Mediterranean to rejoin Collingwood and the Mediterranean Fleet. She seemed to be lightheartedly free of her encumbrances as she heaved and pitched on the quartering sea; after six months afloat, with hardly six hours on land, Hornblower's seasickness was no longer apparent and he

was lighthearted on that account too, along with his ship. Collingwood had seen fit to approve of his report on his proceedings at Marmorice before sending him on to Gibraltar with the treasure, and had given him, for his return journey, orders that an adventurous young captain would approve of. He was to scour the Mediterranean coast of southern Spain, disorganize the Spanish coasting trade, gather up any information he could by personal observation of the harbours, and then look in at Corsica before rejoining the Fleet off the Italian coast, where it was damming back, at the water's edge, Bonaparte's new flood of conquest. Naples had fallen, but Sicily was held intact; Bonaparte's monstrous power ended when the salt water reached the saddle-girths of his horse. His armies could march where they would, but his ships cowered in port, or only ventured forth on furtive raids, while the little *Atropos*, with her twenty-two tiny guns, had twice sailed the whole length of the Mediterranean, from Gibraltar to Marmorice and back again, without once seeing the tricolor flag.

No wonder Hornblower felt pleased with himself, standing on the plunging deck without a qualm, looking over at the serrated skyline which, in the clear Mediterranean air, indicated the mountains of Spain. He had sailed boldly in within gunshot of the harbours and roadsteads of the coast; he had looked into Malaga and Motril and Almeria; fishing boats and coasters had fled before him like minnows before a pike. He had rounded Cape de Gata and had clawed his way back to the coast again so as to look into Cartagena. Malaga and Almeria had sheltered no ships of war. That was negative information, but even negative information could be of value to Collingwood as he directed the activities of his enormous fleet, covering the ramifications of British commerce over two thousand miles of sea, with his finger on the pulse of a score of international enmities and alliances. Cartagena was the principal Spanish naval base. An examination of it would reveal whether the bankrupt Spanish government had made any effort to reconstitute the fleet shattered at Trafalgar. Perhaps a French ship or two would be sheltering there, on one stage of some adventurous cruise planned by Bonaparte to enable them to strike at British convoys.

Hornblower looked up at the straining rigging, felt the heave and plunge of the ship under his feet. There were two reefs in the topsails already — it was more than half a gale that was blowing. He considered, and then dismissed, the notion of a third reef. *Atropos* could carry that amount of canvas safely enough. Cape Cope lay on the port beam; his glass revealed that a little cluster of coasters had taken refuge in the shallows under its lee, and he looked at them longingly. But there were batteries to protect them, and this wind made any attempt on them quite impracticable — he could not send in boats in the teeth of half a gale. He gave an order to the helmsman and the *Atropos* went hurtling on towards Cartagena. It was exhilarating to stand here by the taffrail with the wind screaming round him and a creamy wake emerging from under the stern beneath his feet. He smiled to watch Mr. Turner's navigation class at work; Turner had the midshipmen and master's mates around him giving them instruction in coastwise navigation. He was trying to ballast their feather-brains with good solid mathematics about the "running fix" and "doubling the angle on the bow" and the "four-point bearing", but it was a difficult task to retain their attention in these stimulating surroundings, with the wind setting the chart fluttering wildly in Turner's hand and even making it hard for the young men to hold their slates steady as it caught their inclined surfaces.

"Mr. Turner," said Hornblower. "Report any case of inattention to me at once and I will deal with it as it deserves."

That steadied the young men to a noticeable extent and made them restrain their animal spirits. Smiley checked himself in the midst of a wink at the young Prince, and the Prince's embryo guffaw was stillborn as a guilty grin. That boy was perfectly human now — it was a far cry from the stuffy German court into which he had been born to the windy deck of the *Atropos*. If ever he were restored to the throne of his fathers he would be free of the thralldom of a sextant, but perhaps he might remember these breezy days with regret. The great-nephew of King George — Hornblower looked at him pretending to study the equilateral triangle scrawled on his slate, and smiled to himself again, remembering Dr. Eisenbeiss's horror at the suggestion that perhaps corporal punishment might come the way of a reigning Prince. It had not so far, but it might. Four bells sounded, the sand glass was turned, the wheel was relieved, and Turner dismissed his class.

"Mr. Smiley! Mr. Horrocks!"

The released midshipmen turned to their captain.

"I want you at the mastheads now with your glasses."

Sharp young eyes would be best for looking into Cartagena. Hornblower noticed the appeal in the Prince's expression.

"Very well, Mr. Prince. You can go too. Fore topmast head with Mr. Smiley."

It was a frequent punishment to send a young officer up to the discomforts of the masthead, but it was no punishment today, not with an enemy's harbour to be examined, and reports made on the shipping inside. Cartagena was fast coming into sight; the castle and the towers of the churches were visible now beyond the sheltering island of La Escombrera. With this westerly wind it was simple enough to stand right in so that from the masthead a view could be had of the inner harbour.

"Deck, there! Captain, sir —"

Smiley was hailing down from the fore topmast head. Hornblower had to walk forward to hear what he had to say, for the wind was sweeping away his words.

"There's a ship of war in the outer bay, sir! Spanish, she looks like. One of their big frigates. She's got her yards across."

That was likely to be the *Castilla*, one of the survivors of Trafalgar.

"There's seven sail of coasters anchored close in, sir."

They were safe enough from the *Atropos* in these conditions.

"What about the inner harbour?"

"Four — no five ships moored there, sir. And two hulks."

"What d'you make of them?"

"Four of the line, sir, and a frigate. No yards across. Laid up in ordinary, I should say, sir."

In past years the Spanish government had built fine ships, but under the corruption and inefficiency of Godoy they were allowed to rot at their moorings for want of crews and stores. Four of the line and a frigate laid up at Cartagena was what had last been reported there, so there was no change; negative information for Collingwood again, but useful.

"She's setting sail!"

That was the prince's voice, high-pitched and excited, screaming down. A moment later Horrocks and Smiley were supplementing the warning.

"The frigate, sir! She's getting sail on her!"

"I can see her cross, sir!"

Spanish ships of war had the habit of hoisting huge wooden crosses at the mizzen peak when action seemed timely. The frigate must be intending to make a sortie, to chase away this inquisitive visitor. It was high time to beat a retreat. A big Spanish frigate such as the *Castilla* carried forty-four guns, just twice as many as *Atropos*, and with three times their weight of metal. If only over the horizon *Atropos* had a colleague to whom she could lure the *Castilla*! That was something to bear in mind and to suggest to Collingwood in any case; this Spanish captain was enterprising and energetic, and might be rash — he might be smouldering with shame after Trafalgar, and he might be lured out to his destruction.

"She's under way, sir!"

"Fore tops! I set! Main tops! I set, sir!"

No sense in courting danger, even though with this wind *Atropos* had a clear run to safety.

"Keep her away a point," said Hornblower to the helmsman, and *Atropos* turned a little to show a clean pair of heels to the Spaniard.

"She's coming out, sir!" reported Horrocks from the main topmast head. "Reefed tops'ls. Two reefs, I think, sir."

Hornblower trained his glass over the quarter. There it was, the white oblong just showing above the horizon as *Atropos* lifted — the reefed fore topsail of the *Castilla*.

"She's pointing straight at us now, sir," reported Smiley.

In a stern chase like this *Atropos* had nothing to fear, newly coppered as she was and with a pretty turn of speed. The high wind and the rough sea would favour the bigger ship, of course. The *Castilla* might contrive to keep the *Atropos* in sight even though she had no chance of overtaking her. It would be a useful object lesson to officers and men to see *Atropos* making the best use of her potentiality for speed. Hornblower looked up

again at sails and rigging. Certainly now there could be no question of taking in a third reef. He must carry all possible sail, just as the *Castilla* was doing.

Mr. Still, as officer of the watch, was touching his hat to Hornblower with a routine question.

"Carry on, Mr. Still."

"Up spirits!"

With a powerful enemy plunging along behind her the life of the *Atropos* went on quite normally; the men had their grog and went to their dinners, the watch changed, the wheel was relieved. Palos Point disappeared over the port quarter as *Atropos* went flying on into the open Mediterranean, and still that white oblong kept its position on the horizon astern. The *Castilla* was doing well for a Spanish frigate.

"Call me the moment there is any changes Mr. Jones," said Hornblower, shutting his glass.

Jones was nervous — he might be imagining himself in a Spanish prison already. It would do him no harm to be left on deck with the responsibility, even though, down in his cabin, Hornblower found himself getting up from his dinner table to peer aft through the scuttle to make sure the *Castilla* was not gaining on them. In fact, Hornblower was not sorry when, with his dinner not yet finished, a knock at the door brought a messenger from the quarter-deck

"Mr. Jones's respects, sir, and the wind is moderating a little, he thinks, sir."

"I'm coming," said Hornblower, laying down his knife and fork.

In a moderate breeze *Atropos* ought to be able to run *Castilla* topsails-under in an hour or two, and any reduction in the wind was to the advantage of *Atropos* as long as she spread all the canvas she could carry. But it would call for judgement to shake out the reefs at the right time, without imperilling spars on the one hand or losing distance on the other. When Hornblower arrived on deck a glance told him that it was time.

"You are quite right, Mr. Jones," he said — no harm in giving him a pat on the back — "we'll shake out a reef." The order sped along the deck.

"Hands make sail!"

Hornblower looked aft through his glass; as *Atropos* lifted her stern he could get the *Castilla*'s fore topsail right in the centre of the field. The most painstaking thought could not bring a decision as to whether or not it was any nearer. She must be exactly maintaining her distance. Then as the topsail hung dizzily in the lens he saw — he was nearly sure he saw — the oblong broaden into a square. He rested his eye and looked again. No doubt about it. *Castilla* had decided that was the moment to shake out a reef too.

Hornblower looked up at the *Atropos*' main topsail yard. The topmen, bent over the yard at that dizzy height, had completed the untying of the reef points. Now they came running in from the yard. Smiley had the starboard yardarm, and His Serene Highness the Prince of Seitz-Bunau the port. They were having their usual race, flinging themselves on to the backstays and sliding down without a thought for their necks. Hornblower was glad that boy had found his feet — of course he was wild with the excitement of the flight and pursuit; Hornblower was glad that Smiley had adopted that amused paternal attitude towards him.

With the letting out of the reef *Atropos* increased her speed again; Hornblower could feel the renewed thrust of the sail upon the fabric of the ship under his feet; he could feel the more frantic leap of the vessel on the wave crests. He directed a wary glance aloft. This would not be the moment to have anything carry away, not with *Castilla* tearing along in pursuit. Jones was standing by the wheel. The wind was just over the starboard quarter, and the little ship was answering well to her rudder, but it was as important to keep an eye on the helmsman as it was to see that they did not split a topsail. It called for some little resolution to leave Jones in charge again and go below to try to finish his dinner.

When the message came down again that the wind was moderating it was like that uncanny feeling which Hornblower had once or twice experienced of something happening again even though it had not happened before — the circumstances were so exactly similar.

"Mr. Jones's respects, sir, and the wind is moderating a little, he thinks, sir."

Hornblower had to compel himself to vary his reply.

"My compliments to Mr. Jones, and I am coming on deck."

Just as before, he could feel that the ship was not giving her utmost. Just as before, he gave the order for a reef to be shaken out. Just as before, he swung round to train his glass on the *Castilla*'s topsail. And just as before he turned back as the men prepared to come in from the yard. But that was the moment when

everything took a different course, when the desperate emergency arose that always at sea lies just over the horizon of the future.

Excitement had stimulated the Prince into folly. Hornblower looked up to see the boy standing on the port yardarm, not merely standing but dancing, taking a clumsy step or two to dare Smiley at the starboard yardarm to imitate him, one hand on his hip, the other over his head. Hornblower was going to shout a reprimand; he opened his mouth and inflated his chest, but before he could utter a sound the Prince's foot slipped. Hornblower saw him totter, strive to regain his balance, and then fall, heavily through the air, and turning a complete circle as he fell.

Later on Hornblower, out of curiosity, made a calculation. The Prince fell from a height of a little over seventy feet, and without the resistance of the air and had he not bounced off the shrouds he would have reached the surface of the sea in something over two seconds. But the resistance of the air could have been by no means negligible — it must have got under his jacket and slowed his fall considerably, for the boy was not killed and was in fact only momentarily knocked unconscious by the impact. Probably it took as much as four seconds for the Prince to fall into the sea. Hornblower was led to make the calculation when brooding over the incident later, for he could remember clearly all the thoughts that passed through his mind during those four seconds. Momentary exasperation came first and then anxiety, and then followed a hasty summing up of the situation. If he hove-to to pick up the boy the *Castilla* would have all the time needed to overhaul them. If he went on the boy would drown. And if he went on he would have to report to Collingwood that he had left the King's great-nephew without lifting a finger to help him. He had to choose quickly — quickly. He had no right to risk his ship to save one single life. But — but — if the boy had been killed in battle by a broadside sweeping the deck it would be different. To abandon him was another matter again. On the heels of that conclusion came another thought, the beginnings of another thought, sprouting from a seed that had been sown outside Cartagena. It did not have time to develop in those four seconds; it was as if Hornblower acted the moment the green shoot from the seed showed above ground, to reach its full growth later.

By the time the boy had reached the sea Hornblower had torn the emergency lifebuoy from the taffrail; he flung it over the port quarter as the speed of the ship brought the boy nearly opposite him, and it smacked into the sea close beside him. At the same moment the air which Hornblower had drawn into his lungs to reprimand the Prince was expelled in a salvo of bellowed orders.

"Mizzen braces! Back the mizzen topsail! Quarter boat away!"

Maybe — Hornblower could not be sure later — everyone was shouting at once, but everyone at least responded to orders with the rapidity that was the result of months of drill. *Atropos* flew up into the wind, her way checked instantly. It was Smiley — Heaven only knew how he had made the descent from the starboard main topsail yardarm in that brief space — who got the jolly boat over the side, with four men at the oars, and dashed off to effect the rescue, the tiny boat soaring up and swooping down as the waves passed under her. And even before *Atropos* was hove-to Hornblower was putting the next part of the plan into action.

"Mr. Horrocks! Signal 'Enemy in sight to windward'."

Horrocks stood and gaped, and Hornblower was about to out with, "Blast you, do what I tell you," but he restrained himself. Horrocks was not a man of the quickest thought in the world, and he had failed entirely to see any purpose in signalling to a vacant horizon. To swear at him now would simply paralyse him with nervousness and lead to a further delay.

"Mr. Horrocks, kindly send up the signal as quickly as you can. 'Enemy in sight to windward.' Quickly, please."

The signal rating beside Horrocks was luckily quicker witted — he was one of the dozen men of the crew who could read and write, naturally — and was already at the halliards with the flag-locker open, and his example shook Horrocks out of his amazement. The flags went soaring up to the main topmast yardarm, flying out wildly in the wind. Hornblower made a mental note that that rating, even though he was no seaman as yet — lately a City apprentice who had come hurriedly aboard at Deptford to avoid something worse in civilian life — was deserving of promotion.

"Now another signal, Mr. Horrocks. 'Enemy is a frigate distant seven miles bearing west course east.'"

It was the sensible thing to do to send up the very signals he would have hoisted if there really were help in sight — the *Castilla* might be able to read them or might make at least a fair guess at their meaning. If there had been a friendly ship in sight down to leeward (Hornblower remembered the suggestion he had been going

to make to Collingwood) he would never have hove-to, of course, but would have gone on tearing down to lure the *Castilla* as near as possible, but the captain of the *Castilla* was not to know that.

"Keep that signal flying. Now send up an affirmative, Mr. Horrocks. Very good. Haul it down again Mr. Jones! Lay the ship on the starboard tack, a good full."

A powerful English ship down there to leeward would certainly order *Atropos* to close on *Castilla* as quickly as possible. He must act as if that were the case. It was only when Jones almost as hapless with astonishment as Horrocks had been — had plunged into the business of getting *Atropos* under way again that Hornblower had time to use his telescope. He trained it on the distant topsail again; not so distant now. Coming up fast, and Hornblower felt a sick feeling of disappointment and apprehension. And then as he watched he saw the square of the topsail narrow into a vertical oblong, and two other oblongs appear beside it. At the same moment the masthead lookout gave a hail.

"Deck there! The enemy's hauled his wind, sir!"

Of course he would do so — the disappointment and apprehension vanished instantly. A Spanish frigate captain once he had put his bowsprit outside the safety of a defended port would ever be a prey to fear. Always there would be the probability in his mind that just over the horizon lay a British squadron ready to pounce on him. He would chase a little sloop of war eagerly enough, but as soon as he saw that sloop sending up signals and swinging boldly round on a course that challenged action he would bethink him of the fact that he was already far to leeward of safety; he would imagine hostile ships only just out of sight cracking on all sail to cut him off from his base, and once his mind was made up he would not lose a single additional mile or minute before turning to beat back to safety. For two minutes the Spaniard had been a prey to indecision after *Atropos* hove-to, but the final bold move had made up his mind for him. If he had held on for a short time longer he might have caught sight of the jolly boat pulling over the waves and then would have guessed what *Atropos* was doing, but as it was, time was gained and the Spaniard, close-hauled, was clawing back to safety in flight from a non-existent enemy.

"Masthead! What do you see of the boat?"

"She's still pulling, sir, right in the wind's eye!"

"Do you see anything of Mr. Prince?"

"No, sir, can't say as I do."

Not much chance in that tossing sea of seeing a floating man two miles away, not even from the masthead.

"Mr. Jones, tack the ship."

It would be best to keep *Atropos* as nearly straight down wind from the boat as possible, allowing it an easy run to leeward when its mission was accomplished. *Castilla* would not be able to make anything of the manoeuvre.

"Deck there! The boat's stopped pulling, sir. I think they're picking up Mr. Prince, sir."

Thank God for that. It was only now that Hornblower could realize what a bad ten minutes it had been.

"Deck there! Yes, sir, they're waving a shirt. They're pulling back to us now."

"Heave-to, Mr. Jones, if you please. Doctor Eisenbeiss, have everything ready in case Mr. Prince needs treatment."

The Mediterranean at midsummer was warm enough; most likely the boy had taken no harm. The jolly boat came dancing back over the waves and turned under *Atropos*' stern into the little lee afforded by her quarter as she rode with her starboard bow to the waves. Here came His Serene Highness, wet and bedraggled but not in the least hurt, meeting the concentrated gaze of all on deck with a smile half sheepish and half defiant. Eisenbeiss came forward fussily, talking voluble German, and then turned to Hornblower to explain.

"I have a hot blanket ready for him, sir."

It was at that moment that the dam of Hornblower's even temper burst.

"A hot blanket! I know what'll warm him quicker than that. Bos'n's mate! My compliments to the bos'n, and ask him to be kind enough to lend you his cane for a few minutes. Shut your mouth, doctor, if you know what's good for you. Now, young man —"

Humanitarians had much to say against corporal punishment, but in their arguments, while pointing out the harm it might do to the one punished, they omitted to allow for the satisfaction other people derived from it. And it was some further training for the Blood Royal to display his acquired British imperturbability, to bite off

the howl that a well-applied cane tended to draw forth, and to stand straight afterwards with hardly a skip to betray his discomfort, with hardly a rub at the smarting royal posterior, and with the tears blinked manfully back. Satisfaction or not, Hornblower was a little sorry afterwards.

Chapter XX

There was everything to be said in favour of keeping *Castilla* under observation for a while at least, and almost nothing to be said against it. The recent flight and pursuit had proved that *Atropos* had the heels of her even under reefed topsails, so that it could be taken for granted that she was safe from her in any lesser wind — and the wind was moderating. The *Castilla* was now a full thirty miles dead to leeward of Cartagena; it would be useful to know — Collingwood would certainly want to know — whether she intended to beat back there again or would fetch some easier Spanish port. Close-hauled she could make Alicante to the north or perhaps Almeria to the south; she was close-hauled on the starboard tack, heading south, at this moment. And there was the possibility to be borne in mind that she did not intend to return to Spain as yet, that her captain might decide to range through the Mediterranean for a while to see what prizes he could snap up. On her present course she could easily stretch over to the Barbary coast and pick up a victualler or two with grain and cattle intended for the Fleet.

Hornblower's orders were that he should rejoin Collingwood in Sicilian waters after looking into Malaga and Cartagena; he was not the bearer of urgent despatches, nor, Heaven knew, was *Atropos* likely to be an important addition to the strength of the Fleet; while on the other hand it was the duty of every English captain, having once made contact with a ship of the enemy in open water, to maintain that contact as long as was possible. *Atropos* could not hope to face *Castilla* in battle, but she could keep her under observation, she might warn merchant shipping of danger, and she might with good fortune meet some big British ship of war — in actual fact, not make-believe — to whom she could indicate the enemy.

"Mr. Jones," said Hornblower. "Lay her on the starboard tack again if you please. Full and by."

"Aye aye, sir."

Jones, of course, showed some surprise at the reversal of the roles, at the pursued becoming the pursuer, and that was one more proof that he was incapable of strategic thought. But he had to engage himself on carrying out his orders, and *Atropos* steadied on a southerly course, running parallel to *Castilla*'s, far to windward; Hornblower trained his glass on the topsails just visible over the horizon. He fixed the shape of them firmly in his memory; a slight alteration in the proportion of length to breadth would indicate any change of course on the part of the *Castilla*.

"Masthead!" he hailed. "Keep your eye on the enemy. Report anything you see."

"Aye aye, sir."

Atropos was like a terrier now, yapping at the heels of a bull in a field — not a very dignified role — and the bull might turn and charge at any moment. Eventually the captain of the *Castilla* would make up his mind that a trick had been played on him, that *Atropos* had been signalling to non-existent friends, and there was no guessing what he might decide to do then, when he grew certain that there was no help following *Atropos* up just beyond the horizon. Meanwhile the wind was still moderating, and *Atropos* could set more canvas. When beating to windward she behaved best under all the sail she could carry, and he might as well keep as close to the enemy as the wind allowed.

"Try setting the mainsail, Mr. Jones, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

The main course was a big sail, and the little *Atropos* seemed to take wings under the tremendous pressure of it when it was sheeted home, with the tack hauled forward to the chess-trees by the united strength of half a watch. Now she was thrusting along bravely in the summer evening, lying over to the wind, and shouldering off the hungry waves with her starboard bow in great fountains of spray, through which the setting sun gleamed in fleeting rainbows of fiery beauty, and leaving behind her a seething wake dazzling white against the blue. It was a moment when it was good to be alive, driving hard to windward like this, and with all the

potentiality of adventure at hand in the near unknown. War at sea was a dreary business usually, with boredom and discomfort to be endured day and night, watch and watch, but it had moments of high exaltation like this, just as it had its mom of black despair, of fear, of shame.

"You may dismiss the watch below, Mr. Jones."

"Aye aye, sir,"

Hornblower glanced round the deck. Still would have the watch.

"Call me if there's any change, Mr. Still. I want to set more sail if the wind moderates further."

"Aye aye, sir."

A moment of exaltation, come and gone. He had been on his feet nearly all day, since dawn, and his legs were weary, and if he stayed on deck they would grow wearier still. Down below there were the two books he had bought at Gibraltar for a badly needed guinea — Lord Hodge's "Statement of the Present Political Condition of Italy", and Barber's "New Methods of Determining Longitude, with some Remarks on Discrepancies in Recent Charts". He wanted to inform himself on both subjects, and it was better to do so now than to stay up on deck growing more and more weary while the hours passed.

At sunset he emerged again; *Castilla* was still holding the same course, with *Atropos* head-reaching upon her very slightly. He looked at those distant topsails; he read the slate that recorded the day's run, and he waited while the log was hove again. Surely if *Castilla* intended to put back into Cartagena she would have gone about by now. She had made a very long reach to the southward, and any backing of the wind round to the north — a very likely occurrence at this season — would nullify much of her progress so far. If she did not come about by the time darkness set in it would be a strong indication that she had something else in mind. He waited as the sunset faded from the western sky, and until the first stars began to appear overhead; that was when his aching eye, straining through the glass, could see no more of *Castilla*. But at the last sight of her she was still standing to the southward. All the more reason to keep her under observation.

It was the end of the second dogwatch and the hands were being called.

"I'll have the main course taken in, Mr. Turner," he said.

He wrote his night orders by the faint light of the binnacle; the ship to be kept close-hauled on the starboard tack; he was to be called if the wind shifted more than two points, and in any event he was to be called immediately before moonrise in the middle watch. The gloomy little cabin when he retired into it was like a wild beast's lair with its dark corners where the light of the lamp did not penetrate. He lay down fully clothed, endeavouring to keep his tired mind from continuing to try to solve the problem of what the *Castilla* intended to do. He had shortened sail, as she would probably do. If she did not, he had the heels of her and might overtake her in daylight. If she did anything else, if she tacked or wore, he was doing what was probably best to find her again next day. His eyes closed with fatigue, and did not open again until they came to tell him the middle watch had been called.

The west wind, dying away though it was, had brought a slight overcast with it, enough to obscure the stars and deprive the small moon, almost in its last quarter, of most of its light. *Atropos*, still close-hauled, was now, in the lessening wind, only flitting with the waves that came on to her starboard bow, meeting them elegantly like a stage beauty extending her hand to a stage lover. The dark water all around seemed to fall in with the mood and to murmur pretty conventionalities. There seemed no imminence of blazing death. The minutes passed in warm idleness.

"Deck there!" That was the masthead lookout hailing. "I think I can see something, sir. Right away on the starboard bow."

"Get aloft with the night glass, youngster," said Turner, who had the watch, to the master's mate beside him. A minute passed, two minutes.

"Yes, sir," came the new voice from the masthead. "It's the loom of a ship. Three miles — four miles — fine on the starboard bow."

The night glasses trained round more forward.

"Maybe," said Turner.

There was a tiny patch of something darker than the surrounding night; Hornblower's night glass could tell him no more than that. He watched it painstakingly. The bearing of it seemed to be altering.

"Steer small!" he growled at the helmsman.

For a moment he wondered if the patch was really there; it might be something his mind suggested to his eye — a whole ship's company could sometimes imagine the same thing if the idea was once put in their heads. No, it was undoubtedly there, and drawing across *Atropos*' bows, more than could be accounted for by any wavering of her course with bad steering. It must be *Castilla*; she must have swung round at midnight and come hurrying down wind in the hope of pouncing on her prey by surprise. If he had not shortened sail she would be right on him. The Spanish lookouts were not up to their work, for she was holding on her course. "Heave-to, Mr. Turner," he said, and walked across to the port side to keep the *Castilla* under observation as *Atropos* came up into the wind. *Castilla* had already lost most of the advantage of the weather gage, and in a few minutes would lose it all. The slowly-moving clouds overhead were parting; there was a faint gleam of light through a thin patch, further darkness, and then the moon shone through a gap. Yes, that was a ship; that was the *Castilla*, already far down to leeward.

"Deck, there! I can see her plainly now, sir. On the port quarter. Captain, sir! She's wearing round!"

So she was. Her sails gleamed momentarily bright in the moonlight as they swung round. She had failed in her attempt to surprise her enemy, and was making a fresh one.

"Lay her on the port tack, Mr. Turner."

The little *Atropos* could play catch-as-catch-can with any big frigate in this sort of weather. She swung round and headed into the wind, her stern to her pursuer again.

"Masthead! What sail has the enemy set?"

"She's setting her royals, sir. All plain sail to the royals."

"Call all hands, Mr. Turner. Set all plain sail."

There was still enough wind for the addition of courses and royals to lay *Atropos* over and send her flying once more. Hornblower looked back at *Castilla*'s topsails and royals, silhouetted now against clear sky below the moon. It did not take very long to determine that now *Atropos* was gaining fast. He was pondering a decision regarding shortening sail when he was saved the trouble. The silhouettes narrowed again abruptly.

"Deck there!" hailed the masthead. "Enemy's hauled her wind, sir."

"Very well! Mr. Turner, wear ship, if you please. Point our bows right at her, and take in the fore course."

The terrier had evaded the bull's charge and was now yapping at its heels again. It was easy to follow the *Castilla* for the rest of the night, keeping a sharp lookout during the periods of darkness lest she should play on them the same trick as *Atropos* had played once. Dawn, rising ahead, revealed the *Castilla*'s royals and topsails an inky black before they changed to ivory white against the blue sky. Hornblower could imagine the rage of the Spanish captain at the sight of his pertinacious pursuer, dogging him in this fashion with insolent impunity. Seven miles separated the ships, but as far as the *Castilla*'s big eighteen-pounders mattered it might as well be seventy, and moreover the invisible wind, blowing direct from *Atropos* to *Castilla*, was an additional protection, guarding her from her enemy like the mysterious glass shield that turned the hero's sword in one of the Italian epics. *Atropos*, seven miles to windward, was as safe and yet as visible as the Saracen magician. Hornblower was conscious of weariness again. He had been on his feet since midnight, after less than four hours' rest. He wanted, passionately, to rest his legs; he wanted, hardly less, to close his aching eyes. The hammocks had been brought up, the decks swabbed, and it only remained now to cling to *Castilla*'s heels, but when any moment might bring the need for a quick decision he dared not leave the deck — odd that now he was safely to windward the situation was more dynamic than yesterday when he had been to leeward, but it was true. *Castilla* might come to the wind at any unforeseen moment, and moreover the two ships were driving into the blue Mediterranean where any surprise might be over the horizon.

"I'll have a mattress up here," said Hornblower.

They brought one up and laid it aft beside the weather scuppers. He eased his aching joints down on to it, settled his head on his pillow, and closed his eyes. The lift and send of the ship were soporific, and so was the sound of the sea under the *Atropos*' counter. The light played backward and forward over his face as the shadows of sails and rigging followed the movement of the ship. He could sleep — he could sleep, heavily and dreamlessly, while the ships flew on up the Mediterranean, while they called the watch, while they hove the log, even while they trimmed the yards as the wind came a little northerly, moving round ahead of the sun. It was afternoon when he woke. He shaved with the aid of a mirror stuck in the hammock nettings; he took his bath under the washdeck pump and put on the clean shirt that he sent for; he sat on the deck and ate cold

beef and the last of the goodly soft bread taken on board at Gibraltar, somewhat stale now but infinitely better than ship's biscuit; and the fresh butter from the same source, kept cool so far in an earthenware crock was quite delicious. It struck seven bells as he finished his last mouthful.

"Deck there! Enemy's altering course."

He was on his feet in a flash, his plate sliding into the scuppers, the telescope in his hand without conscious volition on his part. No doubt about it. *Castilla* had altered to a more northerly course, with the wind abeam. It was not very surprising for they had run a full two hundred miles from Cartagena; unless the *Castilla* was prepared to go right up the Mediterranean far to leeward of all Spanish bases, it was time for her to head north to fetch Minorca. He would follow her there, the terrier harassing the bull, and he would give a final yap at the bull's heels outside Port Mahon. Besides, the *Castilla*'s alteration of course might not portend a mere flight to Minorca. They were right on the track of convoys beating up the Mediterranean from Sicily and Malta. "Port your helm, Mr. Still, if you please. Maintain a parallel course."

It was only sensible to stay up to windward of *Castilla* as much as possible. The intense feeling of wellbeing of five minutes ago was replaced now by excitement, a slight tingling under the skin. Ten to one the *Castilla*'s alteration of course meant nothing at all, but there was the tenth chance. Eight bells; hands mustered for the first dogwatch.

"Deck there! There's a sail ahead of the enemy, sir!"

That was it, then.

"Get aloft with you, Mr. Smiley. You can go too, Mr. Prince."

That would show His Serene Highness that a punishment cleared the record in the Navy, and that he was being trusted not to risk any more monkey tricks. It was a detail that had to be borne in mind despite the flood of excitement following the masthead report. There was no knowing what that sail over there, invisible from the deck, might imply. But there was a chance that it was a British ship of war, fair in *Castilla*'s path.

"Two sail! Three sail! Captain, sir, it looks like a convoy, dead to leeward."

A convoy could only be a British convoy, and a convoy meant the presence of a British ship of war ahead there in *Castilla*'s path.

"Up helm and bear down on the enemy. Call all hands, Mr. Still, if you please. Clear for action."

During all the long flight and pursuit he had not cleared for action. He had not wanted action with the vastly superior *Castilla*, and had been determined on avoiding it. Now he hoped for it — hoped for it with that tremor of doubt that made him hate himself, all the more so as the repeating of the order brought a cheer from the men, the watch below pouring on deck for duty with expectant grins and schoolboy excitement. Mr. Jones came bustling up on deck buttoning his coat; apparently he had been dozing comfortably through the afternoon watch. To Jones would fall the command of the *Atropos* if any accident should befall him, if a shot should take off his leg or dash him into bloody fragments. Odd that the thought of Jones becoming responsible for handling *Atropos* was as disturbing as the rest of it. But all the same Jones must be brought up to date on the situation and told what should be done. He did it in three sharp sentences.

"I see, sir," said Jones, pulling at his long chin. Hornblower was not so sure that he did see, but there was no more time to spare for Jones.

"Masthead! What of the convoy?"

"One sail has tacked, sir. She's standing towards us."

"What d'you make of her?"

"She looks like a ship of war, sir. I can only see her royals, sir."

"Mr. Horrocks, make the private signal and our number."

A ship standing towards *Castilla* could only be a ship of war, the escorting vessel. Hornblower could only hope she would be one of the larger frigates, able to meet the big *Castilla* on something like equal terms. But he knew most of the frigates Collingwood had — *Sirius*, *Naiad*, *Hermione* — thirty-two gun twelve-pounder frigates most of them, hardly a match for *Castilla*'s forty-four eighteen-pounders unless well handled, and unless *Castilla* fought badly, and unless he himself had a chance to intervene. He strained his eyesight staring forward through his glass, but the British ship was not yet in sight from the deck, and *Castilla* was still running boldly down before the wind. Clearing for action was nearly completed; they were casting loose the guns.

"Signal, sir!"

Horrocks was ready with the book as the masthead reported the flags.

"Private signal correctly answered, sir. And her number. She's *Nightingale*, sir, 28, Captain Ford, sir."

Almost the smallest of the frigates, with only nine-pounders on her maindeck. Please God Ford would have the sense not to close with *Castilla*. He must out-manoeuver her, keep her in play, and then when *Atropos* came up there could be some pretty tactics until they could shoot away some of *Castilla*'s spars and take her at a disadvantage. Then they could rake her and weaken her before closing in for the kill. The captain of the *Castilla* was showing proof of having grasped the essentials of the situation; caught between two hostile ships so that he could not avoid action if it were forced on him he was plunging down at his best speed to the attack on the one most accessible to him; he was still carrying all sail to bring him most quickly into action before *Atropos* could intervene. He could well hope to batter *Nightingale* into a wreck and then turn on *Atropos*. If he succeeded — oh, if he succeeded! — it would be a terrible problem for *Atropos*, to decide whether or not to accept action.

"Ship cleared for action, sir," reported Jones.

"Very well."

Now his glass picked her up; the distant sail, far beyond *Castilla*. As he looked, as the top gallants appeared below the royals, the royals disappeared. *Nightingale* was shortening down to "fighting sails" ready for action. Hornblower knew a little about Ford. He had the reputation of a good fighting captain. Please God he had discretion as well. Ford was far his senior in the Navy list; there was no possibility of giving him orders to keep clear.

Castilla was still hurtling down upon *Nightingale*.

"Signal, sir. Number 72. 'Engage the enemy more closely!'"

"Acknowledge."

Hornblower was conscious of Jones's and Turner's eyes upon him. There might be an implied rebuke in that signal, a hint that he was not doing his best to get into action. On the other hand it might be a mere signal that action was imminent. *Nightingale*'s topsails were over the horizon now; close-hauled, she was doing her best to come to meet *Castilla*. If only Ford would hold off for half an hour — *Atropos* was steadily gaining on *Castilla*. No, he was still hurrying to the encounter before *Atropos* could arrive; he was playing *Castilla*'s game for her. Now *Castilla* was clewing up her courses; she was taking in her royals, ready for the clash. The two ships were hastening together; white sails on a blue sea under a blue sky. They were right in line from where Hornblower stood staring at them through his glass; right in line so that it was hard to judge the distance between them. Now they were turning, *Nightingale* paying off before the wind as *Castilla* approached. All the masts seemed blended together. Ford must keep clear and try to shoot away a spar.

A sudden billowing of smoke round the ships; the first broadsides were being fired. It looked as if the ships were already close-locked in action — surely it could not be. Not time yet to take in courses and royals; the sooner they got down into action the better. Now, heavily over the blue water, came the sound of those first broadsides, like the rumbling of thunder. The smoke was blowing clear of the fight, drifting away from the ships in a long bank. More smoke billowing up; the guns had been reloaded and were firing away, and still the masts were close together — had Ford been fool enough to lock yardarms? Again the long rumble of the guns. The ships were swinging round in the smoke cloud; he could see the masts above it changing their bearing, but he could not distinguish ship from ship. There was a mast falling, yards, sails and all; it must be *Nightingale*'s main topmast, hideous though the thought was. This seemed like a lifetime, waiting to get into action. Cannon smoke and cannon thunder. He did not want to believe the glass was really revealing the truth to him as he looked, the details becoming clearer as he approached. The two ships were locked together, no doubt about it. And that was *Nightingale*, main topmast gone. She was lying at an angle to *Castilla*'s side, bows towards her. The wind was still turning the two ships, and it was turning them as if they were one. *Nightingale* must be locked against *Castilla*, bowsprit or possibly anchor hooked into *Castilla*'s fore chains. All *Castilla*'s guns could bear, practically raking *Nightingale* with every broadside, and *Nightingale*'s fire must be almost ineffectual. Could she tear herself loose? There went her foremast, everything, over the side; almost impossible to tear herself loose now.

The men at the guns were yelling at the sight.

"Silence! Mr. Jones, get the courses in."

What was he to do? He ought to cross *Castilla's* bows or stern and rake her, come about and rake her again. Not so easy to fire into *Castilla's* bows without hitting *Nightingale*; not so easy to cross her stern; that would put him to leeward and there would be delay in getting back into action again. And the two ships were still swinging considerably, not only with the wind but with the recoil of their guns. Supposing that as he took *Atropos* to lie a little clear they swung so that *Nightingale* intercepted his fire and he had to work back again to windward to get back into action? That would be shameful, and other captains hearing the story would think he had deliberately stayed out of fire. He could lay his ship alongside *Castilla* on her unoccupied side, but her slender scantlings would bear little of *Castilla's* ponderous broadside; his ship would be a wreck in a few minutes. And yet *Nightingale* was already a wreck. He must bring her instant, immediate relief.

Now they were only a mile from the locked ships and running down fast. Years of experience at sea told him how rapidly those last few minutes passed when ships needed each other.

"Muster the port side guns' crews," he said. "Every man, gun captains and all. Arm them for boarding. Arm every idler in the ship. But leave the hands at the mizzen braces."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Pikes, pistols and cutlasses, lads," said Hornblower to the eager men thronging round the arms chests. "Mr. Smiley, muster your topmen for'rard by No. 1 gun. Starboard side. Stand by for a rush."

Young Smiley was the best fighting man of them all, better than the nervous Jones or the stupid Still or the aged Turner. It was best to give him the command at the other end of the ship. Aft here he would have things under his own eye. And he realized he was still unarmed himself. His sword — the sword he had worn at the court of his King — was a cheap one. He could guess its temper was unreliable; he had never been able to afford a good sword. He stepped to the arms chest and took a cutlass for himself, drawing it and dropping the scabbard discarded on the deck; looping the knot over his wrist he stood with the naked blade in his hand and the sunlight beating down in his face.

Now they were closing on *Castilla*; only a cable's length apart and it looked closer. It called for accurate judgment to come close alongside.

"Starboard a point," he said to the helmsman.

"Starboard a point," came the repetition of the order.

Discipline kept the helmsman entirely attentive to his particular duty, even though *Castilla's* port side gun ports were opening, even though at that close range the gun muzzles were glaring straight at them, and the faces of the gunners could be seen through the ports looking along the guns. Oh God, it was just coming!

"Now, starboard slowly. Bring her gently round."

Like the end of the world that broadside came, ripping and smashing into the ship; there were screams, there were frightful crashes, the sunlight was full of dust particles flung up by the hurtling cannon-balls as the splinters whizzed through the air, and then the ship sidled into the powder smoke jutting forth from the gun muzzles. But he must think about only one thing at this moment.

"Now! Hard a-port. Braces there! Back the mizzen tops'!!"

There was a tiny gap between the sides of the two ships, closing by inches. If she struck violently she might rebound and open the gap again; if her forward way was not checked she might scrape forward and swing. In the loftier sides of the *Castilla* the gun ports were above the level of those of the *Atropos*. The dish-shaped *Atropos* had no "tumble-home" to her sides. Her bulwarks would make contact — he had been counting on that.

"Starboard side! Fire!"

The infernal crash of the broadside; the smoke whirling round, the orange-painted side of *Castilla* torn by the carronade balls; but not a moment to think about it.

"Come on!"

Up over *Castilla's* side in the eddying smoke pierced by sunbeams; up over the side, cutlass in hand, wild with fighting madness. A distorted face looking up at him. Strike, swinging the heavy blade like an axe. Wrench the blade free, and strike again at this new face. Plunge forward. Gold lace here, a lean brown face gashed by a black moustache, a slender blade luring at him; beat it aside and strike and strike and strike with every ounce of strength, with all the speed possible to him; beat down the feeble guard and strike again without pity. Trip over something and recover again. The terrified eyes of the men at the wheel looking round at him before

they ran from his fury. A uniformed soldier with white cross-belts extending his arms in surrender; a pike appearing from nowhere beside him and plunging into the soldier's unprotected breast. The quarterdeck cleared but no time to breathe; shout "Come on" and plunge down on to the maindeck.

Something hit his cutlass blade and sent a numbing shock up his arm — a pistol bullet, most likely. There was a crowd of men massed round the main mast, but before he could reach it a surge of pikes from the side broke it up into fleeing fragments. Now a sudden rally on the part of the enemy, pistols banging, and then suddenly opposition ceased and Hornblower found himself glaring into a pair of wild eyes and realized that it was an English uniform, an English face although unknown to him — a midshipman from *Nightingale*, leading the boarding party which had stormed into the *Castilla* along *Nightingale*'s bowsprit.

He could stand there now amid the wreckage and the dead with the madness ebbing out of him, sweat running into his eyes and blinding him; and yet once more he had to clear his mind and brace himself. He had to stop the killing that was still going on, he had to organize the disarming of the prisoners and the herding of them against the ship's side. He had to remember to say a word of thanks to Smiley, covered with blood and smoke, when he met him on the gangway forward. Here was the huge hulk of *Eisenbeiss*, chest heaving, the bloody cutlass like a toy in his vast hand. The sight roused his wrath.

"What the hell are you doing here, doctor? Get back on board and attend to the wounded. You've no business to neglect them."

A smile for the Prince, and then his attention was demanded by a thin-nosed, long-faced rat of a man.

"Captain Hornblower? My name's Ford."

He was going to shake the proffered hand, but discovered that first he must slip the cutlass lanyard from his wrist and transfer the weapon to his other hand.

"All's well that ends well," said Ford. "You arrived in time, but only just in time, captain."

It was no use trying to point out to a senior the senior's errors. They shook hands there, standing on the gangway of the captured *Castilla*, looking round at the three ships clinging together, battered and shattered. Far down to leeward, drifting over the blue sea, the long trail of powder smoke was slowly dissipating under the blue heaven.

Chapter XXI

The church bells of Palermo were ringing, as always, in the drowsy heat of the morning. The sound of them drifted over the water of the bay, the Conca d'Oro, the golden shell which holds the pearl of Palermo in its embrace. Hornblower could hear them as he brought *Atropos* in, echoing round from Monte Pellegrino to Zaffarano, and of all musical noises that was the one that annoyed him most. He looked over at the senior ship, impatient for her to start firing her salute to shatter this maddening sound. If it were not for the church bells this would be almost a happy moment, dramatic enough in all conscience. *Nightingale* under her jury rig, the clear water gushing out of her as the pumps barely kept her afloat, *Atropos* with the raw plugs in the shot holes in her sides, and then *Castilla*, battered and shot torn, too, and with the White Ensign proudly flying over the red and gold of Spain. Surely even the Sicilians must be struck by the drama of this entrance, and for additional pleasure, there were a trio of English ships of war at anchor over there; their crews at least would gape at the proud procession; they at least would be sensitive to all that the appearance of the newcomers implied; they would know of the din and the fury, the agony of the wounded and the distressing ceremony of the burial of the dead.

Palermo looked out idly as the ships came to anchor, and as the boats (even the boats were patched-up fabrics, hurriedly repaired after being shattered by shot) were swung out and began new activities. The wounded had to be carried ashore to hospital, boat-load after boat-load of them, moaning or silent with pain; then the prisoners under guard — there was pathos in those boat-loads of men, too, of a proud nation, going into captivity within four gloomy walls, under all the stigma of defeat. Then there was other ferrying to be done; the forty men that *Atropos* had lent to *Nightingale* had to be replaced by another forty. The ones that came back were gaunt and hollow-checked, bearded and dirty. They fell asleep sitting on the thwarts, and they

fell asleep again the moment they climbed on board, falling like dead men between the guns, for they had laboured for eleven days and nights bringing the shattered *Nightingale* in after the victory.

There was so much to do that it was not until evening that Hornblower had leisure to open the two private letters that were awaiting him. The second one was only six weeks old, having made a quick passage out from England and not having waited long for *Atropos* to come in to Palermo, the new base of the Mediterranean Fleet. Maria was well, and so were the children. Little Horatio was running everywhere now, she said, as lively as a cricket, and little Maria was as good as gold, hardly crying at all even though it seemed likely that she was about to cut a tooth, a most remarkable feat at five months old. And Maria was happy enough in the Southsea house with her mother, although she was lonely for her husband, and although her mother tended to spoil the children in a way that Maria feared would not be approved by her very dearest.

Letters from home; letters about little children and domestic squabbles; they were the momentary lifting of a curtain to reveal another world, utterly unlike this world of peril and hardship and intolerable strain. Little Horatio was running everywhere on busy little legs, and little Maria was cutting her first tooth, while here a tyrants armies had swept through the whole length of Italy and were massed at the Straits of Messina for an opportunity to make another spring and effect another conquest in Sicily, where only a mile of water — and the Navy — opposed their progress. England was fighting for her life against all Europe combined under a single tyrant of frightful energy and cunning.

No, not quite all Europe, for England still had allies — Portugal under an insane queen, Sweden under a mad king, and Sicily, here, under a worthless king. Ferdinand, King of Naples and Sicily — King of the Two Sicilies — bad, cruel, selfish; brother of the King of Spain, who was Bonaparte's closest ally; Ferdinand, a tyrant more bloodthirsty and more tyrannical than Bonaparte himself, faithless and untrustworthy, who had lost one of his two thrones and was only held on the other by British naval might and who yet would betray his allies for a moment's gratification of his senses, and whose gaols were choked with political prisoners and whose gallows creaked under the weight of dead suspects. Good men, and brave men, were suffering and dying in every part of the world while Ferdinand hunted in his Sicilian presence and his wicked queen lied and intrigued and betrayed, and while Maria wrote simple little letters about the babies.

It was better to think about his duties than to brood over these insoluble anomalies. Here was a note from Lord William Bentinck, the British Minister in Palermo. "The latest advices from the Vice-Admiral Commanding in the Mediterranean are to the effect that he may be expected very shortly in Palermo with his flagship. His Excellency therefore begs to inform Captain Horatio Hornblower that in His Excellency's opinion it would be best if Captain Horatio Hornblower were to begin the necessary repairs to *Atropos* immediately. His Excellency will request His Sicilian Majesty's naval establishment to afford Captain Horatio Hornblower all the facilities he may require."

Lord William might be — undoubtedly was — a man of estimable character and liberal opinions unusual in a son of a Duke, but he knew little enough about the workings of a Sicilian dockyard. In the three days that followed Hornblower succeeded in achieving nothing at all with the help of Sicilian authorities. Turner was voluble to them in lingua franca, and Hornblower laid aside his dignity to plead with them in French with o's and a's added to the words in the hope that in that manner he might convey his meaning in Italian, but even when the requests were intelligible they were not granted. Canvas? Cordage? Sheet lead for shot holes? They might never have heard of them. After those three days Hornblower warped *Atropos* out into the harbour again and set about his repairs with his own resources and with his own men, keeping them labouring under the sun, and deriving some little satisfaction from the fact that Captain Ford's troubles — he had *Nightingale* over at the carenage — were even worse than his own. Ford, with his ship heeled over while he patched her bottom, had to put sentries over the stores he had taken out of her, to prevent the Sicilians from stealing them, even while his men vanished into the alleys of Palermo to pawn their clothing in exchange for the heady Sicilian wine.

It was with relief that Hornblower saw *Ocean* come proudly into Palermo, vice-admiral's flag at the fore; he felt confident that when he made his report that his ship would be ready for sea in all respects in one day's time he would be ordered out to join the Fleet. It could not happen too quickly.

And sure enough the orders came that evening, after he had gone on board to give a verbal account of his doings and to hand in his written reports. Collingwood listened to all he had to say, gave in return a very

pleasant word of congratulation, saw him off the ship with his invariable courtesy, and of course kept his promise regarding the orders. Hornblower read them in the privacy of his cabin when the *Ocean's* gig delivered them; they were commendably short. He was "requested and required, the day after tomorrow, the 17th instant", to make the best of his way to the island of Ischia, there to report to Commodore Harris and join the squadron blockading Naples.

So all next day the ship's company of *Atropos* toiled to complete their ship for sea. Hornblower was hardly conscious of the activity going on around *Ocean* — it was what might be expected in the flagship of the Commander-in-Chief in his ally's capital. He regretted the interruption to his men's work when the admiral's barge came pulling by, and still more when the royal barge, with the Sicilian colours and the Bourbon lilies displayed, came pulling by to visit *Ocean*. But that was only to be expected. When the flaming afternoon began to die away into the lovely evening he found time to exercise his men in accordance with the new station and quarter bills so many had been the casualties that all the organization had to be revised. He stood there in the glowing sunset watching the men coming running down from aloft after setting topsails.

"Signal from the flag, sir," said Smiley, breaking in on his concentrated thought. "'Flag to *Atropos*. Come on board!'"

"Call my gig," said Hornblower. "Mr. Jones, you will take command."

A desperate rush to change into his better uniform, and then he hurled himself down the ship's side to where his gig awaited him. Collingwood received him in the well-remembered cabin; the silver lamps were alight now, and in the boxes under the great stern windows were strange flowers whose names he did not know. And on Collingwood's face was a strange expression; there was a hint of distress in it, and of sympathy, as well as something of irritation. Hornblower stopped short at the sight of him, with a sudden pounding of the heart. He could hardly remember to make his bow properly. It flashed through his mind that perhaps Ford had reported adversely on his behaviour in the recent action. He might be facing court martial and ruin.

At Collingwood's shoulder stood a large elegant gentleman in full dress, with the ribbon and star of an order.

"My lord," said Collingwood, "this is Captain Horatio Hornblower, I believe you have already had correspondence with His Excellency, Captain. Lord William Bentinck."

Hornblower made his bow again, his feverish mind telling him that at least this could not be anything to do with the action with the *Castilla* — that would not be the Minister's business; on the other hand, in fact, Collingwood would keep strangers out of any scandal in the service.

"How d'ye do, sir?" asked Lord William.

"Very well, thank you, my Lord."

The two Lords went on looking at Hornblower, and Hornblower looked back at them, trying to appear calm during those endless seconds.

"There's bad news for you, Hornblower, I fear," said Collingwood at last, sadly.

Hornblower restrained himself from asking "What is it?" He pulled himself up stiffer than ever, and tried to meet Collingwood's eyes without wavering.

"His Sicilian Majesty," went on Collingwood, "needs a ship."

"Yes, my lord?"

Hornblower was none the wiser.

"When Bonaparte conquered the mainland he laid hands on the Sicilian Navy. Negligence — desertion — you can understand. There is no ship now at the disposal of His Majesty."

"No, my Lord." Hornblower could guess now what was coming.

"While coming out to visit *Ocean* this morning His Majesty happened to notice *Atropos*, with her paint all fresh. You made an excellent business of your refitting, Captain, as I noticed."

"Thank you, my Lord."

"His Majesty does not think it right that, as an island King, he should be without a ship."

"I see, my Lord."

Here Bentinck broke in, speaking harshly.

"The fact of the matter, Hornblower, is that the King has asked for your ship to be transferred to his flag."

"Yes, my Lord."

Nothing mattered now. Nothing was of any value.

"And I have advised His Lordship," went on Bentinck, indicating Collingwood, "that for the highest reasons of state it would be advisable to agree to the transfer."

The imbecile monarch coveting the newly-painted toy. Hornblower could not keep back his protest.

"I find it hard to believe it necessary, my Lord," he said.

For a moment His Excellency looked down in astonishment at the abysmal junior captain who questioned his judgment, but His Excellency kept his temper admirably all the same, and condescended to explain.

"I have six thousand British troops in the island," he said in his harsh voice. "At least, they call them British, but half of 'em are Corsican Rangers and Chasseurs Brittaniques — French deserters in British uniforms. I can hold the Straits against Bonaparte with them, all the same, as long as I have the goodwill of the King. Without it — if the Sicilian army turns against us — we're lost."

"You must have heard about the King, Captain," interposed Collingwood, gently.

"A little, my Lord."

"He'd ruin everything for a whim," said Bentinck. "Now Bonaparte finds he can't cross the Straits he'd be willing to reach an agreement with Ferdinand. He'd promise him his throne here in exchange for an alliance. Ferdinand is capable of agreeing, too. He'd as lief have French troops in occupation as British, and be a satellite — or so he thinks at present — if it would mean paying off a score against us."

"I see, my Lord," said Hornblower.

"When I have more troops I'll talk to him in a different fashion," said Bentinck. "But at present —"

"*Atropos* is the smallest ship I have in the Mediterranean," said Collingwood.

"And I am the most junior captain," said Hornblower. He could not restrain himself from the bitter comment. He even forgot to say "my Lord".

"That is true as well," said Collingwood.

In a disciplined service an officer was only a fool if he complained about treatment received on account of being junior. And it was clear that Collingwood disliked the present situation intensely.

"I understand, my Lord," said Hornblower.

"Lord William has some suggestions to make which may soften the blow," said Collingwood, and Hornblower shifted his glance.

"You can be retained in command of *Atropos*," said Bentinck — what a moment of joy, just one fleeting moment! — "if you transfer to the Sicilian service. His Majesty will appoint you Commodore, and you can hoist a broad pendant. I am sure he will also confer upon you an order of high distinction as well."

"No," said Hornblower. That was the only thing he could possibly say.

"I thought that would be your answer," said Collingwood. "And if a letter from me to the Admiralty carries any weight you can hope, on your return to England, to be appointed to the frigate to which your present seniority entitles you."

"Thank you, my Lord. So I am to return to England?"

He would have a glimpse of Maria and the children then.

"I see no alternative, Captain, I am afraid, as of course you understand. But if Their Lordships see fit to send you back here with your new command, no one would be more delighted than I."

"What sort of a man is your first lieutenant?" demanded Bentinck.

"Well, my Lord — " Hornblower looked from Bentinck to Collingwood. It was hard to make a public condemnation even of the abject Jones. "He is a worthy enough man. The fact that he is John Jones the Ninth in the lieutenants' list may have held him back from promotion."

A wintry twinkle appeared in Bentinck's eye.

"I fancy he would be John Jones the First in the Sicilian Navy List."

"I expect so indeed, my Lord."

"Do you think he would take service as captain under the King of the Two Sicilies?"

"I should be surprised if he did not."

That would be Jones's only chance of ever becoming a captain, and most likely Jones was aware of it, however he might excuse himself for it in his own thoughts.

Collingwood entered the conversation again at this point.

"Joseph Bonaparte over in Naples has just proclaimed himself King of the Two Sicilies as well," he remarked. "That makes four Sicilies."

Now they were all smiling together, and it was a moment before Hornblower's unhappiness returned to him, when he remembered that he had to give up the ship he had brought to perfection and the crew he had trained so carefully, and his Mediterranean station of honour. He turned to Collingwood.

"What are your orders, my Lord?"

"You will receive them in writing, of course. But verbally you are under orders not to move until you are officially informed of the transfer of your ship to the Sicilian flag. I'll distribute your ship's company through the Fleet — I can use them."

No doubt about that; probably every ship under Collingwood's command was undermanned and would welcome a contingent of prime seamen.

"Aye aye, my Lord."

"I'll take the Prince into my flagship here — there's a vacancy."

The Prince had had seven months in a sloop of war; probably he had learned as much in that time as he would learn in seven years in an Admiral's flagship.

"Aye aye, my Lord." Hornblower waited for a moment; it was hard to go on. "And your orders for me personally?"

"The *Aquila* — she's an empty troop transport — sails for Portsmouth immediately without convoy, because she's a fast ship. The monthly convoy is assembling, but it's far from complete as yet. As you know, I am only responsible for their escort as far as Gibraltar, so that if you choose to go in a King's ship you will have to transfer there. *Penelope* will be the escorting vessel, as far as I can tell at present. And when I can spare her — God knows when that will be — I shall send the old *Temeraire* to England direct."

"Yes, my Lord."

"I would be glad if you would choose for yourself, Captain. I'll frame my orders in accordance with your wishes. You can sail in *Aquila*, or *Penelope*, or wait for *Temeraire*, whichever you prefer."

Aquila was sailing for Portsmouth immediately, and she was a fast ship, sailing alone. In a month, even in less with fair winds, he could be setting foot on shore half an hour's walk from where Maria was living with the children. In a month he might be making his request to the Admiralty for further employment. He might be posted to that frigate that Collingwood had mentioned — he did not want to miss any opportunity. The sooner the better, as always. And he would see Maria and the children.

"I would like orders for *Aquila*, if you would be so kind, my Lord."

"I expected you would say that."

So that was the news that Hornblower brought back to his ship. The dreary little cabin which he had never had time to fit out properly seemed sadly homelike when he sat in it again; the sailcloth pillow supported once more a sleepless head, as so often before, when at last he could force himself to go to bed. It was strangely painful to say goodbye to the officers and crew, good characters and bad, even though he felt a little spurt of amusement at sight of Jones, gorgeous in the uniform of a captain in the Sicilian Navy, and another at the sight of the twenty volunteers from the ship's company whom Jones had been permitted to recruit into the Sicilian service. They were the bad characters, of course, laughed at by the others for exchanging the grog and hardtack of old England for the pasta and the daily quart of wine of Sicily. But even to the bad characters it was hard to say good-bye — a sentimental fool, Hornblower called himself.

It was a dreary two days that Hornblower waited for *Aquila* to make ready to sail. Bentinck had advised him to see the Palace chapel, to take a carriage out to Monreale and see the mosaics there, but like a sulky child he would not. The dreamlike city of Palermo turns its back upon the sea, and Hornblower turned his back upon Palermo, until *Aquila* was working her way out round Monte Pellegrino, and then he stood aft, by the taffrail, looking back at *Atropos* lying there, and *Nightingale* at the careenage, and the palaces of Palermo beyond. He was forlorn and lonely, a negligible passenger amid all the bustle of getting under way.

"By your leave, sir," said a seaman, hastening to the peak halliards — a little more, and he would have been elbowed out of the way.

"Good morning, sir," said the captain of the ship, and instantly turned to shout orders to the men at the main topsail halliards; the captain of a hired transport did not want to offer any encouragement to a King's captain

to comment on the handling of the ship. King's officers would only grudgingly admit that even admirals came between them and God.

Aquila dipped her colours to the flagship, and *Ocean* returned the compliment, the White Ensign slowly descending and rising again. That was the last memory Hornblower was to have of Palermo and of his voyage in the *Atropos*. *Aquila* braced round her sails and caught the first of the land breeze, heading boldly northward out to sea, and Sicily began to fade into the distance, while Hornblower tried to displace his unaccountable sadness by telling himself that he was on his way to Maria and the children. He tried to stimulate himself into excitement over the thought that a new command awaited him, and new adventures. Collingwood's flag lieutenant had passed on to him the gossip that the Admiralty was still commissioning ships as fast as they could be made ready for sea; there was a frigate, the *Lydia*, making ready, which would be an appropriate commend for a captain of his seniority. But it was only slowly that he was able to overcome his sense of loss and frustration, as slowly as the captain of the *Aquila* made him welcome when he was taking his noon sights, as slowly as the days passed while *Aquila* beat her way to the Straits and out into the Atlantic.

Autumn was waiting for them beyond the straits, with the roaring westerly gales of the equinox, gale after gale, when fortunately they had made westing enough to keep them safe from the coast of Portugal while they lay hove to for long hours in the latitude of Lisbon, in the latitude of Oporto, and then in the Bay of Biscay. It was on the tail of the last of the gales that they drove wildly up the Channel, storm-battered and leaky, with pumps going and topsails treble reefed. And there was England, dimly seen, but well remembered, the vague outline to be gazed at with a catch in the breath. The Start, and at last St. Catharine's, and the hour of uncertainty as to whether they could get into the lee of the Wight or would have to submit to being blown all the way up-channel. A fortunate slant of wind gave them their opportunity, and they attained the more sheltered waters of Spithead, with the unbelievable green of the Isle of Wight on their left hand, and so they attained to Portsmouth, to drop anchor where the quiet and calm made it seem as if all the turmoil outside had been merely imagined.

A shore boat took Hornblower to the Sally Port, and he see foot on English soil again, with a surge of genuine emotion, mounting the steps and looking round him at the familiar buildings of Portsmouth. A shore loafer — an old, bent man — hurried away on twisted legs to fetch his barrow while Hornblower looked round him; when he returned Hornblower had to help him lift his chests on to the barrow.

"Thank'ee, cap'n, thank'ee," said the old man. He used the title automatically, without knowing Hornblower's rank.

No one in England knew as yet — Maria did not know — that Hornblower was in England. For that matter no one in England knew as yet about the last exploit of the *Atropos* and the capture of *Castilla*. Copies of Ford's and Hornblower's reports to Collingwood were on board *Aquila*, in the sealed mailbag in the captain's charge, to be sent on to the Secretary of the Admiralty "for the information of Their Lordships". In a day or two they might be in the Gazette, and they might even be copied to appear in the Naval Chronicle and the daily newspapers. Most of the honour and glory, of course, would go to Ford, but a few crumbs might come Hornblower's way; there was enough chance of that to put Hornblower in a good temper as he walked along with the wooden wheels of the barrow thumping and squeaking over the cobbles behind him.

The sadness and distress he had suffered when he parted from *Atropos* had largely died away by now. He was back in England, walking as fast as the old man's legs would allow towards Maria and the children, free for the moment from all demands upon his patience or his endurance, free to be happy for a while, free to indulge in ambitious dreams of the frigate Their Lordships might give him, free to relax in Maria's happy and indifferent chatter, with little Horatio running round the room, and with little Maria making valiant efforts to crawl at his feet. The thumping of the barrow wheels beat out a pleasant rhythm to accompany his dreams.

Here was the house and the well-remembered door. He could hear the echo within as he let the knocker fall, and he turned to help the old man lift off the chests. He put a shilling into the shaky hand and turned back quickly as he heard the door open. Maria was there with a child in her arms. She stood beside the door looking at him without recognition for a long second, and when at last she spoke it was as if she were dazed.

"Horry!" she said. "Horry!"

There was no smile on her bewildered face.

"I've come home, dearest," said Hornblower.

"I — I thought you were the apothecary," said Maria, speaking slowly, "the — the babies aren't so well." She offered the child in her arms for his inspection. It must be little Maria, although he did not know the flushed, feverish face. The closed eyes opened, and then shut again with the pain of the light, and the little head turned away fretfully but wearily, and the mouth opened to emit a low cry.

"Sh — sh," said Maria, folding the child to her breast again, bowing her head over the wailing bundle. Then she looked up at Hornblower again.

"You must come in," she said. "The — the cold. It will strike the fever inward."

The remembered hall; the room at the side where he had asked Maria to marry him; the staircase to the bedroom. Mrs. Mason was there, her grey hair untidy even in the curtained twilight of the room.

"The apothecary?" she asked from where she bent over the bed.

"No, mother. It's Horry come back again."

"Horry? Horatio!"

Mrs. Mason looked up to confirm what her daughter said, and Hornblower came towards the bedside. A tiny little figure lay there, half on its side, one hand outside the bedclothes holding Mrs. Mason's finger.

"He's sick," said Mrs. Mason. "Poor little man. He's so sick."

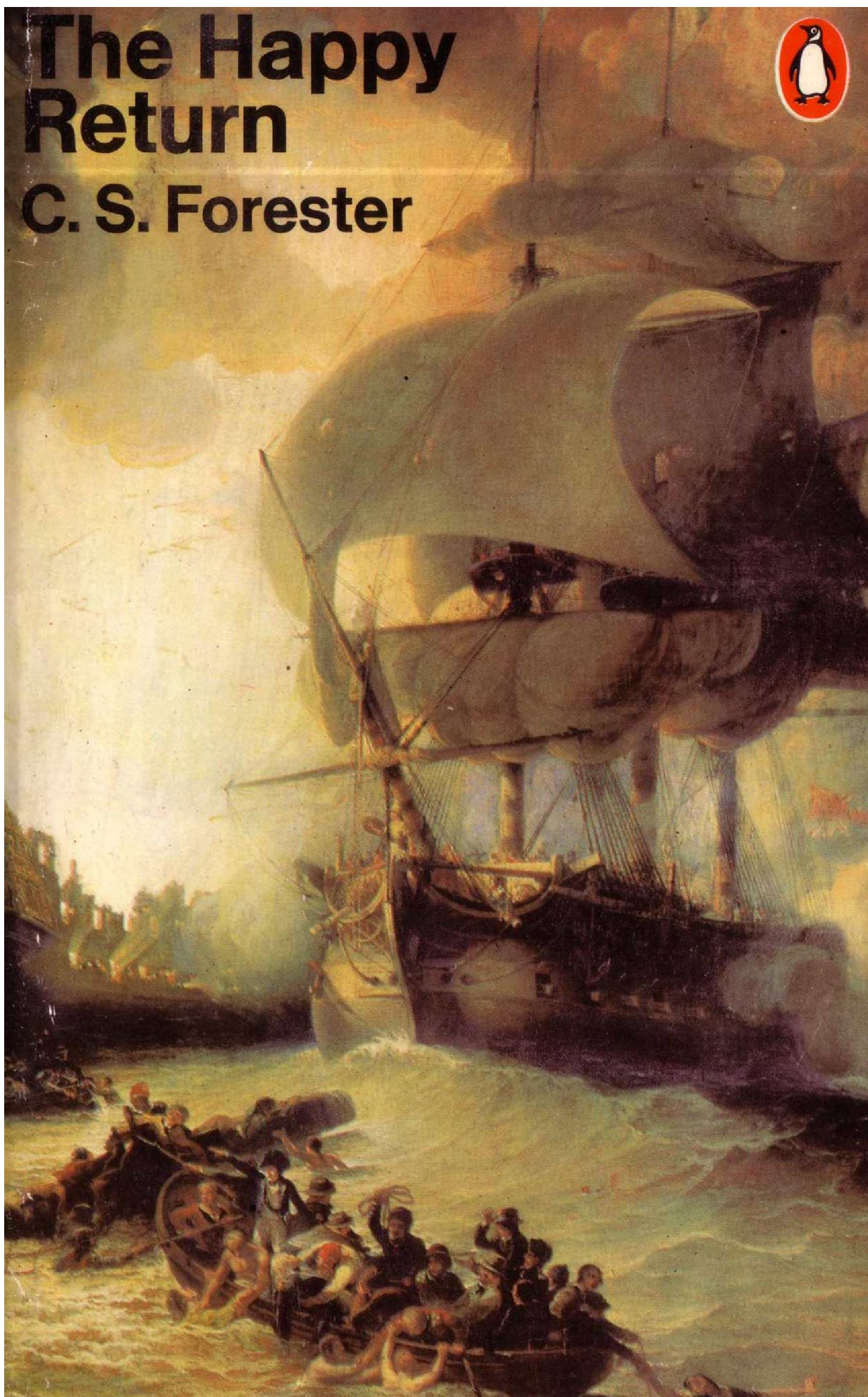
Hornblower knelt beside the bed and bent over his son. He put out his hand and touched the feverish cheek. He tried to soothe his son's forehead as the head turned on the pillow. That forehead; it felt strange; like small shot felt through velvet. And Hornblower knew what that meant. He knew it well, and he had to admit the certainty to himself before telling the women what it meant. Smallpox.

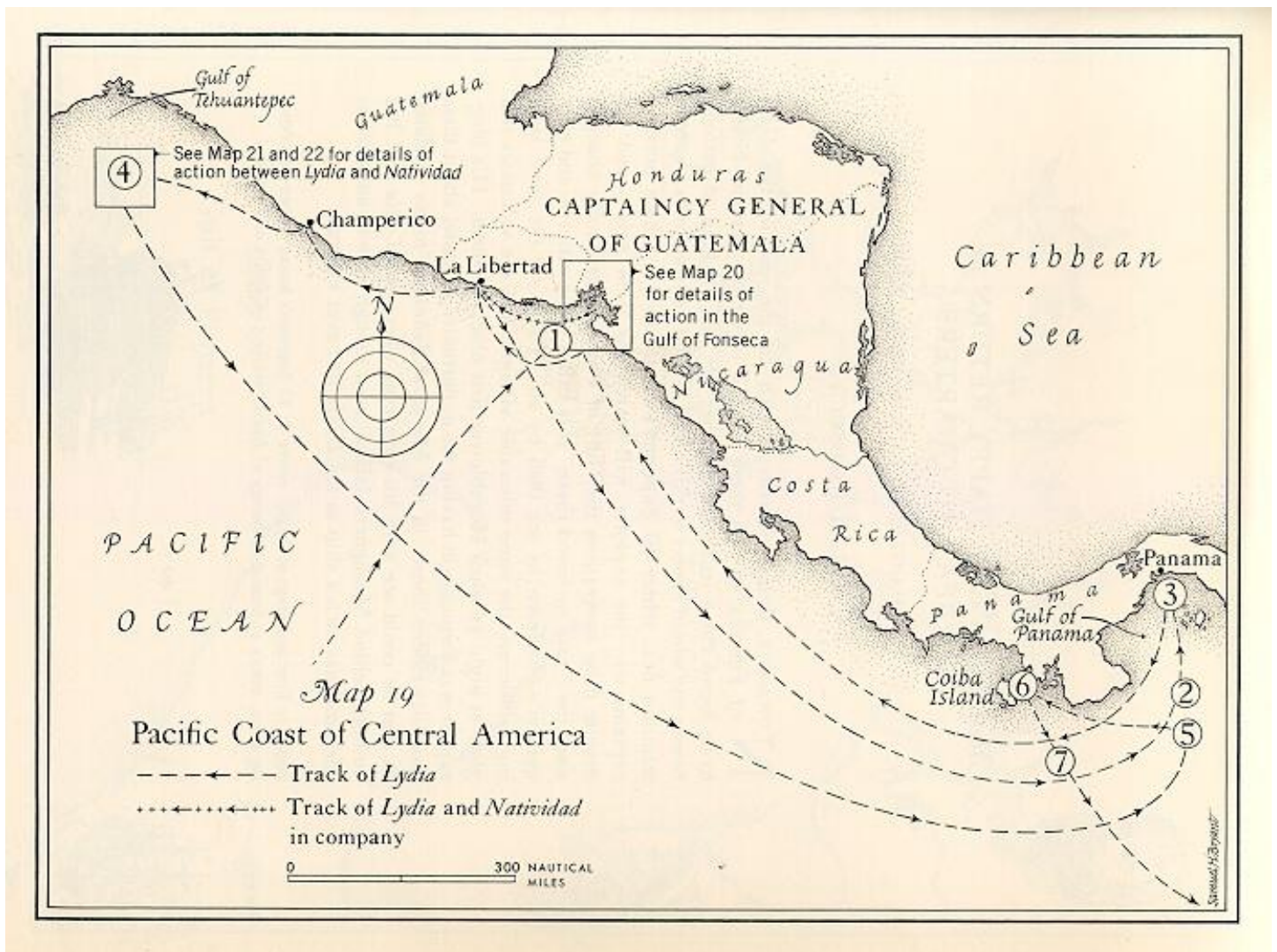
Before he rose to his feet he had reached another conclusion, too. There was still duty to be done, his duty to his King and Country and to the Service and to Maria. Maria must be comforted. He must always comfort her, as long as life lasted.



The Happy Return

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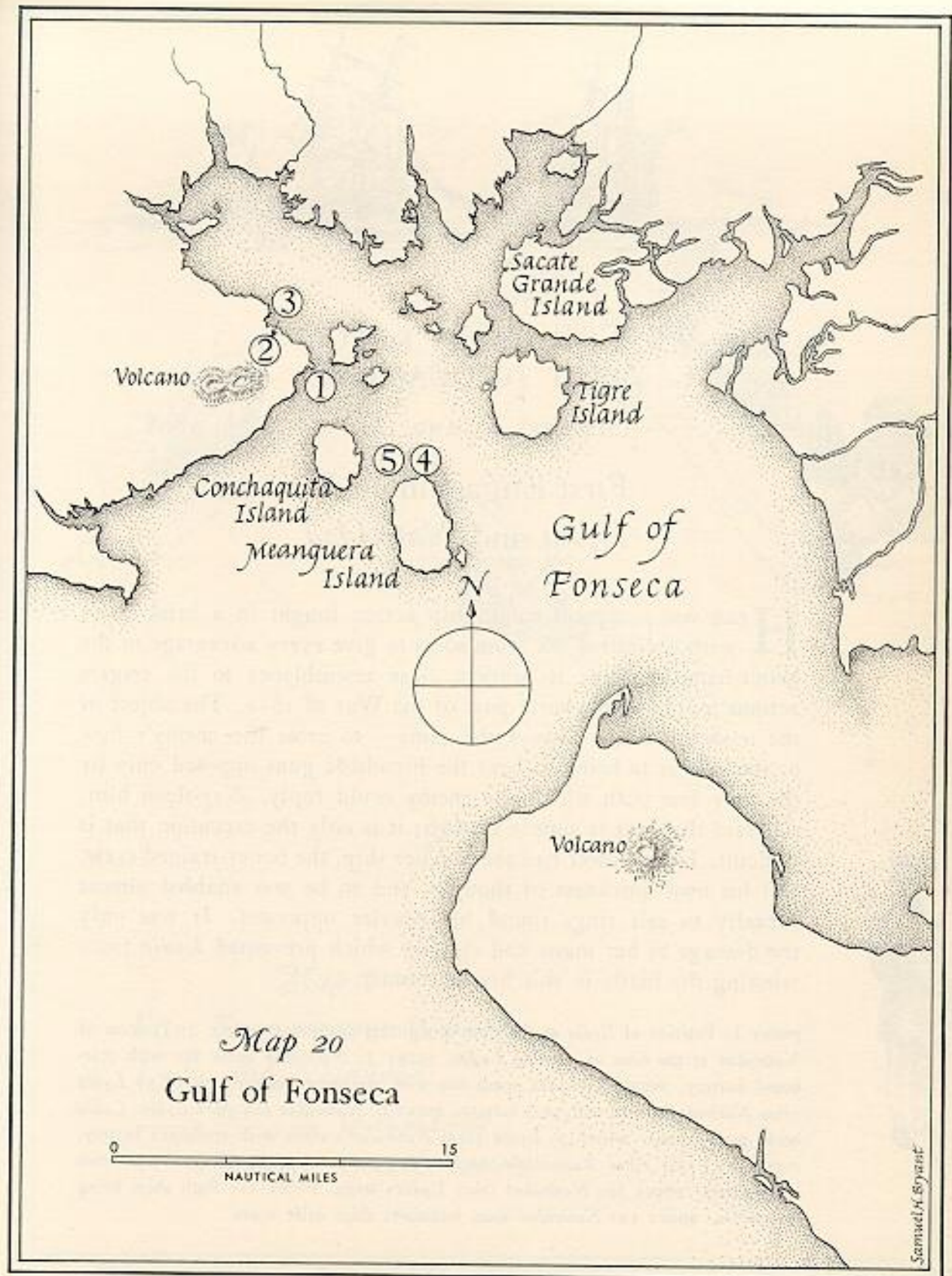


The Happy Return

Chapters 1 to 21 June to August 1808

Map 19 - Pacific Coast of Central America

- ① First landfall
- ② Encounter with Spanish lugger.
- ③ Lady Barbara embarks here.
- ④ Area of final battles between *Lydia* and *Natividad*.
- ⑤ Second encounter with Spanish lugger.
- ⑥ *Lydia* careened here.
- ⑦ Final encounter with Spanish lugger.



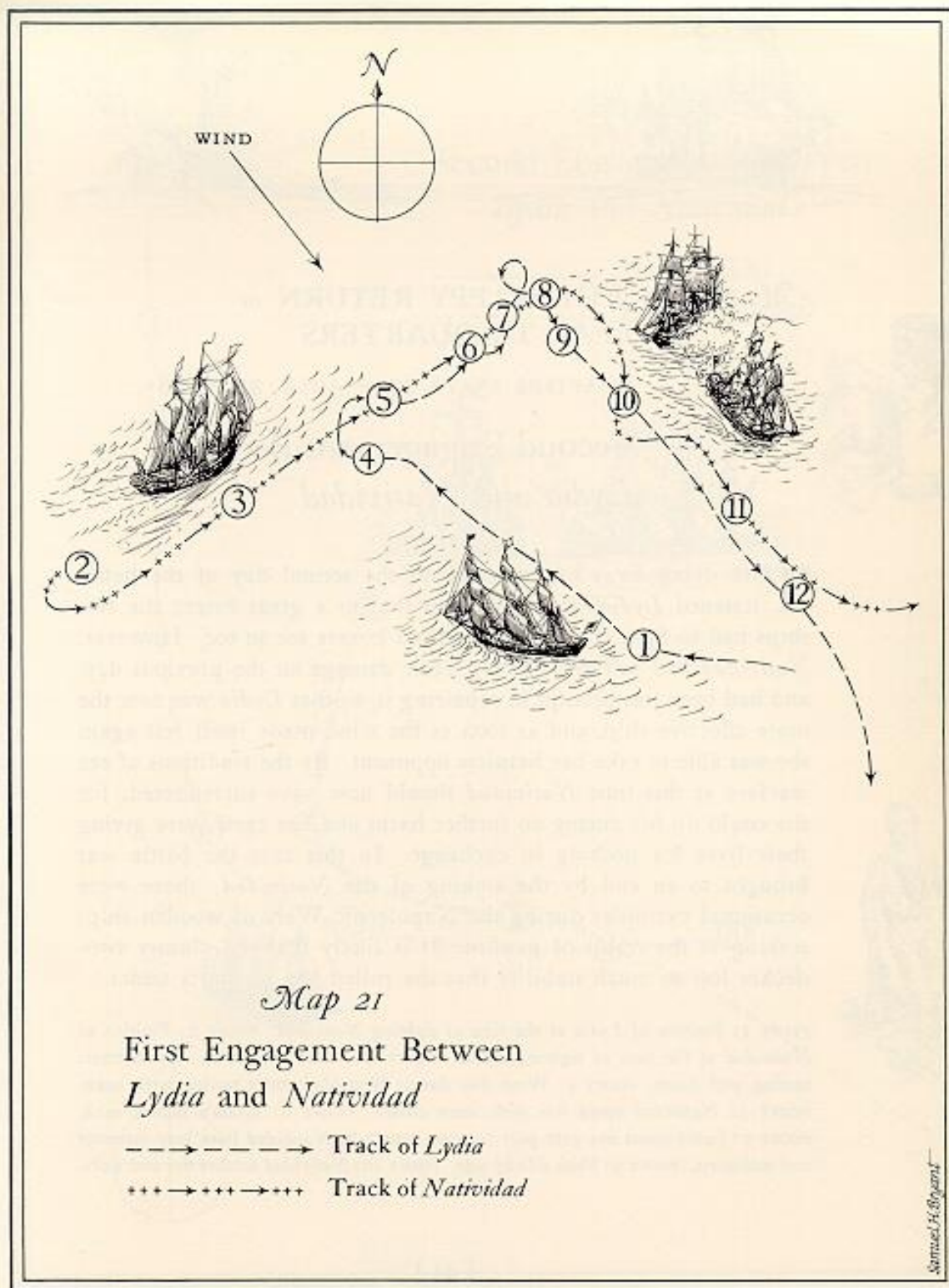
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Chapters 1 to 8

June 1808

Map 20 - Gulf of Fonseca

- ① First anchorage of *Lydia*.
- ② El Supremo's house.
- ③ Watering place.
- ④ Second anchorage of *Lydia*.
- ⑤ Capture of *Natividad*.



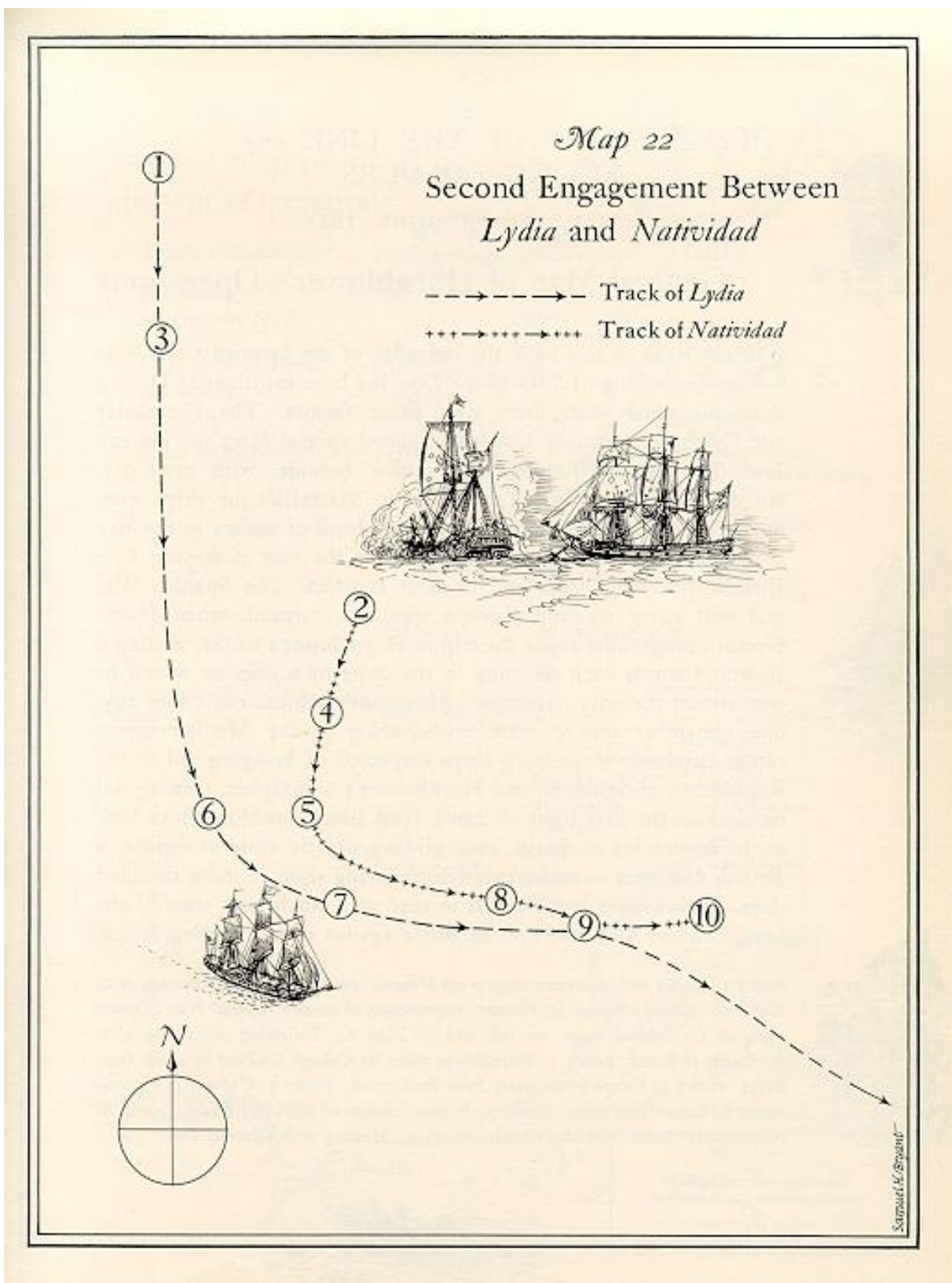
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Chapters 13 and 14

July 20, 1808

Map 21 - First Engagement Between Lydia and Natividad

- | | |
|---|--|
| ① Position of the <i>Lydia</i> at the time of sighting <i>Natividad</i> . | ② Position of <i>Natividad</i> at time of sighting <i>Lydia</i> . |
| ③ <i>Natividad</i> opens fire with starboard battery. | ④ <i>Lydia</i> opens fire with starboard battery. |
| ⑤ <i>Lydia</i> rakes <i>Natividad</i> 's stern with port battery. | ⑥ <i>Natividad</i> alongside <i>Lydia</i> ; <i>Lydia</i> backs main-topsail. |
| ⑦ <i>Lydia</i> rakes <i>Natividad</i> 's stern with starboard battery. | ⑧ <i>Lydia</i> rakes <i>Natividad</i> 's stern with port battery. |
| ⑨ <i>Lydia</i> loses mizzenmast. | ⑩ <i>Natividad</i> rakes <i>Lydia</i> 's stern. |
| Point 11: Both ships firing broadsides. | Point 12: <i>Natividad</i> loses foremast; ships drift apart. |



The Happy Return

Chapters 15 and 16

July 21, 1808

Map 22 - Second Engagement Between Lydia and Natividad

- ① Position of the *Lydia* at the time of sighting *Natividad*.
- ② Position of *Natividad* at the time of sighting *Lydia*.
- ③ Wind dies down; *Lydia* starts towing with boats.
- ④ Wind dies down; *Natividad* starts towing with boats.
- ⑤ *Natividad* opens fire with stern chaser.
- ⑥ *Lydia*'s launch sunk.
- ⑦ *Lydia* opens fire with port battery.
- ⑧ *Natividad* loses jury foremast and mainmast.
- ⑨ Ships side by side.
- ⑩ *Natividad* catches fire and sinks.

The Happy Return

(Beat To Quarters)

C. S. Forester

(1937)

Chapter I

It was not long after dawn that Captain Hornblower came up on the quarterdeck of the *Lydia*. Bush, the first lieutenant, was officer of the watch, and touched his hat but did not speak to him; in a voyage which had by now lasted seven months without touching land he had learned something of his captain's likes and dislikes. During this first hour of the day the captain was not to be spoken to, nor his train of thought interrupted. In accordance with standing orders — hallowed by now with the tradition which is likely to accumulate during a voyage of such incredible length — Brown, the captain's coxswain, had seen to it that the weather side of the quarterdeck had been holystoned and sanded at the first peep of daylight. Bush and the midshipman with him withdrew to the lee side at Hornblower's first appearance, and Hornblower immediately began his daily hour's walk up and down, up and down the twenty-one feet of deck which had been sanded for him. On one hand his walk was limited by the slides of the quarterdeck carronades; on the other by the row of ringbolts in the deck for the attachment of the carronade train tackles; the space of deck on which Captain Hornblower was accustomed to exercise himself for an hour each morning was thus five feet wide and twenty-one feet long. Up and down, up and down, paced Captain Hornblower. Although he was entirely lost in thought, his subordinates knew by experience that his sailor's instinct was quite alert; subconsciously his mind took note of the shadow of the main rigging across the deck, and of the feel of the breeze on his cheek, so that the slightest inattention on the part of the quartermaster at the wheel called forth a bitter rebuke from the captain — the more bitter in that he had been disturbed in this, the most important hour of his day. In the same way he was aware, without having taken special note, of all the salient facts of the prevailing conditions. On his awakening in his cot he had seen (without willing it) from the tell tale compass in the deck over his head that the course was north east, as it had been for the last three days. At the moment of his arrival on deck he had subconsciously noted that the wind was from the west, and just strong enough to give the ship steerage way, with all sail set to the royals, that the sky was of its perennial blue, and that the sea was almost flat calm, with a long peaceful swell over which the *Lydia* seared and swooped with profound regularity.

The first thing Captain Hornblower was aware of thinking was that the Pacific in the morning, deep blue overside and changing to silver towards the horizon, was like some heraldic blazon of argent and azure — and then he almost smiled to himself because that simile had come up in his mind every morning for the last fortnight. With the thought and the smile his mind was instantly working smoothly and rapidly. He looked down the gangways at the men at work holystoning; down on the maindeck, as he came forward, he could see another party engaged on the same task. They were talking in ordinary tones. Twice he heard a laugh. That was well. Men who could talk and laugh in that fashion were not likely to be plotting mutiny — and Captain Hornblower had that possibility much in mind lately. Seven months at sea had almost consumed the ship's stores. A week ago he had cut the daily ration of water to three pints a day, and three pints a day was hardly sufficient for men living on salt meat and biscuit in ten degrees north latitude, especially as water seven months in cask was half solid with green living things.

A week ago, too, the very last of the lemon juice had been served out, and there would be scurvy to reckon with within a month and no surgeon on board. Hankey the surgeon had died of all the complications of drink and syphilis off the Horn. For a month now tobacco had been doled out in half ounces weekly — Hornblower congratulated himself now on having taken the tobacco under his sole charge. If he had not done so the thoughtless fools would have used up their whole store, and men deprived of tobacco were men who could

not be relied upon. He knew that the men were more concerned about the shortage of tobacco than about the shortage of fuel for the galley which caused them each day to be given their salt pork only just brought to the boil in seawater.

The shortage of tobacco, of water and of wood was nothing nearly as important, however, as the imminent shortage of grog. He had not dared to cut that daily issue, and there was only rum for ten more days in the ship. Not the finest crew in the world could be relied on if deprived of their ration of rum. Here they were in the South Sea, with no other King's ship within two thousand miles of them. Somewhere to the westward were islands of romance, with beautiful women, and food to be got without labour. A life of happy idleness was within their reach. Some knave among the crew, better informed than the rest, would give the hint. It would not be attended to at present, but in the future, with no blessed interval of grog at noon, the men would be ready to listen. Ever since the crew of the *Bounty* had mutinied, seduced by the charms of the Pacific, the captain of every ship of His Britannic Majesty whose duty took him there was haunted by this fear. Hornblower, pacing the deck, looked sharply once more at the crew. Seven months at sea without once touching land had given an admirable opportunity for training the gang of gaolbirds and pressed men into seamen, but it was too long without distraction. The sooner now that he could reach the coast of Nicaragua, the better. A run ashore would distract the men, and there would be water and fresh food and tobacco and spirits to be got. Hornblower's mind began to run back through his recent calculations of the ship's position. He was certain about his latitude, and last night's lunar observations had seemed to confirm the chronometer's indication of the longitude — even though it seemed incredible that chronometers could be relied upon at all after a seven months' voyage. Probably less than one hundred miles ahead, at most three hundred, lay the Pacific coast of Central America. Crystal the master had shaken his head in doubt at Hornblower's positiveness, but Crystal was an old fool, and of no use as a navigator. Anyway, two or three more days would see who was right.

At once Hornblower's mind shifted to the problem of how to spend the next two or three days. The men must be kept busy. There was nothing like long idle days to breed mutiny — Hornblower never feared mutiny during the wild ten weeks of beating round the Horn. In the forenoon watch he would clear for action and practice the men at the guns, five rounds from each. The concussion might kill the wind for a space, but that could not be helped. It would be the last opportunity, perhaps, before the guns would be in action in earnest.

Another calculation came up in Hornblower's mind. Five rounds from the guns would consume over a ton weight of powder and shot. The *Lydia* was riding light already with her stores nearly all consumed. Hornblower called up before his mental eye a picture of the frigate's hold and the positions of the store rooms. It was time that he paid attention to the trim of the ship again. After the men had had their dinner he would put off in the quarter boat and pull round the ship. She would be by the stern a little now, he expected. That could be put right tomorrow by shifting the two No. 1 carronades on the forecastle forward to their original positions. And as the ship would have to shorten sail while he was in the quarter boat he might as well do the job properly and give Bush a free hand in exercising the crew aloft. Bush had a passion for that kind of seamanship, as a first lieutenant quite rightly should. Today the crew might beat their previous record of eleven minutes fifty-one seconds for sending up topmasts, and of twenty-four minutes seven seconds for setting all sail starting with topmast housed. Neither of those times, Hornblower agreed with Bush, was nearly as good as they might be; plenty of ships had set up better figures — at least so their captains had said.

Hornblower became aware that the wind had increased a tiny amount, sufficiently to call forth a faint whispering from the rigging. From the feel of it upon his neck and cheek he deduced it must have shifted aft a point or perhaps two, as well, and even as his mind registered these observations, and began to wonder how soon Bush would take notice of it, he heard the call for the watch. Clay, the midshipman on the quarterdeck, was bellowing like a bull for the afterguard. That boy's voice had broken since they left England; he was learning to use it properly now, instead of alternately squeaking and croaking. Still without taking visual notice of what was going on, Hornblower as he continued pacing the quarterdeck listened to the familiar sequence of sounds as the watch came tumbling aft to the braces. A crack and a yelp told him that Harrison the boatswain had landed with his cane on the stern of some laggardly or unlucky sailor. Harrison was a fine seaman, but with a weakness for using his cane on well-rounded sterns. Any man who filled his trousers out tight was likely

to get a welt across the seat of them solely for that reason, especially if he was unluckily engaged as Harrison came by in some occupation which necessitated bending forward.

Hornblower's meditations regarding Harrison's weakness had occupied nearly all the time necessary for the trimming of the sails; as they came to an end Harrison roared "Belay!" and the watch trooped back to their previous duties. Ting-ting, ting-ting, ting-ting, *ting* went the bell. Seven bells in the morning watch. Hornblower had been walking for well over his covenanted hour, and he was aware of a gratifying trickle of sweat under his shirt. He walked over to where Bush was standing by the wheel.

"Good morning, Mr Bush," said Captain Hornblower.

"Good morning, sir," said Bush, exactly as if Captain Hornblower had not been walking up and down within four yards of him for the last hour and a quarter.

Hornblower looked at the slate which bore the rough log of the last twenty-four hours; there was nothing of special note — the hourly casting of the log had given speeds of three knots, four and a half knots, four knots, and so on, while the traverse board showed that the ship had contrived to hold to her north easterly course throughout the day. The captain was aware of a keen scrutiny from his first lieutenant, and he knew that internally the lieutenant seethed with questions. There was only one man on board who knew whither the *Lydia* was bound, and that was the captain. He had sailed with sealed orders, and when he had opened and read them, in accordance with his instructions, in 30° N. 20° W., he had not seen fit to tell even his second in command what they contained. For seven months Lieutenant Bush had contrived to refrain from asking questions, but the strain was visibly telling on him.

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower, clearing his throat non-committally. Without a word he hung up the slate and went down the companion and entered his sleeping-cabin.

It was unlucky for Bush that he should be kept in the dark in this fashion, but Hornblower had refrained from discussing his orders with him not through any fear of Bush's garrulity, but through fear of his own. When he had first sailed as captain five years ago he had allowed his natural talkativeness full play, and his first lieutenant of that time had come to presume upon the licence allowed him until Hornblower had been unable to give an order without having it discussed. Last commission he had tried to limit discussion with his first lieutenant within the ordinary bounds of politeness, and had found that he had been unable to keep himself within those limits — he was always opening his mouth and letting fall one word too many to his subsequent regret. This voyage he had started with the firm resolve (like a drinker who cannot trust himself to drink only in moderation) to say nothing whatever to his officers except what was necessitated by routine, and his resolution had been hardened by the stress which his orders laid upon the need for extreme secrecy. For seven months he had held to it, growing more and more silent every day as the unnatural state of affairs took a firmer grip upon him. In the Atlantic he had sometimes discussed the weather with Mr Bush. Round in the Pacific he only condescended to clear his throat.

His sleeping-cabin was a tiny morsel of space bulkheaded off from his main cabin. Half the room was occupied by an eighteen pounder; the remainder was almost filled by his cot, his desk, and his chest. His steward Polwheal was putting out his razor and lather bowl on a bracket under a strip of mirror on the bulkhead — there was just room for the two of them to stand. Polwheal squeezed himself against the desk to allow his captain to enter; he said nothing, for Polwheal was a man of gratifyingly few words — Hornblower had picked him for that reason, because he had to guard against his besetting sin of garrulity even with servants.

Hornblower stripped off his wet shirt and trousers and shaved standing naked before the mirror. The face he regarded in the glass was neither handsome nor ugly, neither old nor young. There was a pair of melancholy brown eyes, a forehead sufficiently high, a nose sufficiently straight; a good mouth set with all the firmness acquired during twenty years at sea. The tousled curly brown hair was just beginning to recede and leave the forehead a little higher still, which was a source of irritation to Captain Hornblower, because he hated the thought of going bald. Noticing it, he was reminded of his other trouble and glanced down his naked body. He was slender and well muscled; quite a prepossessing figure, in fact, when he drew himself to his full six feet. But down there where his ribs ended there was no denying the presence of a rounded belly, just beginning to protrude beyond the line of his ribs of his iliac bones. Hornblower hated the thought of growing fat with an intensity rare in his generation; he hated to think of his slender smooth-skinned body being disfigured by an

unsightly bulge in the middle, which was the reason why he, a naturally indolent individual who hated routine forced himself to take that regular morning walk on the quarterdeck.

When he had finished shaving he put down razor and brush for Polwheal to wash and put away, and stood while Polwheal hung a ragged serge dressing gown over his shoulders. Polwheal followed him along the deck to the head-pump, removed the dressing gown, and then pumped up seawater from overside while his captain solemnly rotated under the stream. When the bath was finished Polwheal hung the dressing down again over his dripping shoulders and followed him back to the cabin. A clean linen shirt — worn, but neatly mended — and white trousers were laid out on the cot. Hornblower dressed himself, and Polwheal helped him into the worn blue coat with its faded lace, and handed him his hat. All this was without a word being spoken, so well by now had Hornblower trained himself into his self-imposed system of silence. And he who hated routine had by now so fully called in routine to save himself from speech that exactly as he stepped out again on the quarterdeck eight bells rang, just as happened every single morning.

"Hands to punishment, sir?" asked Bush, touching his hat.

Hornblower nodded. The pipes of the boatswain's mates began to twitter.

"All hands to witness punishment," roared Harrison on the maindeck, and from all parts of the ship men began to pour up and toe their lines in their allotted positions.

Hornblower stood rigid by the quarterdeck rail, setting his face like stone. He was ashamed of the fact that he looked upon punishment as a beastly business, that he hated ordering it and dreaded witnessing it. The two or three thousand floggings he had witnessed in the last twenty years had not succeeded in hardening him — in fact he was much softer now (as he was painfully aware) than as a seventeen year old midshipman. But there had been no avoiding the punishment of this morning's victim. He was a Welshman called Owen who could somehow never refrain from spitting on the decks. Bush, without referring to his captain, had sworn that he would have him flogged for every offence, and Hornblower had necessarily to endorse the decision and back up his officer in the name of discipline, although Hornblower had the gravest doubts as to whether a man who was fool enough not to be deterred from spitting on the decks by the fear of a flogging would benefit by receiving it.

Happily the business was got over quickly. The boatswain's mates triced Owen, naked to the waist, up to the main rigging, and laid into him as the drum rolled. Owen, unlike the usual run of seamen, howled with pain as the cat of nintails bit into his shoulders, and danced grotesquely, his bare feet flapping on the deck until at the end of his two dozen he hung from his bound wrists motionless and silent. Someone soused him with water and he was hustled below.

"Hands to breakfast, Mr Bush," snapped Hornblower; he hoped that the tan of the tropics saved him from looking as white as he felt. Flogging a half witted man was not to his taste as a before breakfast diversion and he was sick with disgust at himself at neither being strong enough to stop it nor ingenious enough to devise a way out of the dilemma Bush's decision had forced him into.

The row of officers on the quarterdeck broke up as each turned away. Gerard, the second lieutenant, took over the deck from Bush. The ship was like a magic tessellated pavement. It presented a geometrical pattern; someone shook it up into confusion, and at once it settled itself into a new and orderly fashion.

Hornblower went below to where Polwheal had his breakfast awaiting him.

"Coffee, sir," said Polwheal. "Burgoo."

Hornblower sat down at table; in the seven months' voyage every luxury had long since been consumed. The coffee was a black extract of burnt bread, and all that could be said in its favour was that it was sweet and hot. The burgoo was a savoury mess of unspeakable appearance compounded of mashed biscuit crumbs and minced salt beef. Hornblower ate absentmindedly. With his left hand he tapped a biscuit on the table so that the weevils would all be induced to have left it by the time he had finished his burgoo.

There were ship-noises all round him as he ate. Every time the *Lydia* rolled and pitched a trifle as she reached the crest of the swell which was lifting her, the woodwork all creaked gently in unison. Overhead came the sound of Gerard's shod feet as he paced the quarterdeck, and sometimes the pattering of horny bare feet as some member of the crew trotted by. From forward came a monotonous steady clanking as the pumps were put to the daily task of pumping out the ship's bilges. But these noises were all transient and interrupted; there was one sound which went on all the time so steadily that the ear grew accustomed to it and only

noticed it when the attention was specially directed to it — the sound of the breeze in the innumerable ropes of the rigging. It was just the faintest singing, a harmony of a thousand high-pitched tones and overtones, but it could be heard in every part of the ship, transmitted from the chains through the timbers along with the slow, periodic creaking.

Hornblower finished his burgoo, and was turning his attention to the biscuit he had been rapping on the table. He contemplated it with calm disfavour; it was poor food for a man, and in the absence of butter — the last cask had gone rancid a month back — he would have to wash down the dry mouthfuls with sips of burnt-bread coffee. But before he could take his first bite a wild cry from above caused him to sit still with the biscuit half way to his mouth.

"Land ho!" he heard. "Deck there! Land two points on the larboard bow, sir."

That was the lookout in the foretop hailing the deck. Hornblower, as he sat with his biscuit in mid air, heard the rush and bustle on deck; everyone would be wildly excited at the sight of land, the first for three months, on this voyage to an unknown destination. He was excited himself. There was not merely the imminent thrill of discovering whether he had made a good landfall; there was also the thought that perhaps within twenty-four hours he would be in the thick of the dangerous and difficult mission upon which my lords of the Admiralty had despatched him. He was conscious of a more rapid beating of his heart in his breast. He wanted passionately to rush out on deck as his first instincts dictated, but he restrained himself. He wanted still more to appear in the eyes of his officers and crew to be a man of complete self-confidence and imperturbability — and this was only partially to gratify himself. The more respect in which a captain was held, the better for his ship. He forced himself into an attitude of complete composure, crossing his knees and sipping his coffee in entire unconcern as Mr Midshipman Savage knocked at the cabin door and came bouncing in.

"Mr Gerard sent me to tell you land's in sight on the larboard bow, sir," said Savage, hardly able to stand still in the prevailing infection of excitement. Hornblower made himself take another sip of coffee before he spoke, and he made his words come slowly and calmly.

"Tell Mr Gerard I shall come on deck in a few minutes when I have finished my breakfast," he said.

"Aye aye, sir."

Savage bolted out of the cabin; his large clumsy feet clattered on the companion.

"Mr Savage! Mr Savage!" yelled Hornblower. Savage's large moonlike face reappeared in the doorway.

"You forgot to close the door," said Hornblower, coldly. "And please don't make so much noise on the companionway."

"Aye aye, sir," said the crestfallen Savage.

Hornblower was pleased with himself for that. He pulled at his chin in self congratulation. He sipped again at his coffee, but found himself quite unable to eat his biscuit. He drummed with his fingers on the table in an effort to make the time pass more rapidly.

He heard young Clay bellowing from the masthead, where presumably Gerard had sent him with a glass.

"Looks like a burning mountain, sir. Two burning mountains. Volcanoes, sir."

Instantly Hornblower began to call up before his mind's eye his memory of the chart which he had so often studied in the privacy of this cabin. There were volcanoes all along this coast; the presence of two of the larboard bow was no sure indication of the ship's position. And yet — and yet — the entrance of the Gulf of Fonseca would undoubtedly be marked by two volcanoes to larboard. It was quite possible that he had made a perfect landfall, after eleven weeks out of sight of land. Hornblower could sit still no longer. He got up from the table, and, remembering just in time to go slowly and with an air of complete unconcern, he walked up on deck.

Chapter II

The quarterdeck was thronged with officers, all the four lieutenants, Crystal the master, Simmonds of the marines, Wood the purser, the midshipmen of the watch. The rigging swarmed with petty officers and ratings,

and every glass in the ship appeared to be in use. Hornblower realized that a stern coldblooded disciplinarian would take exception to this perfectly natural behaviour, and so he did the same.

"What's all this?" he snapped. "Has no one in this ship anything to do? Mr Wood, I'll trouble you to send for the cooper and arrange with him for the filling of the water casks. Get the royals and stunsails off her, Mr Gerard."

The ship burst into activity again with the twittering of the pipes and Harrison's bellowing of "All hands shorten sail" and the orders which Gerard called from the quarterdeck. Under plain sail the *Lydia* rolled smoothly over the quartering swell.

"I think I can see the smoke from the deck, sir, now," said Gerard, apologetically raising the subject of land again to his captain. He proffered his glass and pointed forward. Low on the horizon, greyish under a wisp of white cloud, Hornblower could see something through the telescope which might be smoke.

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower, as he had trained himself to say instead of something more conversational. He went forward and began to climb the weather foremast shrouds. He was nothing of an athlete, and he felt a faint dislike for this task, but it had to be done — and he was uncomfortably aware that every idle eye on board was turned on him. Because of this he was morally compelled, although he was hampered by the telescope, to refrain from going through the lubbers' hole and instead to make the difficult outward climb up the futtock shrouds. Nor could he pause for breath — not when there were midshipmen under his command who in their follow-my-leader games thought nothing of running without a stop from the hold to the main royal truck.

The climb hand over hand up the fore top gallant shrouds tried him severely; breathing heavily, he reached the fore top gallant masthead, and settled himself to point the telescope as steadily as his heaving chest and sudden nervousness would allow. Clay was sitting nonchalantly astride the yardarm fifteen feet away, but Hornblower ignored him. The slight corkscrew roll of the ship was sweeping him in a vast circle, up, forward, sideways, and down; at first he could only fix the distant mountains in snatches, but after a time he was able to keep them under fairly continuous observation. It was a strange landscape which the telescope revealed to him. There were the sharp peaks of several volcanoes; two very tall ones to larboard, a host of smaller ones both to starboard and to port. As he looked he saw a puff of grey steam emerge from one peak — not from the summit, but from a vent in the side — and ascend lazily to join the strip of white cloud which hung over it. Besides these cones there was a long mountain range of which the peaks appeared to be spurs, but the range itself seemed to be made up of a chain of old volcanoes, truncated and weathered down by the passage of centuries; that strip of coast must have been a hell's kitchen when they were all in eruption together. The upper parts of the peaks and of the mountains were a warm grey — grey with a hint of pink — and lower he could see what looked like green cataracts which must be vegetation stretching up along gullies in the mountain sides. Hornblower noted the relative heights and positions of the volcanoes, and from these data he drew a map in his mind and compared it with the section of the chart which he also carried in his mind's eye. There was no doubting their similarity.

"I thought I saw breakers just then, sir," said Clay. Hornblower's gaze changed direction from the tops of the peaks to their feet.

Here there was a solid belt of green, unbroken save where lesser volcanoes jutted out from it. Hornblower swept his glass along it, along the very edge of the horizon, and then back again. He thought he saw a tiny flash of white, sought for the place again, experienced a moment of doubt, and then saw it again — a speck of white which appeared and disappeared as he watched.

"Quite right. Those are breakers sure enough," he said, and instantly regretted it. There had been no need to make any reply to Clay at all. By that much his reputation for immobility diminished.

The *Lydia* held her course steadily towards the coast. Looking down, Hornblower could see the curiously foreshortened figures of the men on the forecastle a hundred and forty feet below, and round the bows a hint of a bow wave which told him the ship must be making four knots or very nearly. They would be up with the shore long before nightfall, especially as the breeze would freshen as the day went on. He eased himself out of his cramped position and stared again at the shore. As time went on he could see more breakers stretching on each side of where he had originally seen them. That must be a place where the incoming swell broke straight against a vertical wall of rock and flung its white foam upwards into sight. His belief that he had made a

perfect landfall was growing stronger. On each side of the breakers was a stretch of clear water on the horizon, and beyond that again, on each side, was a medium-sized volcano. A wide bay, an island in the middle of the entrance, and two flanking volcanoes. That was exactly how the Gulf of Fonseca appeared in the chart, but Hornblower was painfully aware that no very great error in his navigation would have brought them anything up to two hundred miles from where he thought he was, and he realised that on a coast like this, littered with volcanoes, one section would appear very like another. Even the appearance of a bay and an island might be simulated by some other formation of the coast. Besides, he could not rely on his charts. They had been drawn from those Anson had captured in these very waters sixty years ago, and every one knew about Dago charts — and Dago charts submitted to the revision of useless Admiralty draughtsmen might be completely unreliable.

But as he watched his doubts were gradually set at rest. The bay opening before him was enormous — there could be no other of that size on that coast which could have escaped even Dago cartographers. Hornblower's eyes estimated the width of the entrance at something over ten miles including the islands. Farther up the bay was a big island of a shape typical of the landscape — a steep circular cone rising sheer from the water. He could not see the far end of the bay, not even now when the ship was ten miles nearer than when he first saw the entrance.

"Mr Clay," he said, not condescending to take his eye from the telescope. "You can go down now. Give Mr Gerard my compliments and ask him please to send all hands to dinner."

"Aye aye, sir," said Clay.

The ship would know now that something unusual was imminent, with dinner advanced by half an hour. In British ships the officers were always careful to see that the men had full bellies before being called upon to exert themselves more than usual.

Hornblower resumed his watch from the mast head. There could be no possible doubt now that the *Lydia* was heading into the Gulf of Fonseca. He had performed a most notable feat of navigation, of which anyone might be justifiably proud, in bringing the ship straight here after eleven weeks without sighting land. But he felt no elation about it. It was Hornblower's nature to find no pleasure in achieving things he could do; his ambition was always yearning after the impossible, to appear a strong silent capable man, unmoved by emotion.

At present there was no sign of life in the gulf, no boats, no smoke. It might be an uninhabited shore that he was approaching, a second Columbus. He could count on at least one hour more without further action being called for. He shut his telescope, descended to the deck, and walked with self conscious slowness aft to the quarterdeck.

Crystal and Gerard were talking animatedly beside the rail. Obviously they had moved out of earshot of the man at the wheel and had sent the midshipman as far away as possible; obviously also, as indicated by the way they looked towards Hornblower as he approached, they were talking about him. And it was only natural that they should be excited, because the *Lydia* was the first British ship of war to penetrate into the Pacific coast of Spanish America since Anson's time. They were in waters furrowed by the famous Acapulco galleon which carried a million sterling in treasure on each of her annual trips, along this coast crept the coasting ships bearing the silver of Potosi to Panama. It seemed as if the fortune of every man on board might be assured if only those unknown orders of the captain permitted it. What the captain intended to do next was of intense importance to them all.

"Send a reliable man with a good glass to the fore t'gallant masthead, Mr Gerard," was all Hornblower said as he went below.

Chapter III

Polwheal was waiting with his dinner in the cabin. Hornblower meditated for a moment upon the desirability of a dinner of fat salt pork at noontide in the tropics. He was not in the least hungry, but the desire to appear a hero in the eyes of his steward overrode his excited lack of appetite. He sat down and ate rapidly for ten minutes, forcing himself to gulp down the distasteful mouthfuls. Polwheal, too, was watching every movement

he made with desperate interest. Under his avid gaze he rose and walked through, stooping his head under the low deck, to his sleeping cabin and unlocked his desk.

"Polwheal!" he called.

"Sir!" said Polwheal instantly appearing at the door.

"Get out my best coat and put the new epaulettes on it. Clean white trousers — no, the breeches and the best white silk stockings. The buckled shoes, and see that the buckles shine. And the sword with the gold hilt."

"Aye aye, sir," said Polwheal.

Back in the main cabin Hornblower stretched himself on the locker below the stern window and once more unfolded his secret Admiralty orders. He had read them so often that he almost knew them by heart, but it was prudent to make certain that he understood every word of them. They were comprehensive enough, in all conscience. Some Admiralty clerk had given his imagination loose rein in the wording of them. The first ten paragraphs covered the voyage up to the present; firstly the need for acting with the utmost possible secrecy so that no hint could reach Spain of the approach of a British frigate to the Pacific shores of her possessions. 'You are therefore requested and required —' to sight land as little as possible on the voyage, and 'you are hereby entirely prohibited —' from coming within sight of land at all in the Pacific until the moment of his arrival at the mouth of the Gulf of Fonseca. He had obeyed these orders to the letter, although there were few enough captains in the service who could have done and who would have done. He had brought his ship here all the way from England without seeing any land save for a glimpse of Cape Horn, and if he had allowed Crystal to have his way regarding the course to be set a week ago, the ship would have gone sailing into the Gulf of Panama, completely forfeiting all possibility of secrecy.

Hornblower wrenched his mind away from the argument regarding the amount of compass-variation to be allowed for in these waters and forced himself to concentrate on a further study of his orders. 'You are hereby requested and required —' to form an alliance as soon as he reached the Gulf of Fonseca with Don Julian Alvarado, who was a large landowner with estates along the western shore of the bay. Don Julian intended, with the help of the British, to rise in rebellion against the Spanish monarchy. Hornblower was to hand over to him the five hundred muskets and bayonets, the five hundred pouch-belts, and the million rounds of small arm ammunition which were to be provided at Portsmouth, and he was to do everything which his discretion dictated to ensure the success of the rebellion. If he were to think it necessary, he could present to the rebels one or more of the guns of his ship, but the fifty thousand guineas in gold which were entrusted to him as well were only to be disbursed if the rebellion would fail without them, on pain of his being brought to a court-martial. He was to succour the rebels to the utmost of his power, even to the extent of recognising Don Julian Alvarado's sovereignty over any territory that he might conquer, provided that in return Don Julian would enter into commercial treaties with His Britannic Majesty.

This mention of commercial treaties apparently had acted as an inspiration to the Admiralty clerk, for the next ten paragraphs dealt in highflown detail with the pressing necessity for opening Spanish possessions to British commerce. Peruvian balsam and logwood, cochineal and gold, were awaiting exchange for British manufactures. The clerk's quill had fairly dipped with excitement as it penned these details in a fair round hand. Furthermore, there was an arm of the bay of Fonseca, called, it was believed, the Estero Real, which approached closely to the inland lake of Managua, which was thought to communicate with the lake of Nicaragua, which drained to the Caribbean by the river San Juan. Captain Hornblower was requested and required to do his utmost to open up this route across the isthmus to British commerce, and he was to guide Don Julian's efforts in this direction.

It was only after Don Julian's rebellion should be successful and all this accomplished that the orders went on to give Captain Hornblower permission to attack the treasure ships to be found in the Pacific, and moreover no shipping was to be interfered with if doing so should give offense to those inhabitants who might otherwise be favourable to the rebellion. For Captain Hornblower's information it was noted that the Spaniards were believed to maintain in these waters a two-decked ship of fifty guns, by the name the *Natividad*, for the enforcement of the royal authority. Captain Hornblower was therefore requested and required to 'take, sink, burn or destroy' this ship at the first opportunity.

Lastly, Captain Hornblower was ordered to open communications as soon as might be convenient with the Rear Admiral commanding the Leeward Islands station for the purpose of receiving further orders.

Captain Hornblower folded up the crackling paper again and fell into contemplation. Those orders were the usual combination of the barely-possible and the quite Quixotic, which a captain on detached service might expect to receive. Only a landsman would have given those opening orders to sail to the Gulf of Fonseca without sighting other land in the Pacific — only a succession of miracles (Hornblower gave himself no credit for sound judgment and good seamanship) had permitted of their being carried out.

Starting a rebellion in the Spanish American colonies had long been a dream of the British government — a dream which had been a nightmare to the British officers ordered to make it a reality. Admiral Popham and Admiral Stirling, General Beresford and General Whitelocke, had, during the last three years, all lost in honour and reputation in repeated efforts to raise rebellion on the River Plate.

Opening up a channel to British trade across the Isthmus of Darien had long been a similar dream cherished by Admiralty clerks with small scale maps before them and no practical experience. Thirty years ago Nelson himself, as a young captain, had nearly lost his life in command of an expedition up that very river San Juan which Hornblower was ordered to clear from its source.

And to crown it all was the casual mention of the presence of a fifty-gun ship of the enemy. It was typical of Whitehall to send a thirty-six gun frigate so lightly to attack an enemy of nearly double that force. The British navy had been so successful in single ship duels during these wars that by now victory was expected of its ships against any odds. If by any chance the *Natividad* should overwhelm the *Lydia* no excuse would be accepted. Hornblower's career would be wrecked. Even if the inevitable courtmartial did not break him, he would be left to languish on half pay for the rest of his life. Failure to capture the *Natividad*, failure to start a successful rebellion, failure to open the isthmus to trade — any one of these quite probable failures would mean a loss of reputation, of employment, of having to face his wife on his return condemned as a man inferior to his fellows.

Having contemplated all these gloomy possibilities Hornblower thrust them aside with determined optimism. First and foremost he must make contact with this Don Julian Alvarado, which seemed to be a duty involving some little interest and only small difficulty. Later there would be treasure-ships to capture and prize money to be won. He would not allow himself to worry about the rest of the future. He heaved himself off the locker and strode back to his sleeping-cabin.

Ten minutes later he stepped up on the quarterdeck; he noted with sardonic amusement how his officers tried without success to appear not to notice his splendid best coat with the epaulettes, his silk stockings, his shoes with the cut steel buckles, his cocked hat and his gold-hilted sword. Hornblower cast a glance at the fast-nearing shore.

"Beat to quarters, Mr Bush," he said. "Clear for action."

The roll of the drum set the ship into a wild fury as the watch below came tumbling up. Urged on by the cries and blows of the petty officers the crew flung themselves into the business of getting the ship ready for action. The decks were soused with water and strewn with sand; the bulkheads were knocked away; the fire parties took their places at the pumps; the boys ran breathless with cartridges for the guns; down below the purser's steward who had been appointed acting surgeon was dragging together the midshipmen's chests in the cockpit to make an operating table.

"We'll have the guns loaded and run out, if you please, Mr Bush," said Hornblower.

That was only a sensible precaution to take, seeing that the ship was about to sail before the wind straight into Spanish territory. The guns' crews cast off the trappings of the breeches, tugged desperately at the train tackles to draw the guns inboard, rammed home the powder and the shot, depressed the gun muzzles, strained madly at the gun tackles, and ran the guns out through the opened ports.

"Ship cleared for action. Ten minutes twenty-one seconds, sir," said Bush as the last rumble died away. For the life of him he still could not tell whether this was an exercise or in earnest, and it gratified Hornblower's vanity to leave him in doubt.

"Very good, Mr Bush. Send a good man with the lead into the main chains, and make ready to anchor."

The breeze off the sea was strengthening every minute now, and the *Lydia*'s speed was steadily increasing. With his glass from the quarterdeck Hornblower could see every detail of the entrance to the bay, and the broad westerly channel between Conchaquita Island and the westerly mainland which the chart assured him afforded twenty fathoms for five miles inland. But there was no trusting these Spanish charts.

"What have you in the chains, there?" called Hornblower.

"No ground with this line, sir."

"How many fathom have you out? Pass along the deep sea line."

"Aye aye, sir."

A dead hush descended on the ship, save for the eternal harping of the rigging and the chatter of the water under the stern.

"No ground, sir, within a hundred fathom."

The shore must be very steep-to, then, because they were within two miles of land now. But there was no purpose in risking running aground under full sail.

"Get the courses in," said Hornblower. "Keep that lead going in the chains, there."

Under topsails alone the *Lydia* crept in towards land. Soon a cry from the chains announced that bottom had been reached in a hundred fathoms, and the depth diminished steadily at every cast. Hornblower would have been glad to know what was the state of the tide — if he was going aground at all it would be far better to do so on the flow than on the ebb — but there was no possible means of calculating that. He went halfway up the mizzen rigging to get a better view, everyone else in the ship save for the man in the chains was standing rigid in the blinding heat. They were almost in the entrance channel now. Hornblower sighted some driftwood afloat on the near side, and training his glass on it, he saw that it was floating in up the bay. The tide was making, then; better and better.

"By the deep nine," chanted the leadsman.

So much for the Dago chart which indicated ten fathoms.

"And a half eight."

The channel was shoaling fast. They would have to anchor soon in this case.

"And a half eight."

Plenty of water still for the present. Hornblower called down to the helmsman, and the *Lydia* swung to starboard round the slight bend.

"And a half eight."

Well enough still. The *Lydia* steadied on her new course.

"By the mark seven."

Hornblower's eyes searched the channel in an attempt to determine the line of deepest water.

"By the mark seven."

An order from Hornblower edged the *Lydia* towards the further side. Bush quietly sent the men to the braces to trim the yards on the new course.

"And a half eight."

That was better.

"By the deep nine."

Better still. The *Lydia* was well up the bay now, and Hornblower could see that the tide was still making. They crept on over the glassy water, with the leadsman chanting monotonously, and the steep conical mountain in the middle of the bay drawing nearer.

"Quarter less eight," called the leadsman.

"Are the anchors clear?" asked Hornblower.

"All clear, sir."

"By the mark seven."

No useful object could be served in going in farther.

"Let go the anchor."

The cable roared through the hawsehole while the watch sprang to furl the topsails, and the *Lydia* swung round to wind and tide while Hornblower descended to the quarterdeck.

Bush blinked at him as at a miracle worker. Seven weeks after sighting the Horn, Hornblower had brought the *Lydia* straight in to her destination; he had arrived in the afternoon with the sea breeze and a flowing tide to bring him in, and if there were danger for them here nightfall would soon bring them the ebb tide and the land breeze to take them out again. How much was fluke and how much was calculation Bush could not guess, but

as his opinion of Hornblower's professional merit was far higher than Hornblower himself cherished he was inclined to give him more credit than was really his due.

"Keep the watch at quarters, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "Dismiss the watch below."

With the ship a mile from any possible danger and cleared for action there was no need to keep every man at his station. The ship broke into a cheerful buzz as the watch below lined the rails to stare out at this land of green jungle and grey rock, but Hornblower was puzzled for a moment, wondering what to do next. The excitement of bringing the ship into an unknown harbour had prohibited his usual careful planning of his next step. His mind was made up for him by a hail from the lookout.

"Deck there! Boat putting out from shore. Two points abaft the starboard beam."

A double speck of white was creeping out towards them; Hornblower's glass resolved it into an open boat under two tiny lateen sails, and as she drew nearer he could see that she was manned by half a dozen swarthy men wearing wide straw hats. She hove-to fifty yards away, and someone stood up in the stern sheets and shouted across the water with hands cupped round his mouth. It was Spanish that he spoke.

"Is that an English ship?" he asked.

"Yes. Come on board," replied Hornblower. Two years as a prisoner of Spain had given him the opportunity of learning the language — he had long before decided that it was merely on account of this accomplishment that he had been selected for this special service.

The boat ran alongside and the man who had hailed scrambled lightly up the ladder to the deck. He stopped at the side and looked round him with a certain curiosity at the spotless decks and the rigid order which prevailed on every hand. He wore a sleeveless black waistcoat aflame with gold embroidery; beneath it a dirty white shirt, and on his legs dirty white trousers terminating raggedly just below the knees. His feet were bare, and in a red sash round his waist he carried two pistols and a short heavy sword. He spoke Spanish as his native tongue, but he did not look like a Spaniard; the black hair which hung over his ears was long, lustreless, and lank; there was a tinge of red in his brown complexion and a tinge of yellow in the whites of his eyes. A long thin moustache drooped from his upper lip. His eyes at once picked out the captain, gorgeous in his best coat and cocked hat, and he advanced towards him. It was in anticipation of just such a meeting that Hornblower had donned his best, and he was pleased with his foresight now.

"You are the captain, sir?" asked the visitor.

"Yes. Captain Horatio Hornblower of His Britannic Majesty's frigate *Lydia*, at your service. And whom have I the pleasure of welcoming?"

"Manuel Hernandez, lieutenant general of el Supremo."

"El Supremo?" asked Hornblower, puzzled. The name was a little difficult to render into English. Perhaps 'The Almighty' might be the nearest translation.

"Yes, of el Supremo. You were expected here four months, six months back."

Hornblower thought quickly. He dared not disclose the reason of his coming to any unauthorized person, but the fact that this man knew he was expected seemed to indicate that he was a member of Alvarado's conspiracy.

"It is not to el Supremo that I am ordered to address myself," he temporized. Hernandez made a gesture of impatience.

"Our lord el Supremo was known to men until lately as His Excellency Don Julian Maria de Jesus de Alvarado y Moctezuma," he said.

"Ah!" said Hornblower. "It is Don Julian that I want to see."

Hernandez was clearly annoyed by this casual mention of Don Julian.

"El Supremo," he said, laying grave accent on the name, "has sent me to bring you into his presence."

"And where is he?"

"He is in his house."

"And which is his house?"

"Surely it is enough, Captain, that you should know that el Supremo requires your attendance."

"Do you think so? I would have you know, señor, that a captain of one of His Britannic Majesty's ships is not accustomed to being at anyone's beck and call. You can go, if you like, and tell Don Julian so."

Hornblower's attitude indicated that the interview was at an end. Hernandez went through an internal struggle, but the prospect of returning to face el Supremo without bringing the captain with him was not alluring.

"The house is there," he said sullenly, at last, pointing across the bay. "On the side of the mountain. We must go through the town which is hidden behind the point to get there."

"Then I shall come. Pardon me for a moment, General."

Hornblower turned to Bush, who was standing by with the half puzzled, half admiring expression on his face so frequently to be seen when a man is listening to a fellow countryman talking fluently in an unknown language.

"Mr Bush," he said, "I am going ashore, and I hope I shall return soon. If I do *not*, if I am not back nor have written to you by midnight, you must take steps to ensure the safety of the ship. Here is the key of my desk. You have my orders that at midnight you are to read the government's secret orders to me, and to act on them as you think proper."

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush. There was anxiety in his face, and Hornblower realised with a thrill of pleasure that Bush was actually worried about his captain's well being. "Do you think — is it safe for you on shore alone, sir?"

"I don't know," said Hornblower, with honest indifference. "I must go, that is all."

"We'll bring you off, sir, safe and sound, if there is any hanky-panky."

"You'll see after the safety of the ship first," snapped Hornblower, visualizing a mental picture of Bush with a valuable landing party blundering about in the fever-haunted jungles of Central America. Then he turned to Hernandez. "I am at your service, señor."

Chapter IV

The boat ran softly aground on a beach of golden sand round the point, and her swarthy crew sprang out and hauled the boat up so that Hornblower and Hernandez could step ashore dry shod. Hornblower looked keenly about him. The town came down to the edge of the sand; it was a collection of a few hundred houses of palmetto leaves, only a few of them roofed with tiles. Hernandez led the way up towards it.

"Agua, agua," croaked a voice as they approached. "Water, for the love of God, water."

A man was bound upright to a six foot stake beside the path; his hands were free and his arms thrashed about frantically. His eyes were protruding from his head and it seemed as if his tongue were too big for his mouth, like an idiot's. A circle of vultures crouched and fluttered round him.

"Who is that?" asked Hornblower, shocked.

"A man whom el Supremo has ordered to die for want of water," said Hernandez. "He is one of the unenlightened."

"He is being tortured to death?"

"This is his second day. He will die when the noontide sun shines on him tomorrow," said Hernandez casually.

"They always do."

"But what is his crime?"

"He is one of the unenlightened, as I said, Captain."

Hornblower resisted the temptation to ask what constituted enlightenment; from the fact that Alvarado had adopted the name of el Supremo he could fairly well guess. And he was weak enough to allow Hernandez to guide him past the unhappy wretch without a protest — he surmised that no expostulation on his part would override the orders given by el Supremo, and an unavailing protest would only be bad for his prestige. He would postpone action until he was face to face with the leader.

Little miry lanes, filthy and stinking, wound between the palmetto huts. Vultures perched on the roof ridges and squabbled with the mongrel dogs in the lanes. The Indian population were going about their usual avocations without regard for the man dying of thirst within fifty yards of them. They were all brown with a tinge of red, like Hernandez himself; the children ran naked, the women were dressed either in black or in dirty white; the few men to be seen wore only short white trousers to the knees and were naked from the

waist up. Half the houses appeared to be shops — open on one side; where were displayed for sale a few handfuls of fruits, or three or four eggs. At one place a black robed woman was bargaining to make a purchase. Tethered in the little square in the centre of the town some diminutive horses warred with the flies. Hernandez' escort made haste to untether two of them and stood at their heads for them to mount. It was a difficult moment for Hornblower; he was not a good horseman, as he knew, and he was wearing his best silk stockings, and he felt he would not cut a dignified figure on horseback with his cocked hat and his sword. There was no help for it, however. He was so clearly expected to mount and ride that he could not draw back. He got his foot into his stirrup and swung up into the saddle, and was relieved to find that the tiny horse was submissive and quiet. He trotted alongside Hernandez, bumping awkwardly. The sweat ran down his face, and every few seconds he had to reach up hurriedly and adjust his cocked hat. A path wound steeply up the hillside out of the town, only wide enough for one horseman at a time, so that Hernandez, with a courteous gesture, preceded him. The escort clattered along fifty yards behind them.

The narrow path was stifling hot, hemmed by trees and bush on either hand. Insects buzzed round them, biting viciously. Half a mile up the path some lounging sentries came awkwardly to attention, and beyond this point there were other men to be seen — men like the first one Hornblower had encountered, bound to stakes and dying of thirst. There were dead men, too — mere stinking masses of corruption with a cloud of flies which buzzed more wildly as the horses brushed by them. The stench was horrible; gorged vultures, hideous with their naked necks, flopped along the path ahead of the horses, unable to fly, seeking escape into the forest.

Hornblower was about to say "More of the unenlightened, General?" when he realised the uselessness of comment. It was better to say nothing than to say anything ineffectual. He rode silently through the stink and the flies, and tried to estimate the mentality of a man who would allow rotting corpses to remain, so to speak, on his doorstep.

The path rose over a shoulder of the mountain, and for a moment Hornblower had a glimpse of the bay below, blue and silver and gold under the evening sun, with the *Lydia* riding to her anchor in the midst of it. Then suddenly the forest at each side changed as if by magic into cultivated land. Orange groves, and trees laden with fruit, bordered the path, and through the trees Hornblower could gain a glimpse of fields bearing crops. The sun, sinking fast to the horizon, illuminated the golden fruit, and then, as they turned a corner, shone full on a vast white building, stretching low and wide on either hand, before them.

"The house of el Supremo," said Hernandez.

In the patio servants came and took their horses, while Hornblower stiffly dismounted and contemplated the ruin which riding had caused to his best silk stockings. The superior servants who conducted them into the house were dressed in clothes similar in their blend of rags and finery to those Hernandez wore — scarlet and gold above, bare feet and rags below. The most gorgeous of all, whose features seemed to indicate a strong dash of negro blood in his ancestry along with the Indian and the slight trace of European, came up with a worried look on his face.

"El Supremo has been kept waiting," he said. "Please come this way as quickly as you can."

He almost ran before them down a corridor to a door studded with brass. On this he knocked loudly, waited a moment, knocked again, and then threw open the door, bending himself double as he did so. Hornblower, at Hernandez' gesture, strode into the room, Hernandez behind him, and the major-domo closed the door. It was a long room, lime-washed to a glittering white, whose ceiling was supported by thick wooden beams, painted and carved. Towards the farther end, solitary in the bleak bareness of the room, stood a treble dais, and in a canopied chair on the dais sat the man Hornblower had been sent half round the world to see.

He did not seem very impressive or dignified; a small swarthy man, restless and fidgety, with piercing black eyes and lank black hair beginning to turn grey. From his appearance one might have guessed at only a small admixture of Indian blood in his European ancestry, and he was dressed in European fashion, in a red coat laced with gold, a white stock, and white breeches and stockings; there were gold buckles on his shoes.

Hernandez cringed before him.

"You have been a long time," snapped Alvarado. "Eleven men have been flogged during your absence."

"Supremo," sighed Hernandez — his teeth were chattering with fright — "the captain came instantly on hearing your summons."

Alvarado turned his piercing eyes upon Hornblower, who bowed stiffly. His mind was playing with the suspicion that the eleven men who had been flogged had suffered, unaccountably, because of the length of time it took to ride a horse from the beach to the house.

"Captain Horatio Hornblower, of His Britannic Majesty's frigate *Lydia*, at your service, sir," he said.

"You have brought me arms and powder?"

"They are in the ship."

"That is well. You will make arrangements with General Hernandez here for landing them."

Hornblower thought of his frigate's almost empty storerooms; and he had three hundred and eighty men to feed. Moreover, as with every ship's captain, he was already feeling irritation at dependence on the shore. He would be restless and uncomfortable until the *Lydia* was fully charged again with food and water and wood and every other necessary, sufficient to take her back round the Horn at least as far as the West Indies or St Helena, if not home.

"I can hand nothing over, sir, until my ship's needs are satisfied," he said. He heard Hernandez drawing his breath sharply at this sacrilegious temporising in the face of orders from el Supremo. The latter's eyebrows came together; for a moment it seemed likely that he would attempt to impose his imperious will upon the captain, but immediately afterwards his expression cleared as he realised the folly of quarrelling with his new ally.

"Certainly," he said. "Please make known to General Hernandez what you require, and he will supply you."

Hornblower had had dealing with officers of the Spanish services, and knew what they could accomplish in the way of fair promises not carried out, and procrastination and shiftiness and doubledealing. He guessed that Spanish American rebel officers would be proportionately less trustworthy. He decided to make known his wants now, so that there might be a fair chance of seeing a part at least of his demands satisfied in the near full.

"My watercasks must be refilled tomorrow," he said.

Hernandez nodded.

"There is a spring close to where we landed. If you wish, I will have men to help you."

"Thank you, but that will not be necessary. My ship's crew will attend to it. Besides water I need —"

Hornblower's mind began to total up all the multifarious wants of a frigate seven months at sea.

"Yes, señor?"

"I shall need two hundred bullocks. Two hundred and fifty if they are thin and small. Five hundred pigs. One hundred quintals of salt. Forty tons of ship's bread, and if biscuit is unobtainable I shall need the equivalent amount of flour, with ovens and fuel provided to bake it. The juice of forty thousand lemons, oranges or limes — I can supply the casks to contain it. Ten tons of sugar. Five tons of tobacco. A ton of coffee. You grow potatoes on this coast, do you not? Then twenty tons of potatoes will suffice."

Hernandez' face had grown longer and longer during this formidable recital.

"But, captain —" he ventured to protest, but Hornblower cut him short.

"Then for our current needs, while we are in harbour," he went on, "I shall need five bullocks a day, two dozen chickens, as many eggs as you can provide, and sufficient fresh vegetables for the daily consumption of my ship's company."

By nature Hornblower was the mildest of men, but in any matter regarding his ship fear of being deemed a failure drove him into unexpected hardness and temerity.

"Two hundred bullocks!" said the wretched Hernandez. "Five hundred pigs?"

"That is what I said," replied Hornblower, inexorably. "Two hundred *fat* bullocks."

At this point el Supremo intervened.

"See that the captain's wants are satisfied," he said, with an impatient wave of his hand. "Start now."

Hernandez only hesitated for a further tenth of a second, and then retired. The big brass bound door closed silently behind him.

"That is the only way to deal with these people," said el Supremo, lightly. "They are no better than beasts. Any kind of refinement is wasted upon them. Doubtless you saw on your way here various criminals suffering punishment?"

"I did."

"My ancestors on earth," said el Supremo, "went to much trouble in arranging elaborate punishments. They burned people to death with elaborate ceremonial. They cut out their hearts to the accompaniment of music and dances, or pressed them to death in wrappings of raw hide exposed to the sun. I find all that quite unnecessary. A simple order to have the man tied up to die of thirst is sufficient. The man dies, and there is an end of him."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"They are incapable of absorbing even the simplest of conceptions. There are some who to this very day cannot understand the very obvious principle that the blood of Alvarado and Moctezuma must be divine. They still cling to their absurd Christs and Virgins."

"Indeed?" said Hornblower.

"One of my earliest lieutenants could not shake himself free from the influence of early education. When I announced my divinity he actually made suggestions that missionaries should be sent out to preach to the tribes so as to convert them, as though I were putting forward a new religion. He could never realise that it was not a matter of opinion but a matter of fact. He was of course one of the first to die of thirst."

"Of course."

Hornblower was utterly bewildered by all this. But he clung to the fact that he had to ally himself to this madman. The revictualling of the *Lydia* depended upon his acting in concert with him, if nothing else did — and that was a matter of the most vital primary importance.

"Your King George must have been delighted to hear that I had decided to act in concert with him," continued el Supremo.

"He charged me with messages to you assuring you of his friendship," said Hornblower cautiously.

"Of course," said el Supremo, "he would not venture to push himself forward beyond that point. The blood of the family of Guelph naturally cannot compare with that of Alvarado."

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower. He found that noncommittal noise as useful in conversation with el Supremo as with Lieutenant Bush.

El Supremo's brows approached each other a trifle.

"I suppose you are aware," he said a little sternly, "of the history of the family of Alvarado? You know who was the first of that name to reach this country?"

"He was Cortez' lieutenant —" began Hornblower.

"Lieutenant? Nothing of the sort. I am surprised that you should believe such lies. He was the leader of the Conquistadores; it is only by the falsification of history that Cortez is represented as in command. Alvarado conquered Mexico, and from Mexico he descended upon this coast and conquered it all, as far as the Isthmus. He married the daughter of Moctezuma the last of the Emperors; and as a direct descendant from that union I have chosen to select from my family names those of Alvarado and Moctezuma. But in Europe; long before the head of the house came to the Americas, the name of Alvarado can be traced back, beyond the Hapsburgs and the Visigoths, beyond the Romans and the empire of Alexander, to the ultimate sources of time. It is only natural, therefore, that in this present generation the family should have attained to the divine state in my person. I find it satisfactory that you agree with me, Captain — Captain —"

"Hornblower."

"I thank you. And now I think we had better, Captain Hornblower, discuss the plans for the extension of my Empire."

"As you please," said Hornblower. He felt he must at least agree with this madman until the *Lydia* was revictualled, although his already faint hope of heading a successful insurrection in this country was fast becoming fainter.

"The Bourbon who calls himself King of Spain," said el Supremo, "maintains in this country an official who calls himself Captain General of Nicaragua. I sent to this gentleman some time ago a message ordering him to announce his fealty to me. This he had not done, and he was even misguided enough to hang my messenger publicly in Managua. Of the insolent men whom he subsequently sent to secure my divine person some were killed on the road and some died while attached to stakes, while a few were fortunate enough to see the light and are now included in my army. The Captain General is now, I hear, at the head of an army of three hundred men in the city of El Salvador. When you have landed the weapons consigned to me I propose to move on this

town, which I shall burn, along with the Captain General and the unenlightened among his men. Perhaps, Captain, you will accompany me? A burning town is worth seeing."

"My ship must be revictualled first," said Hornblower, sturdily.

"I have given the orders for that," replied el Supremo with a trace of impatience.

"And further," continued Hornblower, "it will be my duty first to ascertain the whereabouts of a Spanish ship of war, the *Natividad*, which I believe to be on this station. Before I can engage in any operations on land I must see that she can do no harm to my ship. I must either capture her or know for certain that she is too distant to interfere."

"Then you had better capture her, captain. I expect, from the information I have received, she will be sailing into the bay here at any moment."

"Then I must go back to my ship immediately," said Hornblower, all agitation. The possibility that his frigate might be attacked in his absence by a fifty-gun ship threw him into a seething panic. What would the Lords of the Admiralty say if the *Lydia* were lost while her captain was on shore?

"There is food being brought in. Behold," said el Supremo.

The door at the end of the hall was flung open as he spoke. A crowd of attendants began to walk slowly in, carrying a large table covered with silver dishes, and bearing four large silver candelabra each supporting five lighted candles.

"Your pardon, but I cannot wait for food. I must not," said Hornblower.

"As you will," said el Supremo indifferently. "Alfonso!"

The negroid major-domo came forward, bowing.

"See that Captain Hornblower goes back to his ship."

El Supremo had no sooner spoken the words than he relapsed into an attitude of contemplation. The bustle attendant upon the bringing in of the banquet he allowed to pass unheeded. He did not bestow another glance on Hornblower, who stood before him, regretting already his precipitation in deciding to rejoin his ship, anxious to cause no offense by a breach of good manners, worried by the need to revictual the *Lydia*, and acutely conscious that his present attitude of uncertainty before a man who was paying him no attention whatever was quite undignified.

"This way, señor," said Alfonso, at his elbow, while el Supremo still gazed blankly over his head. Hornblower yielded, and followed the major-domo out to the patio.

Two men and three horses awaited him there, in the half light. Without a word, bewildered by this sudden turn of events, Hornblower set his foot in the linked hands of a half naked slave who knelt at his horse's side and swung himself up into the saddle. The escort clattered before him out through the gates, and he followed them; night was falling fast.

At the corner of the path the wide bay opened before them. A young moon was fast fading down the sky. A shadowy shape in the centre of the silver water showed where the *Lydia* swung to her anchor — she, at least, was something solid and matter-of-fact in this mad world. Eastward a mountain top suddenly glowed red, illuminating the clouds above it, and then died away into darkness. They rode at a sharp trot down the steep path, past the moaning men tied to the stakes, past the stinking corpses, and into the little town. Here there was neither light nor movement; Hornblower had to leave his horse to the task of following the escort round the corners. The sound of the horses' hoofs ceased as they reached the soft sand of the beach; and simultaneously he heard the pitiful moaning of the first man he had seen tied to a stake and saw the faint phosphorescence of the edge of the sea.

He felt his way in the darkness into the waiting boat, and sat on a thwart while to the accompaniment of an explosion of orders the unseen crew pushed off. There was not a breath of wind — the sea breeze had died with the sunset and the land breeze had not yet sprung up. The unseen crew tugged at six oars, and the water sprang into view, the foam faintly visible as each stroke waked the phosphorescence. Slowly they made their way out into the bay to the rhythmical sound of the oars. Far out across the water he could see the faint loom of the *Lydia*, and a minute later he heard the welcome sound of Bush's voice as he hailed.

"Boat ahoy!"

Hornblower made a speaking trumpet of his hands and hailed back "*Lydia!*"

The captain of a King's ship calls himself by the name of that ship when he is on board a small boat.

Hornblower could hear all the expected noises now, could see all the expected sights; the bustle and clatter as boatswain's mate and sideboys ran to the gangway, the measured tramp of the marines, the flickering of lanterns. The boat ran alongside and he sprang to the ladder. It was good to feel solid oak under his feet again. The pipes of the boatswain's mates twittered in chorus; the marines brought their muskets to the present, and Bush was at the gangway to receive him, with all the pomp and ceremony due to a Captain arriving on board. Hornblower saw, by the lantern light, the relief in Bush's honest face. He glanced round the decks; one watch, wrapped in blankets, was lying on the bare boards of the deck, while the other squatted by the guns ready for action. Bush had very properly maintained all precautions while thus at anchor in a presumably hostile port. "Very good, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. Then he became conscious that his white breeches were stained by the dirty saddle, and that his best silk stockings were in threads about his calves. He felt discontented with his appearance; he was ashamed of the fact that he had come back to his ship in this undignified fashion, and without, as far as he knew, having settled anything for the future. He was angry with himself; he feared lest Bush should have a worse opinion of him should he come to know the facts. He felt his cheeks go hot with self-consciousness, and he took refuge, as ever, in uncommunicativeness.

"Ha-h'm," he rasped. "Call me if there is anything unusual to justify it."

With that, and no other word, he turned and went below to his cabin, where canvas screens replaced the torn down bulkheads.

Bush stared at his disappearing form. The volcanoes flicked and glowed round the bay. The crew, excited at their arrival in this strange land and anxious to hear about the future, saw themselves doomed to disappointment, just like the officers, who watched with dropped jaws their captain descending the companion ladder.

For one brief instant Hornblower felt that his dramatic appearance and exit compensated him for his consciousness of failure, but it was only for an instant. Seated on his cot, having sent away Polwheal, he felt his spirits fall again. His weary mind set itself vaguely again to debate the question of whether he would be able to obtain stores on the morrow. He fretted about whether he would be able to raise a rebellion successful enough to satisfy the Admiralty. He fretted about the approaching duel with the *Natividad*.

And throughout these considerations he continually found himself blushing again at the recollection of his abrupt dismissal by el Supremo. He felt that there were few captains in His Britannic Majesties service who would have submitted so meekly to such cavalier treatment.

"But what the devil could I have *done*?" he asked himself pathetically.

Without turning out his lantern he lay on his cot sweating in the still tropical night while his mind raced back and forth through past and future.

And then the canvas screen flapped. A little breath of wind came stealing along the decks. His sailor's instincts kept him informed of how the *Lydia* was swinging to her anchor. He felt the tiny tremor which ran through the ship as she brought up short to her anchor cable in a new direction. The land breeze had begun at last. The ship was cooler at once. Hornblower wriggled over on to his side, and slept.

Chapter V

Those doubts and fears which encompassed Hornblower while he was trying to go to sleep the night before vanished with the day. Hornblower felt a new strength running through his veins when he awoke. His mind was teeming with plans as he drank the coffee which Polwheal brought him at dawn, and for the first time for weeks he dispensed with his morning walk on the quarterdeck. He had decided as he stepped on the deck that at least he could fill the watercasks and restock with fuel, and his first orders sent parties of men hurriedly to the tackles to hoist out the launch and lower the quarter boats. Soon they were off for the shore, charged with the empty casks and manned by crews of excited chattering men; in the bows of each boat sat two marines in their red coats with their muskets loaded and bayonets fixed, and in their ears echoing their final orders from their sergeant, to the effect that if a single sailor succeeded in deserting while on shore every man among them would have his back well scratched with the cat.

An hour later the launch came back under sail, deep laden with her watercasks full, and while the casks were being swayed out of her and lowered into the hold Mr Midshipman Hooker came running up to Hornblower and touched his hat.

"The beef cattle are coming down to the shore, sir," he said.

Hornblower had to struggle hard to keep his face immobile and to receive the news as if he expected it.

"How many?" he snapped; it seemed a useful question to ask in order to waste time, but the answer was more surprising still.

"Hundreds, sir. There's a Dago in charge with a lot to say, but there's no one ashore who can speak his lingo."

"Send him out to me when you go ashore again," said Hornblower.

Hornblower spent the interval granted him in making up his mind. He hailed the lookout at the main royal masthead to ensure that a careful watch was kept to seaward. On the one hand there was the chance that the *Natividad* might come sailing in from the Pacific, in which case the *Lydia*, caught with half her crew ashore, would have no time to clear from the bay and would have to fight in confined waters and with the odds necessarily against her. On the other hand there was the opportunity of filling up completely with stores and regaining entire independence of the shore. From what Hornblower had seen of conditions prevailing there he judged that to postpone regaining that independence would be dangerous in the extreme; at any moment Don Julian Alvarado's rebellion might come to a hurried and bloody ending.

It was Hernandez who came out to him, in the same boat with the two tiny lateen sails in which Hornblower had been ferried across last night. They exchanged salutes on the quarterdeck.

"There are four hundred cattle awaiting your orders, Captain," said Hernandez. "My men are driving them down to the beach."

"Good," said Hornblower, his mind still not made up.

"I am afraid it will take longer to assemble the pigs," went on Hernandez. "My men are sweeping the country for them, but pigs are slow animals to drive."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"With regard to the salt, it will not be easy to collect the hundred quintals you asked for. Until our lord declared his divinity salt was a royal monopoly and scarce in consequence, but I have sent a party to the salt pans at Jiquiliso and hope to find sufficient there."

"Yes," said Hornblower. He remembered demanding salt, but he had no distinct recollection of the quantity he had asked for.

"The women are out collecting the lemons, oranges, and limes which you ordered," continued Hernandez, "but I am afraid it will be two days before we shall have them all ready."

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower.

"The sugar is ready at el Supremo's mill, however. And with regard to the tobacco, señor, there is a good deal in store. What special kind do you prefer? For some time we have only been rolling cigars for our own consumption, but I can set the women to work again after the fruit has been collected."

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower again, suppressing just in time the cry of delight which nearly escaped him involuntarily after the mention of cigars — it was three months since he had last smoked one. Virginia pigtail twist was what his men used, but that, of course, would be unobtainable on this coast. However, he had often seen British sailors chewing and enjoying the half-cured native leaf.

"Send as many cigars as will be convenient to you," he said, lightly. "For the rest, it is of no importance what you send."

Hernandez bowed.

"Thank you, señor. The coffee, the vegetables, and the eggs will of course be easy to supply. But with regard to the bread —"

"Well?"

Hernandez was obviously nervous about what he was going to say next.

"Your excellency will forgive me, but in this country we have only maize. There is a little wheat grown in the tierra templada, but it rests still in the hands of the unenlightened. Would maize flour suffice?"

Hernandez' face was working with anxiety as he gazed at Hornblower. It was only then that Hornblower realised that Hernandez was in terror of his life, and that el Supremo's lighthearted endorsement of the

requisitions he had made was far more potent than any stamped and sealed order addressed to a Spanish official.

"This is very serious," said Hornblower sternly. "My English sailors are unaccustomed to maize flour."

"I know that," said Hernandez, his interlocked fingers working galvanically. "But I assure your excellency that I can only obtain wheat flour for them by fighting for it, and I know that el Supremo would not like me to fight at present. El Supremo will be angry."

Hornblower remembered the abject fright with which Hernandez had regarded el Supremo the night before. The man was in terror lest he should be denounced as having failed to execute his orders. And then, suddenly, Hornblower remembered something he had unaccountably forgotten to ask for — something more important, if possible, than tobacco or fruit, and certainly far more important than the difference between maize flour and wheat.

"Very well," he said. "I will agree to use maize flour. But in consequence of this deficiency there is something else I must ask for."

"Certainly, Captain. I will supply whatever you ask. You have only to name it."

"I want drink for my men," said Hornblower. "Is there wine to be had here? Ardent spirits?"

"There is a little wine, your excellency. Only a little. The people on this coast drink an ardent spirit with which you are perhaps not acquainted. It is good when of good quality. It is distilled from the waste of the sugar mills, from the treacle, your excellency."

"Rum, by God!" exclaimed Hornblower.

"Yes, señor, rum. Would that be of any use to your excellency?"

"I shall accept it in lieu of anything better," said Hornblower sternly.

His heart was leaping with joy. It would appear like a miracle to his officers that he should conjure rum and tobacco from this volcano-riddled coast.

"Thank you, Captain. And shall we begin to slaughter the cattle now?"

That was the question on which Hornblower had been postponing a decision ever since he had heard about the arrival of the cattle on the beach. Hornblower looked up at the lookout at the masthead. He tested the strength of the wind. He gazed out to sea before he took the plunge.

"Very well," he said at length. "We will start now."

The sea breeze was not nearly as strong as yesterday, and the weaker the breeze the less chance there was of the *Natividad* coming in to interrupt the *Lydia's* revictualling. And as events turned out the *Lydia* completed the work undisturbed. For two days the boats plied back and forth between the beach and the ship. They came back piled high with bloody joints of meat; the sand of the shore ran red with the blood of the slaughtered animals, while the half-tame vultures gorged themselves into a coma in the piled offal. On board the ship the purser and his crew toiled like slaves in the roasting heat, cramming the brine barrels with the meat and tugging them into position in the storerooms. The cooper and his mates worked for two days with hardly a break, making and repairing casks. Sacks of flour, ankers of rum, bales of tobacco — the hands at the tackles sweated as they swayed these up from the boats. The *Lydia* was gorging herself full.

So obvious were the good intentions of those on shore that Hornblower was able to give orders that the cargo consigned to this coast should be released, and so the boats which bore the meat and flour to the ship returned laden with cases of muskets and kegs of powder and shot. Hornblower had his gig hoisted out, and was rowed periodically round his ship inspecting her trim, in the anticipation lest at any moment he would have to hoist up his anchor and beat out to sea to fight the *Natividad*.

The work proceeded by night as well as by day; in fifteen years at sea — every one a year of warfare — Hornblower had seen many opportunities lost as a result of some trivial lack of energy, some omission to drive a crew into exerting the last ounce of its strength. He had lost opportunities himself like that, for that matter. He still felt a revulsion of shame at the recollection of how he had missed that privateer off the Azores, for example. For fear of standing condemned again in his own eyes he drove his men until they dropped.

There was no time for enjoyment of the pleasures of land at the moment. The shore party did indeed cook their rations before a huge bonfire, and revel in roast fresh meat after seven months of boiled salt meat, but with the characteristic contrariness of British sailors they turned with revulsion from the delicious fruit which

was offered them — bananas and pawpaws, pineapples and guavas, and considered themselves the victims of sharp practice because these were substituted for their regulation ration of boiled dried peas.

And then, on the second evening, as Hornblower walked the quarterdeck enjoying the sea breeze at its freshest, and rebelling in the thought that he was free of the land if necessary for another six months, and looking forward with the sheerest joy to his imminent dinner of roast fowl, there came the sound of firing from the beach. A scattering volley at first; a few dropping shots, and then another ragged volley. Hornblower forgot his dinner, his feeling of wellbeing, everything. Trouble on the mainland, of whatever sort, meant that the success of his mission was being imperilled. In hot haste he called for his gig, and he was pulled to the shore by a crew who made the stout oars bend as they flung their weight on the handles in response to the profane urgings of Coxswain Brown.

The scene that greeted his eyes as he rounded the point excited his worst apprehensions. The whole landing party was clubbed together on the beach; the dozen marines were in line on one flank, reloading their muskets; the sailors were bunched beside them armed with whatever weapons had come to their hands. In a wide semicircle round them were the inhabitants, brandishing swords and muskets, and in the no man's land between the two parties lay one or two corpses. At the water's edge, behind the sailors, lay one of the hands with two of his mates bending over him. He was propped up on his elbow and he was vomiting floods of blood.

Hornblower sprang into the shallows; he paid no attention to the wounded sailor, but pushed his way through the mob before him. As he emerged into the open there came a puff of smoke from the half circle up the beach and a bullet sang over his head. He paid no attention to that either.

"Put those muskets down!" he roared at the marines, and he turned towards the gesticulating inhabitants and held up his hand palm forward, in the universal and instinctive gesture of peace. There was no room in his mind for thought of personal danger, so hot was he with anger at the thought that someone was botching his chance of success.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

Galbraith was in command. He was about to speak, but he was given no opportunity. One of the sailors who had been attending to the dying man came pushing forward, discipline forgotten in the blind whirl of sentimental indignation which Hornblower instantly recognized as characteristic of the lower deck — and which he despised and distrusted.

"They been torturing a pore devil up there, sir," he said. "Lashed him to a spar and left him to die of thirst."

"Silence!" bellowed Hornblower, beside himself with rage not merely at this breach of discipline but at realising the difficulties ahead of him. "Mr Galbraith!"

Galbraith was slow of speech and of mind.

"I don't know how it started, sir," he began; although he had been at sea since childhood there was still a trace of Scotch in his accent. "A party came running back from up there. They had Smith with them, wounded."

"He's dead now," put in a voice.

"Silence!" roared Hornblower again.

"I saw they were going to attack us, and so I had the marines fire, sir," went on Galbraith.

"I'll speak to you later, Mr Galbraith," snapped Hornblower. "You, Jenkins. And you, Poole. What were you doing up there?"

"Well, sir, it was like this, sir —" began Jenkins. He was sheepish and crestfallen now. Hornblower had pricked the bubble of his indignation and he was being publicly convicted of a breach of orders.

"You knew the order that no one was to go beyond the creek?"

"Yessir."

"Tomorrow morning I'll show you what orders mean, and you, too, Poole. There's the sergeant of marines?"

"Here, sir."

"A fine guard you keep, sergeant, to let these men get by. What were your pickets about?"

The sergeant could say nothing; he could only stand rigidly at attention in face of this incontrovertible proof of his being found wanting.

"Mr Simmonds will speak to you in the morning," went on Hornblower. "I don't expect you'll keep those stripes on your arm much longer."

Hornblower glowered round at the landing party. His fierce rebukes had them all cowed and subservient now, and he felt his anger ebbing away as he realised that he had managed this without having to say a word in extenuation of Spanish-American justice. He turned to greet Hernandez, who had come riding up as fast as his little horse would gallop, reining up on his haunches in a shower of sand.

"Did el Supremo give orders for this attack on my men?" asked Hornblower, getting in the first broadside.

"No, Captain," said Hernandez, and Hornblower rejoiced to see how he winced at the mention of el Supremo's name.

"I think he will not be too pleased with you when I tell him about this," went on Hornblower.

"Your men tried to release a man condemned to death," said Hernandez, half sullenly, half apologetically. He was clearly not too sure of his ground, and was nervous about what would be Alvarado's attitude towards this incident. Hornblower kept a rasp in his voice as he went on speaking. None of the Englishmen round him, as far as he knew, could speak Spanish, but he was anxious for his crew to believe (now that discipline was restored) that he was wholeheartedly on their side.

"That does not permit your men to kill mine," he said.

"They are angry and discontented," said Hernandez. "The whole country has been swept to find food for you. The man your men tried to save was condemned for driving his pigs into the bush to keep them from being taken and given to you."

Hernandez made this last speech reproachfully and with a hint of anger; Hornblower was anxious to be conciliatory if that were possible without exasperating his own men. Hornblower had in mind the plan of leading Hernandez out of earshot of the Englishmen, and then softening his tone, but before he could act upon it his attention was caught by the sight of a horseman galloping down the beach at full speed, waving his wide straw hat. Every eye turned towards this new arrival — a peon of the ordinary Indian type. Breathlessly he announced his news.

"A ship — a ship coming!"

He was so excited that he lapsed into the Indian speech, and Hornblower could not understand his further explanations. Hernandez had to interpret for him.

"This man has been keeping watch on the top of the mountain up there," he said. "He says that from there he could see the sails of a ship coming towards the bay."

He addressed several more questions rapidly, one after the other, to the lookout, and was answered with nods and gesticulations and a torrent of Indian speech.

"He says," went on Hernandez, "that he has often seen the *Natividad* before, and he is sure this is the same ship, and she is undoubtedly coming in here."

"How far off is she?" asked Hornblower and Hernandez translated the answer.

"A long way, seven leagues or more," he said. "She is coming from the south eastward — from Panama."

Hornblower pulled at his chin, deep in thought.

"She'll carry the sea breeze down with her until sunset," he muttered to himself, and glanced up at the sun.

"That will be another hour. An hour after that she'll get the land breeze. She'll be able to hold her course, close hauled. She could be here in the bay by midnight."

A stream of plans and ideas was flooding into his mind. Against the possibility of the ship's arrival in the dark must be balanced what he knew of the Spanish habit at sea of snuggling down for the night, and of attempting no piece of seamanship at all complicated save under the best possible conditions. He wished he knew more about the Spanish captain.

"Has this ship, the *Natividad*, often come into this bay?" he asked.

"Yes, Captain, often."

"Is her captain a good seaman?"

"Oh yes, Captain, very good."

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower. A landsman's opinion of the seamanship of a frigate captain might not be worth much, but still it was an indication.

Hornblower tugged at his chin again. He had fought in ten single ship actions. If he took the *Lydia* to sea and engaged the *Natividad* on open water the two ships might well batter each other into wrecks. Rigging and spars and hulls and sails would be shot to pieces. The *Lydia* would have a good many casualties which would

be quite irreplaceable here in the Pacific. She would expend her priceless ammunition. On the other hand, if he stayed in the bay and yet the plan he had in mind did not succeed — if the *Natividad* waited off shore until the morning — he would have to beat his way out of the bay against the sea breeze, presenting the Spaniards with every possible advantage as he came out to fight them. The *Natividad's* superiority of force was already such that it was rash to oppose the *Lydia* to her. Could he dare to risk increasing the odds? But the possible gains were so enormous that he made up his mind to run the risk.

Chapter VI

Ghostlike in the moonlight, with the first puffs of the land breeze, the *Lydia* glided across the bay. Hornblower had not ventured to hoist sail, lest a gleam of canvas might be visible to the distant ship at sea. The launch and the clutter towed the ship, sounding as they went, into the deep water at the foot of the island at the entrance of the bay — Manguera Island, Hernandez called it when Hornblower had cautiously sketched out his plan to him. For an hour the men laboured at the oars, although Hornblower did his best to aid them, standing by the wheel and making as much use as possible of the leeway acquired by the ship through the force of the puffs of wind on the *Lydia's* rigging. They reached the new anchorage at last, and the anchor splashed into the water.

"Have that cable buoyed and ready to slip, Mr Bush," said Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir."

"Call the boats alongside. I want the men to rest."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Mr Gerard, you have charge of the deck. See that the lookouts keep awake. I want Mr Bush and Mr Galbraith to come below with me."

"Aye aye, sir."

The ship was seething quietly with excitement. Everyone on board had guessed the captain's plan, even though the details of its execution, which he was now explaining to his lieutenants, were still unknown. In the two hours which had elapsed since the arrival of the news of the *Natividad's* approach Hornblower's mind had worked busily at the perfection of his plan. Nothing must go wrong. Everything that could possibly contribute to success must be done.

"That is all understood?" he asked finally; he stood stooping under the deck beams in his screened off cabin while his lieutenants fiddled awkwardly with their hats.

"Aye aye, sir."

"Very good," said Hornblower, dismissing them.

But within five minutes impatience and anxiety drove him up on deck again.

"Masthead, there? What can you see of the enemy?"

"She's just come up over the island, sir. She's more than hull down. I can only see her torps'ls, sir, below her t'garns."

"What's her course?"

"She's holding her wind, sir. She ought to make the bay on this tack."

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower, and went below again.

It would be four hours at least before the *Natividad* reached the entrance, and before he could take any further action. He found himself pacing, stoopshouldered, up and down the tiny limits of his cabin, and checked himself furiously. The iron-nerved captain of his dreams would not allow himself to work himself into this sort of fever, even though his professional reputation was to be at stake in four hours' time. He must show the ship that he, too, could face uncertainty with indifference.

"Pass the word for Polwheal!" he snapped, coming out through the screen and addressing a group by a maindeck gun; and when Polwheal appeared he went on: "My compliments to Mr Bush, and tell him that if he can spare Mr Galbraith and Mr Clay and Mr Savage from their duties I would be glad if they would sup with me and have a hand of a whist."

Galbraith was nervous, too. Not merely was he anticipating a battle, but hanging over his head there was still the promised reprimand for his part in the skirmish of the afternoon. His rawboned Scotch figure moved restlessly, and his face was flushed over his high cheek bones. Even the two midshipmen were subdued as well as fidgety.

Hornblower compelled himself to play the part of the courtly host, while every word he uttered was designed to increase his reputation for imperturbability. He apologised for his shortcomings of the supper — the ship being cleared for action involved the extinction of all fires and the consequent necessity for serving cold food. But the sight of the cold roast chickens, the cold roast pork, the golden cakes of maize, the dishes of fruit, roused Mr Midshipman Savage's sixteen year old appetite and caused him to forget his embarrassment.

"This is better than rats, sir," he said, rubbing his hands.

"Rats?" asked Hornblower, vaguely. For all his appearance and attention his thoughts were up on deck, and not in the cabin.

"Yes, sir. Until we made this harbour rats had become a favourite dish in the midshipmen's berth."

"That they had," echoed Clay. He carved himself substantial slices of cold pork, and plenty of crackling, and added them to the half chicken on his plate. "I was paying that thief Bailey threepence apiece for prime rats." Desperately Hornblower jerked his mind away from the approaching *Natividad* and delved into the past when he had been a half-starved midshipman, homesick and seasick. His seniors then had eaten rats with gusto, and maintained that a biscuit-fed rat was far more delicate a dish than beef two years in cask. He had never been able to stomach them himself, but he would not admit it to these boys.

"Threepence apiece for rats seems a trifle dear," he said. "I can't remember paying as much as that when I was a midshipman."

"Why, sir, did you ever eat them yourself?" asked Savage, amazed.

In reply to this direct question Hornblower could only lie.

"Of course," he said. "Midshipmen's berths were much the same twenty years ago as now. I always maintained that a rat who had had the run of the bread-locker all his life made a dish fit for a king, let alone a midshipman."

"God bless my soul!" gasped Clay, laying down his knife and fork. He had never thought for a moment that this stern and inflexible captain of his had once been a rat-eating midshipman.

The two boys blinked at their captain with admiration. This little human touch had won their hearts completely, as Hornblower had known it would. At the end of the table Galbraith sighed audibly. He had been eating rats himself only three days ago, but he knew full well that to admit it would not increase the boys' respect for him, but would rather diminish it, for he was that sort of officer. Hornblower had to make Galbraith feel at home, too.

"A glass of wine with you, Mr Galbraith," he said, raising his glass. "I must apologise because this is not my best Madeira, but I am keeping the last two bottles for when I entertain the Spanish captain as our prisoner tomorrow. To our victories of the future!"

The glasses were drained, and constraint dwindled. Hornblower had spoken of '*our* prisoner' when most captains would have said '*my* prisoner.' And he had said '*our* victories.' The strict cold captain, the stern disciplinarian, had for a moment revealed human characteristics and had admitted his inferiors to his fellowship. Any one of the three junior officers would at that moment have laid down his life for his captain — and Hornblower, looking round at their flushed faces, was aware of it. It gratified him at the same moment as it irritated him; but with a battle in the immediate future which might well be an affair of the utmost desperation, he knew that he must have behind him a crew not merely loyal but enthusiastic.

Another midshipman, young Knyvett, came into the cabin.

"Mr Bush's compliments, sir, and the enemy is hull up from the masthead now, sir."

"Is she holding her course for the bay?"

"Yes, sir. Mr Bush says two hours ought to see her within range."

"Thank you, Mr Knyvett," said Hornblower, dismissing him. The reminder that in two hours he would be at grips with a fifty-gun ship set his heart beating faster again. It took a convulsive effort to maintain an unmoved countenance.

"We still have ample time for our rubber, gentlemen," said Hornblower.

The weekly evening of whist which Captain Hornblower played with his officers was for these latter — especially the midshipmen — a sore trial. Hornblower himself was a keen good player; his close observation and his acute study of the psychology of his juniors were of great help to him. But to some of his officers, without card sense, and floundering helplessly with no memory for the cards that had been played, Hornblower's card evenings were periods of torment.

Polwheal cleared the table, spread the green tablecloth and brought the cards. When play began Hornblower found it easier to forget about the approaching battle. Whist was enough of a passion with him to claim most of his attention whatever the distraction. It was only during the intervals of play, during the deals and while making the score, that he found his heart beating faster again and felt the blood surging up in his throat. He marked the fall of the cards with close attention, making allowances for Savage's schoolboy tendency to dash out his aces, and for the fact that Galbraith invariably forgot, until it was too late, to signal a short suit. One rubber ended quickly; there was almost dismay on the faces of the other three as Hornblower proffered the cards for cutting for a second one. He kept his face expressionless.

"You really must remember, Clay," he said, "to lead the king from a sequence of king, queen, knave. The whole art of leading is based upon that principle."

"Aye aye, sir," said Clay, rolling his eyes drolly at Savage, but Hornblower looked up sharply and Clay hurriedly composed his expression. Play continued — and to all of them seemed interminable. It came to an end at last, however.

"Rubber," announced Hornblower, marking up the score. "I think, gentlemen, that it is almost time that we went on deck."

There was a general sigh of relief and a scraping of feet on the deck. But at all costs Hornblower felt that he must consolidate his reputation for imperturbability.

"The rubber would not be over," he said dryly, "if Mr Savage had paid attention to the score. It being nine, Mr Savage and Mr Galbraith had only to win the odd trick to secure the rubber. Hence Mr Savage, at the eighth trick, should have played his ace of hearts instead of risking the finesse. I grant that if the finesse had been successful he would have won two more tricks, but —"

Hornblower droned on, while the other three writhed in their chairs. Yet they glanced at each other with admiration for him in their eyes as he preceded them up the companion ladder.

Up on deck everything was deathly still as the crew lay at their posts. The moon was setting fast, but there was ample light still as soon as the eye grew accustomed to it. Bush touched his hat to the captain.

"The enemy is still heading for the bay, sir," he said hoarsely.

"Send the crews into the launch and cutter again," replied Hornblower. He climbed the mizzen rigging to the mizzen top gallant yard. From here he could just see over the island; a mile away, with the setting moon behind her, he could see the white canvas of the *Natividad* as she stood in, close hauled, across the entrance. He struggled with his agitation as he endeavoured to predict her movements. There was small chance of her noticing, against the dark sky, the top gallant masts of the *Lydia*; and it was on the assumption that she would not that all his plans were based. She must go about soon, and her new course would bring her directly to the island. Perhaps she would weather it, but not likely. She would have to go about again to enter the bay, and that would be his opportunity. As he watched, he saw her canvas gleam brighter for a space and then darken again as she came round. She was heading for the middle of the entrance, but her leeway and the beginning of the ebb tide would carry her back to the island. He went down again to the deck.

"Mr Bush," he said, "send the hands aloft ready to set sail."

The ship was filled with gentle noises as bare feet padded over the deck and up the rigging. Hornblower brought the silver whistle out of his pocket. He did not trouble to ask whether everyone was ready for the signal and properly instructed in the part he had to play; Bush and Gerard were efficient officers.

"I am going forward, now, Mr Bush," he said. "I shall try and get back to the quarterdeck in time, but you know my orders if I do not."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower hurried forward along the gangway, past the forecastle carronades with their crews crouching round them, and swung himself over on to the bowsprit. From the sprit sail yard he could see round the corner of the island; the *Natividad* was heading straight for him. He could see the glimmer of phosphorescent foam

about her cutwater. He could almost hear the sound of her passage through the water. He swallowed hard, and then all his excitement vanished and he was left deadly cool. He had forgotten about himself, and his mind was making calculations of time and space like a machine. Now he could hear the voice of a man at the lead on board the *Natividad*, although he could distinguish no word. The Spaniard was coming very close. By now he could hear the babble of the Spanish crew, every one busy talking like every Spaniard, and no one looking out sufficiently well to catch sight of the *Lydia*'s bare spars. Then he heard orders being shouted from the *Natividad*'s deck; she was going about. At the very first sound he put the whistle to his lips and blew, and the whole of the *Lydia* sprang into activity. Sail was loosed from every yard simultaneously. The cable was slipped, the boats were cast off. Hornblower, racing aft again, collided with the hands at the braces as the ship paid off. He picked himself off the deck and ran on, while the *Lydia* gathered way and surged forward. He reached the wheel in time.

"Steady!" he called to the quartermaster. "Port a little! A little more! Now, hard-a-starboard!"

So quickly had it all happened that the Spaniard had only just gone about and had gathered no way on her new course when the *Lydia* came leaping upon her out of the blackness behind the island and rasped alongside.

Months of drill bore their fruit in the English ship. The guns crashed out in a single shattering broadside as the ships touched, sweeping the deck of the *Natividad* with grape. Overhead the topmen ran out along the yards and lashed the ships together. On deck the cheering boarders came rushing to the portside gangway.

On board the Spaniard there was utter surprise. One moment all hands had been engrossed with the work of the ship, and the next, seemingly, an unknown enemy had come crashing alongside; the night had been torn to shreds with the flare of hostile guns; on every hand men had been struck down by the hurtling shot, and now an armed host, yelling like fiends from the pit, came pouring on to the deck. Not the most disciplined and experienced crew could have withstood the shock of that surprise. During the twenty years the *Natividad* had sailed the Pacific coast no enemy had been nearer to her than four thousand miles of sea.

Yet even then there were some stout hearts who attempted resistance. These were officers who drew their swords; on the high quarterdeck there was an armed detachment who had been served out with weapons in consequence of the rumours of rebellion on shore; there were a few men who grasped capstan bars and belaying pins; but the upper deck was swept clear immediately by the wave of boarders with their pikes and cutlasses. A single pistol flashed and exploded. The Spaniards who offered resistance were struck down or chased below; the others were herded together under guard.

And on the lower deck the men sought blindly round for leaders, for means of resistance. They were gathering together in the darkness ready to oppose the enemy above them, and to defend the hatchways, when suddenly a new yelling burst out behind them. Gerard's two boats' crews had reached the *Natividad*'s port side, and prising open the lower deck ports, came swarming in, yelling like fiends as their orders bid them do — Hornblower had foreseen that the moral effect of a surprise attack would be intensified, especially against undisciplined Spaniards, if the attackers made as much noise as possible. At this new surprise the resistance of the lower deck broke down completely, and Hornblower's prescience in detaching the two boats' crews to make this diversion was justified.

Chapter VII

The Captain of the *Lydia* was taking his usual morning walk on the quarterdeck of his ship. Half a dozen Spanish officers had attempted, on his first appearance, to greet him with formal courtesy, but they had been hustled away by the *Lydia*'s crew, indignant that their captain's walk, sacrosanct after so many months, should be disturbed by mere prisoners.

The captain had a good deal to think about, too — so much, in fact, that he could spare no time to rejoice in the knowledge that his frigate last night, in capturing a two-decker without losing a man, had accomplished a feat without precedent in the long annals of British naval history. He wanted instead to think about his next move. With the capture of the *Natividad* he was lord of the South Sea. He knew well enough that the communications by land were so difficult that the whole trade — the whole life, it might he said — of the

country depended upon the coastwise traffic; and now not a boat could move without his licence. In fifteen years of warfare he had learned the lessons of sea power. There was at least a chance now that with Alvarado's aid he might set the whole of Central America into such a flame that the Spanish Government would rue the day when they had decided to throw in their lot with Bonaparte.

Hornblower paced up and down the sanded deck. There were other possibilities, too. North westward along the coast lay Acapulco, whither came and whence departed yearly galleons bearing a million sterling in treasure. The capture of a galleon would at a stroke make him a wealthy man — he could buy an estate in England then; could buy a whole village and be a squire, with the country folk touching their hats to him as he drove by in his coach. Maria would like that, although he could not imagine Maria playing the part of a great lady with any grace.

Hornblower tore his mind away from the contemplation of Maria snatched from her Southsea lodgings and settled in a country home. To the east was Panama, with its stored silver from Peru, its pearling fleet, its whitewashed golden altar which had escaped Morgan but would not escape him. A blow there, at the central knot of the transcontinental communications, would be the best strategy perhaps, as well as being potentially profitable. He tried to think about Panama.

Forward Sullivan, the red-haired Irish vagabond, was perched on a carronade slide with his fiddle, and round him a dozen sailors, their horny feet flapping on the deck, were setting to partners. Twenty-five guineas apiece, at least, the men would get as prize money for the capture of *Natividad*, and they were already spending it in imagination. He looked across to where the *Natividad* swung at anchor. Her waist was black with her crew, crammed on her upper deck. On her old-fashioned poop and quarterdeck he could see the red coats and shakoes of his marines, and he could see, too, the carronades pointing down into the waist and the men posted beside them with lighted matches. Gerard, whom he had left on board as prizemaster, had served in a Liverpool slaver in his day and knew well how to keep a ship full of hostile humanity in subjection — although, parted from their officers, Hornblower for one did not anticipate trouble from the crew.

Hornblower knew that he must make up his mind about what to do with the *Natividad*, and more especially with his prisoners. He could not hand them over to the tender mercies of el Supremo; his own crew would hardly permit that. He tried to think about the problem. A long line of pelicans came flying by, more rigid in their formation than the Channel fleet at drill. A frigate bird, superb with its forked tail, came wheeling above them with motionless wings, and having obviously decided that they were not worth plundering, swooped away again towards the island where the cormorants were fishing industriously. The sun was already hot and the water of the bay was as blue as the sky above.

Hornblower cursed sun and pelicans and frigate birds as he tried to concentrate on the problems before him. He paced moodily up and down the deck another half dozen times. Then Midshipman Knyvett barred his way, touching his hat.

"What the devil is it now?" snapped Hornblower.

"Boat coming alongside, sir. Mr — Mr Hernandez on board."

That was only to be expected.

"Very good," said Hornblower, and went down the gangway to greet Hernandez as he came up the side.

Hernandez wasted no time on felicitations for the late victory. In the service of el Supremo apparently even Spanish-Americans grew abrupt and businesslike.

"El Supremo wishes to see you at once, Captain," said Hernandez. "My boat is waiting."

"Indeed," said Hornblower. He knew well that dozens of his brother captains in the British service would be infuriated at such a cavalier message. He toyed with the idea of sending back to tell el Supremo to come out to the ship himself if he wanted to interview her captain. But he knew that it would be foolish to imperil his cordial relations with the shore, upon which so much of his success depended, upon a mere question of dignity. The captain of the *Natividad* could afford to overlook the presumption of others.

A compromise suggested itself to him; he could keep Hernandez waiting for an hour or two so as to bolster up his own dignity. But his commonsense rejected the notion. Hornblower hated compromises, and this one would only (like most compromises) irritate one side and do no good to the other. Far better to put his pride in his pocket and to come at once.

"Certainly," he said. "My duties leave me free at the moment."

But this time, at least there was no need to dress up for the occasion. There was no call to put on his best silk stockings and his buckled shoes. The capture of the *Natividad* was a clearer proof of his bona fides than any gold-hilted sword.

It was only while giving final orders to Bush that Hornblower remembered that last night's success gave him adequate grounds for not flogging the erring Jenkins and Poole, and for not reprimanding Galbraith. That was an enormous relief, anyway. It helped to clear away the clouds of depression which always tended to settle on him after every success. It cheered him up as he mounted the minute horse which awaited him on shore, and rode past the mountain of stinking animal intestines, and along the avenue of dead men, up to el Supremo's house.

The appearance of el Supremo, sitting in his canopied chair on his dais, seemed for all the world to indicate that he had been sitting there, immobile, since the occasion four days ago (it seemed more like a month) when Hornblower had left him.

"So you have already done what I wished you to do, Captain?" were his opening words.

"I captured the *Natividad* last night," said Hornblower.

"And the provisioning of your ship is, I understand, complete?"

"Yes."

"Then," said el Supremo, "you have done what I wanted. That is what I said before."

In the face of such sublime self-assurance there was no point in arguing.

"This afternoon," said el Supremo, "I shall proceed with my plan for the capture of the city of El Salvador and the man who calls himself Captain General of Nicaragua."

"Yes?" said Hornblower.

"There are fewer difficulties before me now, Captain. You may not be aware that the roads between here and El Salvador are not as good as roads might be. At one place the path goes up one hundred and twenty seven steps cut in the lava between two precipices. It is difficult for a mule, to say nothing of a horse, to make the journey, and an evilly disposed person armed with a musket could cause much trouble."

"I expect he could," said Hornblower.

"However," said el Supremo, "El Salvador lies less than ten miles from the sea, and there is a good road from the city to its port of La Libertad. This afternoon I shall sail with five hundred men in the two ships to La Libertad. As this town is no more than a hundred miles away I shall reach there at dawn tomorrow. Tomorrow evening I shall dine in El Salvador."

"Ho-h'm," said Hornblower. He was wondering how best to present in argument the difficulties he could see ahead.

"You killed very few of the crew of the *Natividad*, Captain?" asked el Supremo, and thereby approaching directly some of the difficulties Hornblower had in mind.

"Eleven killed," said Hornblower. "And eighteen wounded, of whom four seem unlikely to recover."

"So you left enough to work the ship?"

"Ample, señor, if —"

"That is what I wanted. And, Captain, human beings in addressing me do not use the expression 'señor'. That is insufficiently honorific. I am el Supremo."

Hornblower could only bow in reply. El Supremo's marvellous manner was like a stone wall.

"The navigating officers are still alive?" went on el Supremo.

"Yes," said Hornblower; and, because he could see trouble close ahead and was anxious to keep it to a minimum, he added, with a gulp, "Supremo."

"Then," said el Supremo, "I will take the *Natividad* into my service. I will kill the executive officers and replace them with men of my own. The others and the common sailors will serve me."

There was nothing intrinsically impossible in what el Supremo suggested; Hornblower knew from experience that the Spanish navy, old fashioned as always, maintained a rigid distinction (such as was fast dying out in our own service) between the officers who worked the ship and the gentlemen who commanded it. And Hornblower had no doubt whatever as to what choice the seamen and sailing master would make if asked to choose between death by torture and serving el Supremo.

Nor could it be denied that el Supremo's suggestion was in many ways a good one; to transport five hundred men in the *Lydia* alone would be difficult, to say the least, while the *Lydia* by herself would find it impossible to blockade completely all the thousand miles of coast — two ships would cause far more than twice as much trouble to the enemy in that way. Yet to hand over the *Natividad* meant starting an endless and probably unsuccessful argument with the lords of the Admiralty on the question of prize money. And he could not in honour hand over the Spanish officers to the death el Supremo had in mind for them. He had to think quickly. "The *Natividad* is the prize of my King," he said. "Perhaps he would not be pleased if I let her go."

"He certainly would be displeased if he knew you had offended *me*," said el Supremo. His eyebrows came closer together, and Hornblower heard Hernandez beside him take a quick breath. "I have noticed before, Captain Hornblower, that you have verged upon disrespect towards me, and I have been mild enough to attribute it to your foreign breeding."

Hornblower was still thinking hurriedly. A little more opposition would cause this madman to order him out for execution, and if her captain were killed the *Lydia* would certainly not fight for el Supremo. There would indeed be a complicated situation in the Pacific, and the *Lydia*, with friends neither among the rebels nor among the government, would probably never reach home again — especially with the unimaginative Bush in command. England would lose a fine frigate and a fine opportunity. He must sacrifice his prize money, the thousand pounds or so with which he had wanted to dazzle Maria's eyes. But at all costs he must keep his prisoners alive.

"I am sure it is my foreign breeding which is to blame, Supremo," he said. "It is difficult for me to express in a foreign tongue all the delicate shades of meaning which it is necessary to convey. How could it possibly be imagined that I could be lacking in respect to el Supremo?"

El Supremo nodded. It was satisfactory to see that a madman who attributed almightiness to himself was naturally inclined to accept the grossest flattery at its face value.

"The ship is yours, Supremo," went on Hornblower, "she has been yours since my men first set foot on her deck last night. And when in the future a vast Armada sails the Pacific under el Supremo's direction I only wish it to be remembered that the first ship of that fleet was taken from the Spaniards by Captain Hornblower at el Supremo's orders."

El Supremo nodded again, and then turned to Hernandez.

"General," he said, "make arrangements for five hundred men to go on board the ships at noon. I will sail with them and so will you."

Hernandez bowed and departed; it was easy to see that there was no chance of el Supremo doubting his own divinity as a result of disrespect or hesitation on the part of his subordinates. His lightest order, whether it dealt with a thousand pigs or five hundred men, was obeyed instantly. Hornblower made his next move at once.

"Is the *Lydia*," he asked, "to have the honour of carrying el Supremo to La Libertad? My crew would greatly appreciate the distinction."

"I am sure they would," said el Supremo.

"I hardly venture to ask it," said Hornblower, "*but* could my officers and I aspire to the honour of your dining with us before our departure?"

El Supremo considered for a moment.

"Yes," he said, and Hornblower had to suppress the sigh of relief he was on the point of drawing. Once el Supremo was on board the *Lydia* it might be possible to deal with him with less difficulty.

El Supremo clapped his hands, and instantly, as though by clockwork, a knocking at the brass-studded door heralded the arrival of the swarthy major-domo. He received in a single sentence orders for the transfer of el Supremo's household to the *Lydia*.

"Perhaps," said Hornblower, "you will permit me to return to my ship now to make arrangements for your reception, Supremo."

He received another nod in reply.

"At what time shall I be at the beach to receive you?"

"At eleven."

Hornblower, as he came out into the patio, thought with sympathy of the oriental vizier who never came out of the royal presence without feeling to see if his head were still on his shoulders. And on the *Lydia's* deck, the moment the twittering of the pipes had died away, Hornblower was giving his orders.

"Have those men taken below at once," he said to Bush, pointing to the Spanish prisoners. "Put them in the cable tier under guard. Call the armourer and have them put in irons."

Bush made no attempt to conceal his surprise, but Hornblower wasted no time on explanations to him.

"Señores," he said, as the officers came by him. "You are going to be harshly treated. But believe me, if you are as much as seen during the next few days you will be killed. I am saving your lives for you."

Next Hornblower turned back to his first lieutenant.

"Call all hands, Mr Bush."

The ship was filled with the sound of horny feet pattering over pine boards.

"Men!" said Hornblower. "There is coming aboard today a prince of this country who is in alliance with our own gracious King. Whatever happens — mark my words, *whatever happens* — he is to be treated with respect. I will flog the man who laughs, or the man who does not behave towards Señor el Supremo as he would to me. And we shall be sailing tonight with this gentleman's troops on board. You will look after them as if they were Englishmen. And better than that. You would play tricks on English soldiers. The first man to play a trick on any of these men I shall flog within the hour. Forget their colour. Forget their clothes. Forget that they cannot speak English, and remember only what I say to you. You can pipe down now, Mr Bush."

Down in the cabin Polwheal was waiting faithfully with the dressing gown and towel for his captain's bath, which ought according to time table have been taken two hours back.

"Put out my best uniform again," snapped Hornblower. "And I want the after cabin ready for a state dinner for eight at six bells. Go for'rard and bring my cook to me."

There was plenty to do. Bush and Rayner the first and fourth lieutenants, and Simmonds the marine officer, and Crystal the master, had to be invited to the dinner and warned to be ready in full dress. Plans had to be made for the accommodation of five hundred men on board the two frigates.

Hornblower was just looking across to the *Natividad*, where she swung with her white ensign over the red and gold of Spain, wondering what steps he should take with regard to her, when a boat came running gaily out to him from the shore. The leader of the party which came on board was a youngish man of less than middle height, slight of figure and lithe as a monkey, with a mobile smile and an expression of indefeatable good humour. He looked more Spanish than American. Bush brought him up to where Hornblower impatiently trod his quarterdeck. Making a cordial bow, the newcomer introduced himself.

"I am Vice-Admiral Don Cristobal de Crespo," he said.

Hornblower could not help but look him up and down. The Vice-Admiral wore gold earrings, and his gold embroidered coat did not conceal the raggedness of the grey shirt beneath. At least he wore boots, of soft brown leather, into which were tucked his patched white trousers.

"Of el Supremo's service?" asked Hornblower.

"Of course. May I introduce my officers. Ship-captain Andrade. Frigate-captain Castro. Corvette-captain Carrera. Lieutenants Barrios and Barillas and Cerno. Aspirants Diaz —"

The dozen officers introduced under these resounding titles were barefooted Indians, the red sashes round their waists stuck full of pistols and knives. They bowed awkwardly to Hornblower; one or two of them wore expressions of brutish cruelty.

"I have come," said Crespo, amiably, "to hoist my flag in my new ship *Natividad*. It is el Supremo's wish that you should salute it with the eleven guns due to a vice-admiral."

Hornblower's jaw dropped a little at that. His years of service had grained into him despite himself a deep respect for the details of naval pageantry, and he was irked by the prospect of giving this ragged-shirted rascal as many guns as Nelson ever had. With an effort he swallowed his resentment. He knew he had to go through with the farce to the bitter end if he was to glean any success. With an empire at stake it would be foolish to strain at points of ceremony.

"Certainly, Admiral," he said. "It gives me great happiness to be one of the first to congratulate you upon your appointment."

"Thank you, Captain. There will be one or two details to attend to first," said the vice-admiral. "May I ask if the executive officers of the *Natividad* are on board here or are still in the *Natividad*?"

"I greatly regret," said Hornblower, "that I dropped them overboard this morning after courtmartial."

"That is indeed a pity," said Crespo. "I have el Supremo's orders to hang them at the *Natividad*'s yardarms. You did not leave even one?"

"No one, Admiral. I am sorry that I received no orders from el Supremo on the subject."

"There is no help for it, then. Doubtless there will be others. I will go on board my ship, then. Perhaps you will be good enough to accompany me so as to give orders to your prize crew?"

"Certainly, Admiral."

Hornblower was curious to see how el Supremo's subordinates would deal with the problem of changing the allegiance of a whole ship's crew. He gave hurried orders to the gunner for the saluting of the flag when it should be hoisted in the *Natividad*, and went down into the boat with the new officers.

On board the *Natividad* Crespo swaggered on to the quarterdeck. The Spanish sailing master and his mates were grouped there, and under their startled eyes he walked up to the image of the Virgin and Child beside the taffrail and tossed it overboard. At a sign from him one of the aspirants hauled down the Spanish and British ensigns from the peak. Then he turned upon the navigating officers. It was a dramatic scene on that crowded quarterdeck in the brilliant sunshine. The British marines stood in rigid line in their red coats, with ordered arms. The British seamen stood by their carronades, matches smouldering, for no orders had yet relieved them of their duty. Gerard came over and stood beside Hornblower.

"Which is the sailing master?" demanded Crespo.

"I am," quavered one of the Spaniards.

"Are you his mates?" rasped Crespo, and received frightened nods in reply.

All trace of humour had disappeared from Crespo's expression. He seemed to expand and dilate with cold anger.

"You," he said, pointing at the youngest. "You will now hold up your hand and declare your faith in our lord el Supremo. Hold up your hand."

The boy obeyed as if in a trance.

"Now repeat after me. 'I swear —'"

The boy's face was white. He tried to look round at his superior officer, but his gaze was held by Crespo's glaring eyes.

"'I swear,'" said Crespo, more menacingly. The boy's mouth opened and shut without a sound. Then convulsively he freed himself from the hypnotic stare. His hand wavered and came down, and he looked away from Crespo's pointing right forefinger. Instantly Crespo's left hand shot out; so quick was the motion that no one could see until afterwards that it held a pistol from his sash. The shot rang out, and the boy, with a pistol ball in his stomach, fell to the deck writhing in agony. Crespo disregarded his convulsions and turned to the next man.

"*You* will now swear," he said.

He swore at once, repeating Crespo's words in quavering tones. The half dozen sentences were very much to the point; they declared the omnipotence of el Supremo, testified to the speaker's faith, and in a single sweeping blasphemy denied the existence of God and the virginity of the Mother of God. The others followed his example, repeating the words of the oath one after the other, while no one paid any attention to the dying boy at their feet. Crespo only condescended to notice him after the conclusion of the ceremony.

"Throw that overboard," he said curtly. The officers only hesitated a moment under his gaze, and then one stooped and lifted the boy by his shoulders, another by his feet, and they flung the still living body over the rail.

Crespo waited for the splash, and then walked forward to the quarterdeck rail with its peeling gilt. The herded crew in the waist listened dumbly to his uplifted voice. Hornblower, gazing down at them, saw that there would be small resistance to Crespo's missionary efforts. To a man the crew were of non-European blood; presumably during the many years of the *Natividad*'s commission in the Pacific the original European crew had quite died out. Only officers had been replaced from Spain; fresh hands had been recruited from the native

racers. There were Chinese among them, as Hornblower recognised, and negroes, and some whose physiognomy was unfamiliar to him — Philipinos.

In five minutes of brilliant speaking Crespo had won them all over. He made no more attempt to enunciate the divinity of el Supremo than was involved in the mention of his name. El Supremo, he said, was at the head of a movement which was sweeping the Spaniards from the dominion of America. Within the year the whole of the New World from Mexico to Peru would be at his feet. There would be an end of Spanish misrule, or brutal domination, of slavery in mine and field. There would be land for the asking for everybody, freedom and happiness under the benign supervision of el Supremo. Who would follow him?

They all would seemingly. Crespo had them all cheering wildly at the end of his speech. Crespo came back to Hornblower.

"Thank you, Captain," he said. "I think there is no more need for the presence of your prize crew. My officers and I will be able to attend to any insubordination which may arise later."

"I think you will be quite able to," said Hornblower, a little bitterly.

"Some of them *may* not easily be enlightened when the time comes for that," said Crespo, grinning.

Pulling back to the *Lydia* Hornblower thought bitterly about the murder of the Spanish master's mate. It was a crime which he ought to have prevented — he had gone on board the *Natividad* expressly to prevent cruelty and he had failed. Yet he realised that that kind of cruelty would not have the bad effect on his own men that a coldblooded hanging of the officers would have done. The crew of the *Natividad* was being forced to serve a new master against their will — but the pressgang had done the same for three-quarters of the crew of the *Lydia*. Flogging and death were the punishments meted out to Englishmen who refused to obey the orders of officers who had arbitrarily assumed command over them — English sailors were not likely to fret unduly over Dagoes in the same position, even though with English lower-class lack of logic they would have been moved to protest against a formal hanging of officers.

His train of thought was suddenly interrupted by the sound of a gun from the *Natividad*, instantly answered by another from the *Lydia*. He almost sprang to his feet in the sternsheets of the launch, but a glance over his shoulder reassured him. A new flag was now flying from the *Natividad's* peak. Blue with a yellow star in the middle, he saw. The sound of the saluting guns rolled slowly round the bay; the salute was still being fired as he went up the *Lydia's* side. Mr Marsh, the gunner, was pacing up and down the foredeck mumbling to himself — Hornblower guessed at the jargon.

"If I hadn't been a born bloody fool I shouldn't be here. Fire *seven*. I've left my wife; I've left my home and everything that's dear. Fire *eight*."

Half an hour later Hornblower was at the beach to meet el Supremo, who came riding down, punctual to the minute, a ragged retinue of a dozen riding with him. El Supremo did not condescend to present his suite to the captain, but bowed and stepped straight into the launch; his suite introduced themselves, in a string of meaningless names, in turn as they came up to Hornblower. They were all nearly pure Indians; they were all Generals save for one or two Colonels, and they were all clearly most devotedly attached to their master. Their whole bearing, every little action of theirs, indicated not merely their fear of him but their admiration — their love, it might be said.

At the gangway sideboys and boatswain's mates and marines were ready to receive el Supremo with distinguished military formality, but el Supremo astonished Hornblower as he was about to go up the ladder, with the casual words —

"The correct salute for me, Captain, is twenty-three guns."

That was two more guns than His Majesty King George himself would receive. Hornblower stared for a moment, thought wildly of how he could refuse, and finally salved his conscience with the notion that a salute of that number of guns would be entirely meaningless. He sent a message hurriedly to Mr Marsh ordering twenty-three guns — it was odd, the way in which the ship's boy almost reduplicated Hornblower's reactions, by staring, composing his features, and hurrying off comforted by the thought that it was the Captain's responsibility and not his own. And Hornblower could hardly repress a grin as he thought of Marsh's certain astonishment, and the boiling exasperation in his voice when he reached — "If I hadn't been a born bloody fool I shouldn't be here. Fire *twenty-three*."

El Supremo stepped on to the quarterdeck with a keen glance round him, and then, while Hornblower looked at him, the interest faded from his face and he lapsed into the condition of abstracted indifference in which Hornblower had seen him before. He seemed to listen, but he looked over the heads of Bush and Gerard and the others as Hornblower presented them. He shook his head without a word when Hornblower suggested that he might care to inspect the ship. There was a little awkward pause, which was broken by Bush addressing his captain.

"*Natividad* hoisting another flag to the main yardarm, sir. No it's not, it's —"

It was the body of a man, black against the blue sky, rising slowly, jerking and twisting as it rose. A moment later another body rose at the other end of the yard. All eyes instinctively turned towards el Supremo. He was still gazing away into the distance, his eyes focused on nothing, yet everyone knew he had seen. The English officers cast a hasty glance at their captain for guidance, and followed his lead in lapsing into an uncomfortable pose of having noticed nothing. Disciplinary measures in a ship of another nation could be no affair of theirs.

"Dinner will be served shortly, Supremo," said Hornblower with a gulp. "Would you care to come below?" Still without a word el Supremo walked over to the companion and led the way. Down below his lack of stature was made apparent by the fact that he could walk upright. As a matter of fact, his head just brushed the deck beams above him, but the nearness of the beams did nothing to make him stoop as he walked. Hornblower became conscious of a ridiculous feeling that el Supremo would never need to stoop, that the deck beams would raise themselves as he passed rather than commit the sacrilege of bumping his head — that was how el Supremo's quiet dignity of carriage affected him.

Polwheal and the stewards assisting him, in their best clothes, held aside the screens which still took the place of the discarded bulkheads, but at the entrance to the cabin el Supremo stopped for a moment and said the first words which had passed his lips since he came on board.

"I will dine alone here," he said. "Let the food be brought to me."

None of his suite saw anything in the least odd about his request — Hornblower, watching their expressions, was quite sure that their unconcern was in no way assumed. El Supremo might have been merely blowing his noise for all the surprise they envinced.

It was all a horrible nuisance, of course. Hornblower and his other guests had to dine in makeshift fashion in the gunroom mess, and his one linen tablecloth and his one set of linen napkins, and the two last bottles of his old Madeira remained in the after cabin for el Supremo's use. Nor was the meal improved by the silence that prevailed most of the time; el Supremo's suite were not in the least talkative, and Hornblower was the only Englishman with conversational Spanish. Bush tried twice, valiantly, to make polite speeches to his neighbours, putting a terminal 'o' on the ends of his English words in the hope that so they might be transmuted into Spanish, but the blank stares of the men he addressed reduced him quickly to stammering inarticulation. Dinner was hardly finished; everyone had hardly lighted the loose brown cigars which had been part of the stores handed over to the *Lydia* when a new messenger arrived from the shore and was brought in by the bewildered officer of the watch who could not understand his jabbering talk. The troops were ready to come on board. With relief Hornblower put away his napkin and went on deck, followed by the others.

The men whom the launch and the cutter, plying steadily between ship and shore, brought out, were typical Central American soldiers, barefooted and ragged, swarthy and lankhaired. Each man carried a bright new musket and a bulging cartridge pouch, but these were merely what Hornblower had brought for them; most of the men carried in their hands cotton bags presumably filled with provisions — some bore melons and bunches of bananas in addition. The crew herded them on to the maindeck; they looked about them curiously and chattered volubly, but they were amenable enough, squatting in gossiping groups between the guns where the grinning crew pushed them. They sat on the planking and most of them incontinently began to eat; Hornblower suspected them to be half starved and to be devouring the rations which were expected to last them for several days.

When the last man was on board Hornblower looked across to the *Natividad*; it appeared as if her share of the expeditionary force was already embarked. Suddenly the babble on the main deck died away completely, to be succeeded by a silence surprising in its intensity. Next moment el Supremo came on the quarterdeck — it must have been his appearance from the after cabin which had quelled the noise.

"We shall sail for La Libertad, Captain," he said.

"Yes, Supremo," replied Hornblower. He was glad that el Supremo had made his appearance when he did; a few seconds later and the ship's officers would have seen that their captain was awaiting his orders, and that would never have done.

"We will weigh anchor, Mr Bush," said Hornblower.

Chapter VIII

The voyage up the coast was completed. La Libertad had fallen, and el Supremo and his men had vanished into the tangle of volcanoes surrounding the city of the Holy Saviour. Once again in the early morning Captain Hornblower was pacing the quarterdeck of His Britannic Majesty's 36-gun frigate *Lydia*, and Lieutenant Bush as officer of the watch was standing by the wheel rigidly taking no notice of him.

Hornblower was gazing round him, and filling his lungs deep with air at every respiration as he walked. He noticed that he was doing this, and grinned to himself at the realisation that what he was doing was to savour the sweet air of liberty. For a space he was free from the nightmare influence of el Supremo and his cut-throat methods, and the feeling of relief was inexpressible. He was his own master again, free to walk his quarterdeck undisturbed. The sky was blue, the sea was blue and silver — Hornblower caught himself making the old comparison with heraldic argent and azure, and knew that he was himself again; he smiled once more out of sheer high spirits, looking out to sea, nevertheless, so that his subordinates should not see that their captain was walking the deck grinning like a Cheshire cat.

There was just the gentlest wind abeam pushing the *Lydia* along at three or four knots; peeping over the horizon on the port side were the tops of the interminable volcanoes which formed the backbone of this benighted country. Perhaps after all el Supremo might accomplish his wild dream of conquering Central America; perhaps after all there might be some solid foundation in the hope that good communications might be opened across the Isthmus — by Panama if the Nicaraguan scheme proved impracticable. That would make a profound difference to the world. It would bring Van Diemen's Land and the Moluccas into closer relation to the civilised world. It would open the Pacific to England by evading the difficulties of the journey round the Horn or by the Cape of Good Hope and India, and in that case the Pacific might see squadrons of ships of the line cruising where hardly a frigate had penetrated up to that moment. The Spanish Empire of Mexico and California might acquire a new importance.

Hornblower told himself hastily that all this was only a wild dream at present. As a kind of punishment for dreaming he began to take himself to task regarding his present movements, and to subject himself to a severe examination regarding the motives which had brought him southwards towards Panama. He knew full well that the main one was to shake himself free from el Supremo, but he tried to justify his action in the face of his self-accusation.

If el Supremo's attempt upon San Salvador should fail, the *Natividad* would suffice to bring off what few might survive of his army. The presence of the *Lydia* could in no way influence the land operations. If el Supremo should succeed it might be as well that while he was conquering Nicaragua there should be a diversion in Panama to distract the Spaniards and to prevent them from concentrating their whole strength upon him. It was only right that the *Lydia's* crew should be given a chance of winning some prize money among the pearl fishers of the Gulf of Panama; that would compensate them for their probable loss of the prize money already gained — there would be no screwing money out of the Admiralty for the *Natividad*. The presence of the *Lydia* in the Gulf would hamper the transport of Spanish forces from Peru. Besides, the Admiralty would be glad of a survey of the Gulf and the Pearl Islands; Anson's charts were wanting in this respect. Yet for all these plausible arguments Hornblower knew quite well that why he had come this way was to get away from el Supremo.

A large flat ray, the size of a table top, suddenly leaped clear of the water close overside and fell flat upon the surface again with a loud smack, leaped clear again, and then vanished below, its pinky brown gleaming wet for a moment as the blue water closed over it. There were flying fish skimming the water in all directions, each leaving behind it a momentary dark furrow. Hornblower watched it all, carefree, delighted that he could allow

his thoughts to wander and not feel constrained to keep them concentrated on a single subject. With a ship full of stores and a crew contented by their recent adventures he had no real care in the world. The Spanish prisoners whose lives he had saved from el Supremo were sunning themselves lazily on the forecabin.

"Sail ho!" came echoing down from the masthead.

The idlers thronged the bulwark, gazing over the hammock nettings; the seamen holystoning the deck surreptitiously worked more slowly in order to hear what was going on.

"Where away?" called Hornblower.

"On the port bow, sir. Lugger, sir, I think, an' standing straight for us, but she's right in the eye of the sun —"

"Yes, a lugger, sir," squeaked midshipman Hooker from the fore top gallant masthead. "Two masted. She's right to windward, running down to us, under all sail, sir."

"Running down to us?" said Hornblower, mystified. He jumped up on the slide of the quarterdeck carronade nearest him, and stared into the sun and the wind under his hand, but at present there was still nothing to be seen from that low altitude.

"She's still holding her course, sir," squeaked Hooker.

"Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "Back the mizzen tops'l."

A pearling lugger from the Gulf of Panama, perhaps, and still ignorant of the presence of a British frigate in those waters; on the other hand she might be bearing a message from el Supremo — her course made that unlikely, but that might be explained. Then as the ship lifted, Hornblower saw a gleaming square of white rise for a second over the distant horizon and vanish again. As the minutes passed by the sails were more and more frequently to be seen, until at last from the deck the lugger was in plain view, nearly hull up, running goose-winged before the wind with her bow pointed straight at the *Lydia*.

"She's flying Spanish colours at the main, sir," said Bush from behind his levelled telescope. Hornblower had suspected so for some time back, but had not been able to trust his eyesight.

"She's hauling 'em down, all the same," he retorted, glad to be the first to notice it.

"So she is, sir," said Bush, a little puzzled, and then — "There they go again, sir. No! What do you make of that, sir?"

"White flag over Spanish colours now," said Hornblower. "That'll mean a parley. No, I don't trust 'em. Hoist the colours, Mr Bush, and send the hands to quarters. Run out the guns and send the prisoners below under guard again."

He was not going to be caught unaware by any Spanish tricks. That lugger might be as full of men as an egg is of meat, and might spew up a host of boarders over the side of an unprepared ship. As the *Lydia's* gun ports opened and she showed her teeth the lugger rounded-to just out of gunshot, and lay wallowing, hove-to.

"She's sending a boat, sir," said Bush.

"So I see," snapped Hornblower.

Two oars rowed a dinghy jerkily across the dancing water, and a man came scrambling up the ladder to the gangway — so many strange figures had mounted that ladder lately. This new arrival, Hornblower saw, wore the full dress of the Spanish royal navy, his epaulette gleaming in the sun. He bowed and came forward.

"Captain Hornblower?" he asked.

"I am Captain Hornblower."

"I have to welcome you as the new ally of Spain."

Hornblower swallowed hard. This might be a ruse, but the moment he heard the words he felt instinctively that the man was speaking the truth. The whole happy world by which he had been encompassed up to that moment suddenly became dark with trouble. He could foresee endless worries piled upon him by some heedless action of the politicians.

"We have had the news for the last four days," went on the Spanish officer. "Last month Bonaparte stole our King Ferdinand from us and has named his brother Joseph King of Spain. The Junta of Government has signed a treaty of perpetual alliance and friendship with His Majesty of England. It is with great pleasure. Captain, that I have to inform you that all ports in the dominions of His Most Catholic Majesty are open to you after your most arduous voyage."

Hornblower still stood dumb. It might all be lies, a ruse to lure the *Lydia* under the guns of Spanish shore batteries. Hornblower almost hoped it might be — better that than all the complications which would hem him in if it were the truth. The Spaniard interpreted his expression as implying disbelief.

"I have letters here," he said, producing them from his breast. "One from your admiral in the Leeward Islands, sent overland from Porto Bello, one from His Excellency the Viceroy of Peru, and one from the English lady in Panama."

He tendered them with a further bow, and Hornblower, muttered an apology — his fluent Spanish had deserted him along with his wits — began to open them. Then he pulled himself up; on deck under the eye of the Spanish officer was no place to study these documents. With another muttered apology he fled below to the privacy of his cabin.

The stout canvas wrapper of the naval orders was genuine enough. He scrutinised the two seals carefully, and they showed no signs of having been tampered with; and the wrapper was correctly addressed in English script. He cut the wrapper open carefully and read the orders enclosed. They could leave him in no doubt. There was the signature — Thomas Troubridge, Rear Admiral, Bart. Hornblower had seen Troubridge's signature before, and recognised it. The orders were brief, as one would expect from Troubridge — an alliance having been concluded between His Majesty's Government and that of Spain Captain Hornblower was directed and required to refrain from hostilities towards the Spanish possessions, and, having drawn upon the Spanish authorities for necessary stores, to proceed with all dispatch to England for further orders. It was a genuine document without any doubts at all. It was marked 'Copy No. 2'; presumably other copies had been distributed to other parts of the Spanish possessions to ensure that he received one.

The next letter was flamboyantly sealed and addressed — it was a letter of welcome from the Viceroy of Peru assuring him that all Spanish America was at his disposal, and hoping that he would make full use of all facilities so that he would speedily be ready to help the Spanish nation in its sacred mission of sweeping the French usurper back to his kennel.

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower — the Spanish viceroy did not know yet about the fate of the *Natividad*, nor about the new enterprise of el Supremo. He might not be so cordial when he heard about the *Lydia*'s part in these occurrences.

The third letter was sealed merely with a wafer and was addressed in a feminine hand. The Spanish officer had spoken about a letter from the English lady in Panama — what in the world was an English lady doing there? Hornblower slit open the letter and read it.

The Citadel,
Panama.

Lady Barbara Wellesley presents her compliments to the captain of the English frigate. She requests that he will be so good as to convey her and her maid to Europe, because Lady Barbara finds that owing to an outbreak of yellow fever on the Spanish Main she cannot return home the way she would desire.

Hornblower folded the letter and tapped it on his thumb nail in meditation. The woman was asking an impossibility, of course. A crowded frigate sailing round the Horn was no place for females. She seemed to have no doubt about it, all the same; on the contrary, she seemed to assume that her request would be instantly granted. That name Wellesley, of course, gave the clue to that. It had been much before the public of late. Presumably the lady was a sister or an aunt to the two well-known Wellesleys — the Most Hon. the Marquis Wellesley, K.P., late Governor General of India and now a member of the Cabinet, and General the Hon. Sir Arthur Wellesley, K.B., the victor of Assaye and now pointed at as England's greatest soldier after Sir John Moore. Hornblower had seen him once, and had noticed the high arched arrogant nose and the imperious eye. If the woman had that blood in her she would be the sort to take things for granted. So she might, too. An impecunious frigate captain with no influence at all would be glad to render a service to a member of that family. Maria would be pleased as well as suspicious when she heard that he had been in correspondence with the daughter of an Earl, the sister of a Marquis.

But this was no time to stop and think about women. Hornblower locked the letters in his desk and ran up on deck; forcing a smile as he approached the Spanish captain.

"Greeting to the new allies," he said. "Señor, I am proud to be serving with Spain against the Corsican tyrant." The Spaniard bowed.

"We were very much afraid, Captain," he said, "lest you should fall in with the *Natividad* before you heard the news, because she has not heard it either. In that case your fine frigate would have come to serious harm." "Ha-h'm," said Hornblower. This was more embarrassing than ever; he turned and snapped out an order to the midshipman of the watch. "Bring the prisoners up from the cable tier. Quickly!"

The boy ran, and Hornblower turned back again to the Spanish officer.

"I regret to have to tell you, señor, that by evil chance the *Lydia* met the *Natividad* a week ago."

The Spanish captain looked his surprise. He stared round the ship, at the meticulous good order, the well set up rigging. Even a Spaniard frigate captain could see that the frigate had not been engaged in a desperate action lately.

"But you did not fight her, Captain?" he said. "Perhaps —"

The words died away on his lips as he caught sight of a melancholy procession approaching them along the gangway. He recognised the captain and the lieutenants of the *Natividad*. Hornblower plunged feverishly into an explanation of their presence; but it was not easy to tell a Spanish captain that the *Lydia* had captured a Spanish ship of twice her force without receiving a shot or a casualty — it was harder still to go on and explain that the ship was now sailing under the flag of rebels who had determined to destroy the Spanish power in the new world. The Spaniard turned white with rage and injured pride. He turned upon the captain of the *Natividad* and received confirmation of Hornblower's story from that wretched man's lips; his shoulders were bowed with sorrow as he told the story which would lead inevitably to his courtmartial and his ruin.

Bit by bit the newcomer from the lugger heard the truth about recent events, about the capture of the *Natividad*, and the success of el Supremo's rebellion. He realised that the whole of the Spanish overlordship of the Americas was in jeopardy, and as he realised that, a fresh and harassing aspect of the situation broke in upon him.

"The Manila galleon is at sea!" he exclaimed. "She is due to arrive at Acapulco next month. The *Natividad* will intercept her."

One ship a year crossed the wide Pacific from the Philippines, never bearing less than a million sterling in treasure. Her loss would cripple the bankrupt Spanish government hopelessly. The three captains exchanged glances — Hornblower was telling himself that this was why el Supremo had agreed so readily to the *Lydia* sailing south westward; he had doubtless been pleased at the thought of the *Natividad* to the north eastward acquiring this wealth for him. It would take the Spaniards months to bring round the Horn a ship capable of dealing with the *Natividad*, and in the interval el Supremo would enjoy all those advantages of sea power which Hornblower had foreseen for the *Lydia*. The rebellion would be so firmly rooted that nothing would put it down, especially as, apparently, the Spaniards of Spain were engaged in a life-and-death struggle with Bonaparte and would have neither ships nor men to spare for America. Hornblower could see where lay his duty.

"Very well," he announced abruptly. "I will take my ship back to fight the *Natividad*."

All the Spanish officers looked their relief at that.

"Thank you, Captain," said the officer of the lugger. "You will call in at Panama to consult the Viceroy first?"

"Yes," snapped Hornblower.

In a world where news took months to travel, and where complete upheavals of international relationships were not merely possible but likely, he had learned now by bitter experience to keep in the closest contact with the shore; his misery was in no way allayed by the knowledge that the present difficulties were occasioned merely by his strict obedience to orders — and he knew, too, that the Lords of the Admiralty would not allow that point to influence them in their opinion of a captain who could cause such terrible trouble.

"Then," said the captain of the lugger. "I will bid you good-bye for the time. If I reach Panama first, I will be able to arrange a welcome for you. Perhaps you will allow my compatriots to accompany me?"

"No I won't," rasped Hornblower. "And you, sir, will keep under my lee until we drop anchor."

The Spaniard shrugged and yielded. At sea one can hardly argue with a captain whose guns are run out and whose broadside could blow one's ship out of the water, especially as all Englishmen were as mad and as domineering as el Supremo. The Spaniard had not enough intuition to enable him to guess that Hornblower

still had a lurking fear that the whole business might be a ruse to inveigle the *Lydia* helpless under the guns of Panama.

Chapter IX

It was not a ruse at all. In the morning when the *Lydia* came stealing before a three knot breeze into the roadstead of Panama the only guns fired were the salutes. Boatloads of rejoicing Spaniards came out to greet her, but the rejoicing was soon turned to wailing at the news that the *Natividad* now flew el Supremo's flag, that San Salvador had fallen, and that all Nicaragua was in a flame of rebellion. With cocked hat and gold-hilted sword ('a sword of the value of fifty guineas', the gift of the Patriotic Fund for Lieutenant Hornblower's part in the capture of the *Castilla* six years ago) Hornblower had made himself ready to go ashore and call upon the Governor and the Viceroy, when the arrival of yet one more boat was announced to him.

"There is a lady on board, sir," said Gray, one of the master's mates, who brought the news.

"A lady?"

"Looks like an English lady, sir," explained Gray. "She seems to want to come aboard."

Hornblower went on deck; close alongside a large rowing boat tossed and rolled; at the six oars sat swarthy Spanish Americans, bare armed and straw hatted, while another in the bows, boat hook in hand, stood waiting, face upturned for permission to hook on to the chains. In the stem sat a negress with a flaming red handkerchief over her shoulders, and beside her sat the English lady Gray had spoken about. Even as Hornblower looked, the bowman hooked on, and the boat closed in alongside, two men fending off. Somebody caught the rope ladder, and the next moment the lady, timing the movement perfectly, swung on to it and two seconds later came on deck.

Clearly she was an Englishwoman. She wore a wide shady hat trimmed with roses, in place of the eternal mantilla, and her grey-blue silk dress was far finer than any Spanish black. Her skin was fair despite its golden tan, and her eyes were grey-blue, of just the same evasive shade as her silk dress. Her face was too long for beauty and her nose too high arched, to say nothing of her sunburn. Hornblower saw her at that moment as one of the horsefaced mannish women whom he particularly disliked; he told himself that all his inclinations were towards clinging incompetence. Any woman who could transfer herself in that fashion from boat to ship in an open roadstead, and could ascend a rope ladder unassisted, must be too masculine for his taste. Besides, an Englishwoman must be unsexed to be in Panama without a male escort — the phrase 'globe trotting', with all its disparaging implications, had not yet been invented, but it expressed exactly Hornblower's feeling about her.

Hornblower held himself aloof as the visitor looked about her. He was going to do nothing to help her. A wild squawk from overside told that the negress had not been as handy with the ladder, and directly afterwards this was confirmed by her appearance on deck wet from the waist down, water streaming from her black gown on to the deck. The lady paid no attention to the mishap to her maid; Gray was nearest to her and she turned to him.

"Please be so good, sir," she said, "as to have my baggage brought up out of the boat."

Gray hesitated, and looked round over his shoulder at Hornblower, stiff and unbending on the quarterdeck.

"The captain's here, ma'am," he said.

"Yes," said the lady. "Please have my baggage brought up while I speak to him."

Hornblower was conscious of an internal struggle. He disliked the aristocracy — it hurt him nowadays to remember that as the doctor's son he had had to touch his cap to the squire. He felt unhappy and awkward in the presence of the self-confident arrogance of blue blood and wealth. It irritated him to think that if he offended this woman he might forfeit his career. Not even his gold lace nor his presentation sword gave him confidence as she approached him. He took refuge in an icy formality.

"Are you the captain of this ship, sir?" she asked, as she came up. Her eyes looked boldly and frankly into his with no trace of downcast modesty.

"Captain Hornblower, at your service, ma'am," he replied, with a stiff jerk of his neck which might charitably be thought a bow.

"Lady Barbara Wellesley," was the reply, accompanied by a curtsy only just deep enough to keep the interview formal. "I wrote you a note, Captain Hornblower, requesting a passage to England. I trust that you received it."

"I did, ma'am. But I do not think it is wise for your ladyship to join this ship."

The unhappy double mention of the word 'ship' in this sentence did nothing to make Hornblower feel less awkward.

"Please tell me why, sir."

"Because, ma'am, we shall be clearing shortly to seek out an enemy and fight him. And after that, ma'am, we shall have to return to England round Cape Horn. Your ladyship would be well advised to make your way across the Isthmus. From Porto Bello you can easily reach Jamaica and engage a berth in the West India packet which is accustomed to female passengers."

Lady Barbara's eyebrows arched themselves higher.

"In my letter," she said, "I informed you that there was yellow fever in Porto Bello. A thousand persons died there of it last week. It was on the outbreak of the disease that I removed from Porto Bello to Panama. At any day it may appear here as well."

"May I ask why your ladyship was in Porto Bello, then?"

"Because, sir, the West India packet in which I was a female passenger was captured by a Spanish privateer and brought there. I regret, sir, that I cannot tell you the name of my grandmother's cook, but I shall be glad to answer any further questions which a gentleman of breeding would ask."

Hornblower winced and then to his annoyance found himself blushing furiously. His dislike for arrogant blue blood was if anything intensified. But there was no denying that the woman's explanations were satisfactory enough — a visit to the West Indies could be made by any woman without unsexing herself, and she had clearly come to Porto Bello and Panama against her will. He was far more inclined now to grant her request — in fact he was about to do so, having strangely quite forgotten the approaching duel with the *Natividad* and the voyage round the Horn. He recalled them just as he was about to speak, so that he changed at a moment's notice what he was going to say and stammered and stuttered in consequence.

"B-but we are going out in this ship to fight," he said. "*Natividad's* got twice our force. It will be d-dangerous."

Lady Barbara laughed at that — Hornblower noted the pleasing colour contrast between her white teeth and her golden sunburn; his own teeth were stained and ugly.

"I would far rather," she said, "be on board your ship, whomsoever you have got to fight, than be in Panama with the *vomita negro*."

"But Cape Horn, ma'am?"

"I have no knowledge of this Cape Horn of yours. But I have twice rounded the Cape of Good Hope during my brother's Governor-Generalship, and I assure you, captain, I have never yet been seasick."

Still Hornblower stammered and hesitated. He resented the presence of a woman on board his ship. Lady Barbara exactly voiced his thoughts — and as she did so her arched eyebrows came close together in a fashion oddly reminiscent of el Supremo although her eyes still laughed straight into his.

"Soon, Captain," she said, "I will come to think that I shall be unwelcome on board. I can hardly imagine that a gentleman holding the King's commission would be discourteous to a woman, especially to a woman with my name."

That was just the difficulty. No captain of small influence could afford to offend a Wellesley. Hornblower knew that if he did he might never command a ship again, and that he and Maria would rot on the beach on half pay for the rest of their lives. At thirty-seven he still was not more than one-eighth the way up the captain's list — and the goodwill of the Wellesleys could easily keep him in employment until he attained flag rank. There was nothing for it but to swallow his resentment and to do all he could to earn that goodwill, diplomatically wringing advantage from his difficulties. He groped for a suitable speech.

"I was only doing my duty, ma'am," he said, "in pointing out the dangers to which you might be exposed. For myself there would be nothing that would give me greater pleasure than your presence on board my ship."

Lady Barbara went down in a curtsy far deeper than her first, and at this moment Gray came up and touched his cap.

"Your baggage is all on board, ma'am," he said.

They had hove the stuff up with a whip from the main yardarm, and now it littered the gangway — leather cases, ironbound wooden boxes, dome-topped trunks.

"Thank you, sir." Lady Barbara brought out a flat leather purse from her pocket, and took from it a gold coin.

"Would you be so kind as to give this to the boat's crew?"

"Lord love you, ma'am, you don't need to give those Dago niggers gold. Silver's all they deserve."

"Give them this, then, and thank you for your kindness."

Gray hurried off, and Hornblower heard him bargaining in English with a boat's crew who knew no tongue but Spanish. The threat of having a cold shot hove down into the boat compelled it at length to shove off still spattering expostulation. A new little wave of irritation rose in Hornblower's mind. He disliked seeing his warrant officers running to do a woman's bidding, and his responsibilities were heavy, and he had been standing in a hot sun for half an hour.

"There will be no room in your cabin for a tenth of that baggage, ma'am," he snapped.

Lady Barbara nodded gravely.

"I have dwelt in a cabin before this, sir. That sea chest there holds everything I shall need on board. The rest can be put where you will — until we reach England."

Hornblower almost stamped on the deck with rage. He was unused to a woman who could display practical common-sense like this. It was infuriating that he could find no way of discomposing her — and then he saw her smiling, guessed that she was smiling at the evident struggle on his face, and blushed hotly again. He turned on his heel and led the way below without a word.

Lady Barbara looked round the captain's cabin with a whimsical smile, but she made no comment, not even when she surveyed the grim discomfort of the after-cabin.

"A frigate has few of the luxuries of an Indiaman you see, ma'am," said Hornblower, bitterly. He was bitter because his poverty at the time when he commissioned the *Lydia* had allowed him to purchase none of the minor comforts which many frigate-captains could afford.

"I was just thinking when you spoke," said Lady Barbara, gently, "that it was scandalous that a King's officer should be treated worse than a fat John Company man. But I have only one thing to ask for which I do not see."

"And that is, ma'am — ?"

"A key for the lock on the cabin door."

"I will have the armourer make you a key, ma'am. But there will be a sentry at this door night and day."

The implications which Hornblower read into this request of Lady Barbara's angered him again. She was slandering both him and his ship.

"Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" said Lady Barbara. "It is not on my account, Captain, that I need a key. It is Hebe here whom I have to lock in unless she is directly under eye. She can no more keep from the men than a moth from a candle."

The little negress grinned widely at this last speech, showing no resentment and a good deal of pride. She rolled her eyes at Polwheal, who was standing silently by.

"Where will she sleep, then?" asked Hornblower, disconcerted once more.

"On the floor of my cabin. And mark my words, Hebe, the first time I find you not there during the night I'll lace you so that you will have to sleep on your face."

Hebe still grinned, although it was evident that she knew her mistress would carry out her threat. What mollified Hornblower was Lady Barbara's little slip in speaking of the 'floor' of her cabin instead of the deck. It showed that she was only a feeble woman after all.

"Very good," he said. "Polwheal, take my things into Mr Bush's cabin. Give Mr Bush my apologies and tell him he will have to berth in the wardroom. See that Lady Barbara has all that she wants, and ask Mr Gray with my compliments to attend to putting the baggage in my storeroom. You will forgive me, Lady Barbara, but I am already late in paying my call upon the Viceroy."

Chapter X

The captain of the *Lydia* came on board again to the accompaniment of the usual twitterings of the pipes and the presenting of arms by the marine guard. He walked very carefully, for good news just arrived from Europe had made the Viceroy pressingly hospitable while the notification of the first case of yellow fever in Panama had made him apprehensive so that Hornblower had been compelled to drink one glass of wine too much. A naturally abstemious man, he hated the feeling of not being quite master of himself.

As always, he looked sharply round the deck as soon as his feet were on it. Lady Barbara was sitting in a hammock chair on the quarterdeck — someone must have had that chair made for her during the day; and someone had rigged for her a scrap of awning in the mizzen rigging so that she sat in the shade with Hebe crouching at her feet. She looked cool and comfortable, and smiled readily at him as he approached, but he looked away from her. He would not speak to her until his head was clearer.

"Call all hands to weigh anchor and make sail," he said to Bush. "We leave at once."

He went below, checked himself with a gesture of annoyance at finding that habit had led him to the wrong cabin, and as he turned on his heel he hit his head a shattering crash on a deck beam. His new cabin, from which Bush had been evicted, was even smaller than the old one. Polwheal was waiting to help him change his clothes, and the sight of him reminded Hornblower of fresh troubles. He had been wearing his best gold laced coat and white breeches when Lady Barbara came on board, but he could not afford to continue to wear them lest they should grow too shabby for use on ceremonial occasions. He would have to appear before this woman in future in his old patched coats and cheap duck trousers. She would sneer at his shabbiness and poverty.

He cursed the woman as he stripped off his clothes, all wet with sweat. Then a new trouble came into his mind. He had to leave Polwheal to keep watch while he had his shower bath under the pump lest she should surprise him there naked. He would have to issue orders to the crew so as to make sure that her fastidious eyes would not be offended by the state of undress which they habitually affected in the tropics. He combed his hair and cursed its curliness as drawing additional attention to the way his hair was receding from his forehead.

Then he hurried on deck; he was glad that the need for looking after the ship saved him from meeting Lady Barbara's eyes and seeing her reaction to his shabby clothes. He felt her gaze upon him, all the same, as he stood with his back to her attending to the business of getting under weigh. Half of one watch were at the capstan with all their weight upon the bars, their bare feet seeking holds on the smooth deck while Harrison bellowed encouragement and threats, and stimulated the laggards with cuts from his cane. Sullivan the mad fiddler, the two Marine fifers and the two drummers were playing some lively tune — to Hornblower one tune was much the same as another — on the forecastle.

The cable came steadily in, the ship's boys with their nippers following it to the hatch-coamings and scuttling back immediately to take a fresh hold on cable and messenger. But the measured clank-clank of the capstan grew slower and slower and then came to a dead stop.

"Heave, you bastards! Heave!" bellowed Harrison. "Here, you fo'c'sle men, bear a hand! Now, heave!"

There were twenty more men thrusting at the bars now. Their added strength brought one more solemn clank from the capstan.

"Heave! Christ damn you, heave!"

Harrison's cane was falling briskly first here and then there.

"Heave!"

A shudder ran through the ship, the capstan swung round so sharply that the hands at the bars fell in a tumbling heap to the deck.

"Messenger's parted, sir," hailed Gerard from the forecastle. "The anchor's foul, I think, sir."

"Hell fire!" said Hornblower to himself. He was certain that the woman in the hammock chair behind him was laughing at his predicament, with a foul anchor and the eyes of all Spanish America on him. But he was not going to abandon an anchor and cable to the Spaniards.

"Pass the small bower cable for a messenger," he shouted.

That meant unbearably hot and unpleasant work for a score of men down in the cable tier rousing out the small bower cable and manhandling it up to the capstan. The calls and curses of the boatswain's mates came echoing back to the quarterdeck — the warrant officers were as acutely conscious of the indignity of the ship's position as was their captain. Hornblower could not pace the deck as he wished to do, for fear of meeting Lady Barbara's eyes. He could only stand and fume, wiping the sweat with his handkerchief from his face and neck. "Messenger's ready, sir!" hailed Gerard.

"Put every man to the bars that there's place for. Mr Harrison, see that they heave!"

"Aye aye, sir!"

Br-r-r-m. Boom! Br-r-r-m. Boom! The drum rolled.

"Heave, you sons of bitches," said Harrison, his cane going crack-crack-crack on the straining backs.

Clank! went the capstan. Clank-clank-clank. Hornblower felt the deck inclining a trifle under his feet. The strain was dragging down the ship's bows, not bringing home the anchor.

"God —," began Hornblower to himself, and then left the sentence uncompleted. Of the fifty-five oaths he had ready to employ not one was adequate to the occasion.

'Avast heaving!' he roared, and the sweating seamen eased their aching backs.

Hornblower tugged at his chin as though he wanted to pull it off. He would have to sail the anchor out of the ground — a delicate manoeuvre involving peril to masts and rigging, and which might end in a ridiculous fiasco. Up to the moment only a few knowing people in Panama could have gussed the ship's predicament, but the moment sail was set telescopes would be trained upon her from the city walls and if the operation failed everyone would know and would be amused — and the *Lydia* might be delayed for hours repairing damage. But he was not going to abandon that anchor and cable.

He looked up at the vane at the masthead, and overside at the water; the wind was across the tide, which gave them a chance, at least. He issued his orders quietly, taking the utmost precaution to conceal his trepidation, and steadily keeping his back to Lady Barbara. The top-men raced aloft to set the fore topsail; with that and the driver he could get sternway upon the ship. Harrison stood by the capstan ready first to let the cable go with a run and then second to have it hove in like lightning when the ship came forward again. Bush had his men ready at the braces, and every idle hand was gathered round the capstan.

The cable roared out as the ship gathered sternway; Hornblower stood rooted to the quarterdeck feeling that he would give a week of his life for the chance to pace up and down without meeting Lady Barbara's eyes.

With narrowed eyes he watched the progress of the ship, his mind juggling with a dozen factors at once — the drag of the cable on the bows, the pressure of the wind on the driver and the backed fore topsail, the set of the tide, the increasing sternway, the amount of cable still to run out. He picked his moment.

"Hard-a-starboard," he rasped at the quartermaster at the wheel, and then to the hands forward "Smartly with the braces now!"

With the rudder hard across the ship came round a trifle. The fore topsail came round. The jibs and fore staysails were set like lightning. There was a shuddering moment before the ship paid off. Her sternway checked, the ship hesitated, and then, joyfully, began slowly to move forward close hauled. Up aloft every sail that could draw was being set as Hornblower barked his orders. The capstan clanked ecstatically as Harrison's men raced round with the bars gathering the cable again.

Hornblower had a moment to think now, with the ship gathering forward way. The drag of the cable would throw her all aback if he gave her the least chance. He was conscious of the rapid beating of his heart as he watched the main topsail for the first signs of flapping. It took all his force of will to keep his voice from shaking as he gave his orders to the helmsman. The cable was coming in fast; the next crisis was at hand, which would see the anchor out of the ground or the *Lydia* dismasted. He nerved himself for it, judged his moment, and then shouted for all sail to be got in.

All the long and painful drill to which Bush had subjected the crew bore its fruit now. Courses, topsails and top gallants were got in during the few seconds which were left, and as the last shred of canvas disappeared a fresh order from Hornblower brought the ship round, pointing straight into the wind and towards the hidden anchor, the way she had gathered carrying her slowly forward. Hornblower strained his ears to listen to the capstan.

Clank-clank-clank-clank.

Harrison was driving his men round and round the capstan like madmen.

Clank-clank-clank.

The ship was moving perceptibly slower. He could not tell yet if all his effort was to end ignominiously in failure.

Clank-clank.

There came a wild yell from Harrison.

"Anchor's free, sir!"

"Set all sail, Mr Bush," said Hornblower; Bush was making no attempt to conceal his admiration for a brilliant piece of seamanship, and Hornblower had to struggle hard to keep his voice at the hard mechanical pitch which would hide his elation and convince everyone that he had had no doubt from the very start of the success of his manoeuvre.

He set a compass course, and as the ship came round and steadied upon it he gave one final glance of inspection round the deck.

"Ha-h'm," he rasped, and dived below, to where he could relax and recover, out of Bush's sight — and out of Lady Barbara's, too.

Chapter XI

Stretched flat on his back in his cabin, blowing thick greasy wreaths of smoke from one of General Hernandez' cigars towards the deck above him where sat Lady Barbara, Hornblower began slowly to recover from the strain of a very trying day. It had begun with the approach to Panama, with every nerve keyed up lest an ambush had been laid, and it had ended so far with this trying business of the fouled anchor. Between the two had come Lady Barbara's arrival and the interview with the Viceroy of New Granada.

The Viceroy had been a typical Spanish gentleman of the old school — Hornblower decided that he would rather have dealings with el Supremo any day of the week. El Supremo might have an unpleasant habit of barbarously putting men to death, but he found no difficulty in making up his mind and one could be confident that orders issued by him would be obeyed with equal promptitude. The Viceroy, on the other hand, while full of approval of Hornblower's suggestion that instant action against the rebels was necessary, had not been ready to act on it. He was obviously surprised at Hornblower's decision to sail from Panama on the same day as his arrival — he had expected the *Lydia* to stay for at least a week of fêtings and junketings and idleness. He had agreed that at least a thousand soldiers must be transported to the Nicaraguan coast — although a thousand soldiers constituted practically the whole of his command — but he had clearly intended to postpone until the morrow the issuing of the orders for that concentration.

Hornblower had had to use all his tact to persuade him to do it at once, to give his instructions from his very banqueting table, and to put his favourite aides de camp to the pain of riding with messages under a hot sun during the sacred hours of the siesta. The banquet had in itself been trying; Hornblower felt as if there was no skin left on his palate, so highly peppered had been every dish. Both because of the spiciness of the food and the pressing hospitality of the Viceroy it had been hard to avoid drinking too much; in an age of hard drinking Hornblower stood almost alone in his abstemiousness, from no conscientious motive but solely because he actively disliked the feeling of not having complete control of his judgment.

But he could not refuse that last glass of wine, seeing what news had just come in. He sat up on his cot with a jerk. That business with the anchor had driven the recollection out of his mind. Good manners compelled him to go and communicate the news to Lady Barbara, seeing how closely it concerned her. He ran up on deck, pitched his cigar overboard, and went towards her. Gerard, the officer of the watch, was in close conversation with her; Hornblower smiled grimly to himself when he saw Gerard hurriedly break off the conversation and move away.

She was still seated aft by the taffrail in her hammock chair, the negress at her feet. She seemed to be drinking in the cool wind against which the *Lydia* was standing out of the gulf close hauled. On the starboard beam the sun was ready at the horizon, a disc of orange fire in the clear blue of the sky, and she was exposing her face to

its level beams with a total disregard for her complexion which accounted for her sunburn and, presumably, for the fact that she was now twenty-seven and still unmarried despite a trip to India. Yet there was a serenity in her expression which seemed to show that at the moment at least she was not worrying about being an old maid.

She acknowledged his bow with a smile.

"It is heavenly to be at sea again, Captain," she said. "You have given me no opportunity so far to tell you how grateful I am to you for taking me away from Panama. To be a prisoner was bad enough, but to be free and yet to be confined there by force of circumstances would have driven me out of my mind. Believe me, Captain, you have won my eternal gratitude."

Hornblower bowed again.

"I trust the Dons treated your ladyship with all respect?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Well enough. But Spanish manners can grow trying. I was in charge of Her Excellency — an admirable woman. But insupportably dull. In Spanish America women are treated like Mohammedans. And Spanish-American food —"

The words recalled to Hornblower the banquet he had just endured, and the expression on his face made Lady Barbara break off her sentence to laugh so infectiously that Hornblower could not help but join in.

"Will you not sit down, Captain?"

Hornblower resented the suggestion. He had never once during this commission sat in a chair on his own deck, and he disliked innovations in his habits.

"Thank you, your ladyship, but I prefer to stand if I may. I came to give you good news."

"Indeed? Then your company is doubly pleasant. I am all eagerness to hear."

"Your brother, Sir Arthur, has won a great victory in Portugal over the French. Under the terms of a convention the French are evacuating the country and are handing over Lisbon to the English army."

"That is very good news. I have always been proud of Arthur — this makes me prouder still."

"It gives me great pleasure to be the first to congratulate his sister."

Lady Barbara contrived miraculously to bow although seated in her hammock chair — Hornblower was conscious of the difficulty of the feat and grudgingly admitted to himself that it was well done.

"How did the news come?"

"It was announced to the Viceroy while I was at dinner with him. A ship had reached Porto Bello from Cadiz, and a messenger rode express by the waggon road. There was other news as well — how true is more than I can say."

"To what effect, Captain?"

"The Spaniards claim a victory, too. They say a whole army of Bonaparte's has surrendered to them in Andalusia. They are already looking forward to an invasion of France in company with the English army."

"And how true do you think it is?"

"I distrust it. They may have cut off a detachment by good luck. But it will need more than a Spanish army to beat Bonaparte. I can foresee no speedy end to the war."

Lady Barbara nodded a grave approval. She looked out to where the sun was sinking into the sea, and Hornblower looked with her. To him the disappearance of the sun each evening into those placid waters was a daily miracle of beauty. The line of the horizon cut the disc now. They watched silently as the sun sank farther and farther. Soon only a tiny edge was left; it vanished, reappeared for a second like a glint of gold as the *Lydia* heaved up over the swell, and then faded once more. The sky glowed red in the west, but overhead it grew perceptibly darker with the approach of night.

"Beautiful! Exquisite!" said Lady Barbara; her hands were tightly clasped together. She was silent for a moment before she spoke again, returning to the last subject of conversation. "Yes. One gleam of success and the Spaniards will look on the war as good as over. And in England the herd will be expecting my brother to lead the army into Paris by Christmas. And if he does not they will forget his victories and clamour for his head."

Hornblower resented the word 'herd' — by birth and by blood he was one of the herd himself — but he was aware of the profound truth of Lady Barbara's remarks. She had summed up for him his opinion both of the

Spanish national temperament and of the British mob. Along with that went her appreciation of the sunset and her opinion of Spanish-American food. He actually felt well disposed towards her.

"I hope," he said, ponderously, "that your ladyship was provided to-day during my absence with everything necessary? A ship is poorly provided with comforts for women, but I hope that my officers did their best for your ladyship."

"Thank you, Captain, they did indeed. There is only one more thing that I wish for, which I should like to ask as a favour."

"Yes, your ladyship?"

"And that is that you do not call me 'your ladyship.' Call me Lady Barbara, if you will."

"Certainly, Your — Lady Barbara. Ha-h'm."

Ghosts of dimples appeared in the thin cheeks, and the bright eyes sparkled.

"And if 'Lady Barbara' does not come easily to you, Captain, and you wish to attract my attention, you can always say 'ha-h'm.'"

Hornblower stiffened with anger at this impertinence. He was about to turn on his heel, drawing a deep breath as he did so, and he was about to exhale that breath and clear this throat when he realised that he would never again, or at least until he had reached some port where he could get rid of this woman, be able to make use of that useful and noncommittal sound. But Lady Barbara checked him with outstretched hand; even at that moment he noticed her long slender fingers.

"I am sorry, Captain," she said, all contrition, "please accept my apologies, although I know now that it was quite unforgivable."

She looked positively pretty as she pleaded. Hornblower stood hesitating, looking down at her. He realised that why he was angry was not because of the impertinence, but because this sharp-witted woman had already guessed at the use he made of this sound to hide his feelings, and with that realisation his anger changed into his usual contempt for himself.

"There is nothing to forgive, ma'am," he said, heavily. "And now, if you will forgive me in your turn, I will attend to my duties in the ship."

He left her there in the fast falling night. A ship's boy had just come aft and lighted the binnacle lamps, and he stopped and read on the slate and traverse board the record of the afternoon's run. He wrote in his painstaking hand the instructions with regard to calling him — because some time that night they would round Cape Mala and have to change course to the northward — and then he went below again to his cabin.

He felt oddly disturbed and ill at ease and not merely because of the upsetting of all his habits. It was annoying that his own private water closet was barred to him now so that he had to use the wardroom one, but it was not just because of this. Not even was it merely because he was on his way to fight the *Natividad* again in the certain knowledge that with Vice-Admiral Cristobal de Crespo in command it would be a hard battle. That was part of what was troubling him — and then he realised with a shock that his disquiet was due to the added responsibility of Lady Barbara's presence on board.

He knew quite well what would be the fate of himself and his crew if the *Lydia* were beaten by the *Natividad*. They would be hanged or drowned or tortured to death — el Supremo would show no mercy to the Englishman who had turned against him. That possibility left him unmoved at present, because it was so entirely inevitable that he should fight the *Natividad*. But it was far different in Lady Barbara's case. He would have to see that she did not fall alive into Crespo's hands.

This brief wording of his difficulty brought him a sudden spasm of irritation. He cursed the yellow fever which had driven her on board; he cursed his own slavish obedience to orders which had resulted in the *Natividad's* fighting on the rebels' side. He found himself clenching his hands and gritting his teeth with rage. If he won his fight public opinion would censure him (with all public opinion's usual ignorance of circumstances) for risking the life of a lady — of a Wellesley. If he lost it — but he could not bear to think about that. He cursed his own weakness for allowing her to come on board; for a moment he even dallied with the notion of putting back to Panama and setting her on shore. But he put that notion aside. The *Natividad* might take the Manila galleon. His crew, already discomposed by all the recent changes of plan, would fret still more if he went back and then went to sea again. And Lady Barbara might refuse — and with yellow fever raging in Panama she would be justified in refusing. He could not exercise his authority so brutally as to force a woman to land in a fever-

stricken town. He swore to himself again, senselessly, making use of all the filthy oaths and frantic blasphemies acquired during his sea experience.

From the deck came a shrilling of pipes and a shouting of orders and a clatter of feet; apparently the wind had backed round now with the fall of night. As the sound died away the feeling of oppression in the tiny cabin overcame him. It was hot and stuffy; the oil lamp swinging over his head stank horribly. He plunged up on deck again. Aft from the taffrail he heard a merry laugh from Lady Barbara, instantly followed by a chorus of guffaws. The dark mass there must be at least half a dozen officers, all grouped round Lady Barbara's chair. It was only to be expected that after seven months — eight, nearly, now — without seeing an English woman they would cluster round her like bees round a hive.

His first instinct was to drive them away, but he checked himself. He could not dictate to his officers how they spent their watch below, and they would attribute his action to his desire to monopolise her society to himself — and that was not in the least the case. He went down again, unobserved by the group, to a stuffy cabin and the stinking lamp. It was the beginning of a sleepless and restless night.

Chapter XII

Morning found the *Lydia* heaving and swooping lightly over a quartering sea. On the starboard beam, just jutting over the horizon, were the greyish-pink summits of the volcanoes of that tormented country; by ranging along just in sight of the coast the *Lydia* stood her best chance of discovering the *Natividad*. The captain was already afoot — indeed, his coxswain Brown had had apologetically to sand the captain's portion of the quarterdeck while he paced up and down it.

Far away on the port side the black shape of a whale broke the surface in a flurry of foam — dazzling white against the blue sea — and a thin plume of white smoke was visible as the whale emptied its lungs. Hornblower liked whales for some reason or other; the sight of this one, in fact, led him on his first step back towards good temper. With the imminent prospect of his cold shower bath before him the prickle of sweat under his shirt was gratifying now instead of irritating. Two hours ago he had been telling himself that he loathed this Pacific coast, its blue sea and its hideous volcanoes — even its freedom from navigational difficulties. He had felt himself homesick for the rocks and shoals and fogs and tides of the Channel, but now, bathed in sunshine, his opinion changed once more. There was something to be said in favour of the Pacific after all. Perhaps this new alliance between Spain and England would induce the Dons to relax some of their selfish laws prohibiting trade with America; they might even go so far as to try to exploit the possibility of that canal across Nicaragua which the British Admiralty had in mind, and in that case this blue Pacific could come into its own. El Supremo would have to be suppressed first, of course, but on this pleasant morning Hornblower foresaw less difficulty in that.

Gray the master's mate had come aft to heave the log. Hornblower checked in his walk to watch the operation. Gray tossed the little triangle of wood over the stern, and, log line in hand, he gazed fixedly with his boyish blue eyes at the dancing bit of wood.

"Turn!" he cried sharply to the hand with the sand glass, while the line ran out freely over the rail.

"Stop!" called the man with the glass.

Gray nipped the line with his fingers and checked its progress, and then read off the length run out. A sharp jerk at the thin cord which had run out with the line freed the peg so that the log now floated with its edge towards the ship, enabling Gray to pull the log in hand over hand.

"How much?" called Hornblower to Gray.

"Seven an' nigh on a half, sir."

The *Lydia* was a good ship to reel off seven and a half knots in that breeze, even though her best point of sailing was with the wind on her quarter. It would not take long if the wind held to reach waters where the *Natividad* might be expected to be found. The *Natividad* was a slow sailer, as nearly all those two-decker fifty-gun ships were, and as Hornblower had noticed when he had sailed in her company ten days back — it might as well be ten years, so long did it seem — from the Gulf of Fonseca to La Libertad.

If he met her in the open sea he could trust to the handiness of his ship and the experience of his crew to outmanoeuvre her and discount her superior weight of metal. If the ships once closed and the rebels boarded their superior numbers would overwhelm his crew. He must keep clear, slip across her stern and rake her half a dozen times. Hornblower's busy mind, as he paced up and down the deck, began to visualise the battle, and to make plans for the possible eventualities — whether or not he might hold the weather gauge, whether or not there might be a high sea running, whether or not the battle began close inshore.

The little negress Hebe came picking her way across the deck, her red handkerchief brilliant in the sunshine, and before the scandalised crew could prevent her she had interrupted the captain in his sacred morning walk. "Milady says would the captain breakfast with her," she lisped.

"Eh — what's that?" asked Hornblower, taken by surprise and coming out of his day dream with a jerk, and then, as he realised the triviality for which he had been interrupted, "No no no! Tell her ladyship I will *not* breakfast with her. Tell her that I will *never* breakfast with her. Tell her that on *no* account am I to be sent messages during the morning. Tell her you are *not* allowed and neither is she on this deck before eight bells. *Get below!*"

Even then the little negress did not seem to realise how enormous had been her offence. She nodded and smiled as she backed away without a sign of contrition. Apparently she was used to white gentlemen who were irascible before breakfast and attributed little importance to the symptoms. The open skylight of the after cabin was close beside him as he walked, and through it he could hear, now that his reverie had been broken into, the clatter of crockery, and then first Hebe's and then Lady Barbara's voice.

The sound of the men scrubbing the decks, the harping of the rigging and the creaking of the timbers were noises to which he was used. From forward came the thunderous beat of a sledgehammer as the armourer and his mate worked upon the fluke of the anchor which had been bent in yesterday's misadventure. He could tolerate all the ship's noises, but this clack-clack-clack of women's tongues through the open skylight would drive him mad. He stamped off the deck in a rage again. He did not enjoy his bath after all, and he cursed Polwheal for clumsiness in handing him his dressing gown, and he tore the threadbare suit which Polwheal had put out for him and cursed again. It was intolerable that he should be driven in this fashion off his own deck. Even the excellent coffee, sweetened (as he liked it) to a syrup with sugar, did not relieve his fresh ill-temper. Nor, most assuredly, did the necessity of having to explain to Bush that the *Lydia* was now sailing to seek out and to capture the *Natividad*, having already been to enormous pains to capture her and hand her over to the rebels who were now their foes.

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush gravely, having heard the new development. He was being so obviously tactful, and he so pointedly refrained from comment, that Hornblower swore at him.

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush again, knowing perfectly well why he was being sworn at, and also knowing that he would be sworn at far worse if he said anything beyond "aye aye, sir." Really what he wanted to say was some expression of sympathy for Hornblower in his present situation, but he knew he dared not sympathise with his queer-tempered captain.

As the day wore on Hornblower came to repent of his ill-humour. The saw-edged volcanic coast was slipping past them steadily, and ahead of them somewhere lay the *Natividad*. There was a desperate battle awaiting them, and before they should fight it it would be tactful for him to entertain his officers to dinner. And he knew that any captain with an eye to his professional advancement would be careful not to treat a Wellesley in the cavalier fashion he had employed up to the present. And ordinary politeness dictated that he should at this, the earliest opportunity, arrange that his guest should meet his officers formally at dinner, even though he knew full well that she had already, in her emancipated manner, conversed with half of them in the darkness of the quarterdeck.

He sent Polwheal across to Lady Barbara with a politely worded request that Lady Barbara would be so kind as to allow Captain Hornblower and his officers to dine with her in the after cabin and Polwheal returned with a politely worded message to the effect that Lady Barbara would be delighted. Six was the maximum number that could sit round the after cabin table; and superstitiously Hornblower remembered that on the eve of his last encounter with the *Natividad* Galbraith, Clay, and Savage had been his guests. He would never have admitted to himself that it was for this reason that he invited them again in the hope of encountering similar good fortune, but it was the case nevertheless. He invited Bush as the sixth — the other possible choice was

Gerard, and Gerard was so handsome and had acquired somehow such a knowledge of the world that Hornblower did not want to bring him into too frequent contact with Lady Barbara — solely, he hastened to assure himself, for the sake of peace and quiet in his ship. And when that was all settled he could go on deck again to take his noon sights and pace his quarterdeck in his consuming restlessness, feeling that he could (after this exchange of polite messages) meet Lady Barbara's eyes without the embarrassment that would previously have prevented him, unreasoningly.

The dinner at three o'clock was a success. Clay and Savage passed through the stages of behaviour that might have been expected of boys their age. At first they were brusque and shy in Lady Barbara's presence, and then, when the novelty had worn off and they had a glass of wine inside them they moved towards the other extreme of over-familiarity. Even the hard-bitten Bush, surprisingly, showed the same symptoms in the same order, while poor Galbraith was of course shy all the time.

But Hornblower was astonished at the ease with which Lady Barbara handled them. His own Maria would have been too gauche ever to have pulled that party together, and in a world where he knew few women Hornblower was prone to measure the ones he met by Maria's standard. Lady Barbara laughed away Clay's bumptiousness, listened appreciatively to Bush's account of Trafalgar (when he had been a junior lieutenant in the *Téméraire*) and then won Galbraith's heart completely by displaying a close knowledge of a remarkable poem called 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel' by an Edinburgh lawyer — every line of which Galbraith knew by heart, and which Galbraith thought was the greatest poem in the English language. His cheeks glowed with pleasure as they discussed it.

Hornblower kept his opinion of the work to himself. His model author was Gibbon, whose 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' was to be found in the very locker on which he sat, and he was surprised that a woman who could quote Juvenal with ease should be so interested in a barbaric romantic poem with no polish about it whatever. He contented himself with sitting back and watching the faces round the table — Galbraith tense and pleased, Clay and Savage and Bush a little out of their depth but interested in spite of themselves, and Lady Barbara completely at ease, conversing with a fearless self-confidence which nevertheless (as Hornblower grudgingly admitted to himself) seemed to owe nothing to her great position.

She made no use of her sex, either, Hornblower realised, and yet she was, marvellously, neither cold nor masculine. She might have been Savage's aunt, or Galbraith's sister. She could talk to men as an equal, and yet could keep from her manner both invitation and hostility. She was very different from Maria. And when dinner was over and the officers rose to drink the health of the King, stooping under the deck beams (not until twenty-five more years had passed would a King who had been a sailor himself give permission to the Navy to drink his health sitting) she echoed "God bless him!" and finished her single glass of wine with exactly the right touch of light-hearted solemnity which befitted the occasion. Hornblower suddenly realised that he was passionately anxious for the evening not to end.

"Do you play whist, Lady Barbara?" he asked.

"Why, yes," she said, "are there whist players on board this ship?"

"There are some who are not too enthusiastic," replied Hornblower, grinning at his juniors.

But nobody had nearly as much objection to playing in a four with Lady Barbara, the more so as her presence might moderate the captain's dry strictness. The cut allotted Lady Barbara as the captain's partner against Clay and Galbraith. Clay dealt and turned up a heart as trump; it was Lady Barbara's lead. She led the king of hearts, and Hornblower writhed uneasily in his seat. This might well be the play of a mere tyro, and somehow it hurt him to think that Lady Barbara was a bad whist player. But the king of hearts was followed by the king of diamonds, which also took the trick, and that by the ace of hearts, followed by the seven. Hornblower took the trick with the queen — his last heart, making a total of eleven played, and returned a diamond. Down came Lady Barbara's queen. Next came the ace of diamonds, and then two small ones to follow. At his first discard Hornblower dropped the seven from his suit of four clubs headed by king and knave. His opponents each discarded small spades on that remorseless string of diamonds. From doubt Hornblower changed instantly to complete confidence in his partner, which was entirely justified. She led the ace of clubs followed by the three, Hornblower finessed his knave, played his king, on which his partner discarded her singleton spade and then claimed the last two tricks with her remaining trumps. They had made a slam even though their opponents held every trick in spades.

Lady Barbara had shown that she could play a good hand well, later she proved that she could fight out a losing hand with equal brilliance. She watched every discard, noted every signal, finessed boldly when there was a chance of profit, returned her partner's leads and yet resolutely ignored them if her hand justified the risk; she played low from a sequence and led high. Not since the *Lydia* left England had Hornblower had such a good partner. In his pleasure at this discovery Hornblower quite forgot to have any qualms at the fact that here was a woman who could do something well.

And the next evening she displayed another accomplishment, when she brought out a guitar on to the quarterdeck and accompanied herself in the songs which she sang in a sweet soprano — so sweet that the crew came creeping aft and crouched to listen under the gangways and coughed and fidgeted sentimentally at the close of each song. Galbraith was her slave, and she could play on his musical heartstrings as on her guitar. The midshipmen loved her. Even the barnacle-encrusted officers like Bush and Crystal softened towards her, and Gerard flashed his brilliant smile at her and made play with his good looks and told her stories of his privateering days and of his slaving adventures up the African rivers. Hornblower watched Gerard anxiously during that voyage up the Nicaraguan coast, and cursed his own tone deafness which made Lady Barbara's singing not merely indifferent to him but almost painful.

Chapter XIII

The long volcanic coast line slid past them day after day. Every day brought its eternal panorama of blue sea and blue sky, of slaty-pink volcanic peaks and a fringing coast line of vivid green. With decks cleared for action and every man at his post they ran once more into the Gulf of Fonseca and sailed round the island of Manguera in search of the *Natividad*, but they did not find her. They saw no sign of life on the shores of the bay, either. Someone fired a musket at the ship from the cliffs of Manguera — the spent bullet thudded into the mainchains — but they did not see the man who fired it. Bush steered the *Lydia* out of the gulf again and north eastward in his search for the *Natividad*.

The *Natividad* was not to be found in the roadstead of La Libertad, nor in any of the little ports farther along. There was much smoke to be seen at Champerico, and Hornblower, training his glass upon it, could see that for once it was not volcanic. Champerico was in flames, so that presumably el Supremo's men had come there spreading enlightenment, but there was no sign of the *Natividad*.

Storms awaited them in the Gulf of Tehuantepec, for that corner of the Pacific is always stormy, lashed by the wind which blows hither from the Gulf of Mexico through a gap in the sierras. Hornblower was made aware of the change by an increase in the motion of the ship. She was rising and swooping more violently than usual and a gusty wind was heeling her sharply over. It was just eight bells, and the watch was being called; he could hear the bellowings of the master's mates — "Show a leg! Show a leg! Lash up and stow! Lash up and stow!" — as he ran up to the quarterdeck. The sky was still blue overhead and the sun was hot, but the sea was grey, now, and running high, and the *Lydia* was beginning to labour under her press of sail.

"I was just sending down to you, sir, for permission to shorten sail," said Bush.

Hornblower glanced up at the canvas, and over towards the clouds towards the coast.

"Yes. Get the courses and t'gallants off her," he said.

The *Lydia* plunged heavily as he spoke, and then rose again, labouring, the water creaming under her bows. The whole ship was alive with the creaking of timber and the harping of the rigging. Under shortened sail she rode more easily, but the wind of her beam was growing stronger, and she was bowing down to it as she crashed over the waves. Looking round, Hornblower saw Lady Barbara standing with one hand on the taffrail. The wind was whipping her skirts about her, and with her other hand she was trying to restrain the curls that streamed round her head. Her cheeks were pink under their tan, and her eyes sparkled.

"You ought to be below, Lady Barbara," he said.

"Oh no, Captain. This is too delicious after the heat we have been enduring."

A shower of spray came rattling over the bulwarks and wetted them both.

"It is your health, ma'am, about which I am anxious."

"If salt water was harmful sailors would die young."

Her cheeks were bright as if she had been using cosmetics. Hornblower could refuse her nothing, even though he bitterly remembered how last evening she had sat in the shadow of the mizzen rigging talking so animatedly to Gerard that no one else had been able to profit by her society.

"Then you can stay on deck, ma'am, since you wish it, unless this gale increases — and I fancy it will."

"Thank you, Captain," she replied. There was a look in her eye which seemed to indicate that the question as to what would happen if the gale increased was not nearly as decided as the captain appeared to think — but like her great brother she crossed no bridges until she came to them.

Hornblower turned away; he would clearly have liked to have stayed there talking, with the spray pattering about them, but his duty was with his ship. As he reached the wheel there came a hail from the masthead.

"Sail ho! Deck, there, a sail right ahead. Looks like *Natividad*, sir."

Hornblower gazed up. The lookout was clinging to his perch, being swung round and round in dizzy circles as the ship pitched and swooped over the waves.

"Up you go, Knyvett," he snapped to the midshipman beside him. "Take a glass with you and tell me what you can see." He knew that he himself would be of no use as a lookout in that wild weather — he was ashamed of it, but he had to admit it to himself. Soon Knyvett's boyish voice came calling down to him through the gale.

"She's the *Natividad*, sir. I can see the cut of her tops'ls."

"How's she heading?"

"On the starboard tack, sir, same course as us. Her masts are in one line. Now she's altering course, sir. She's wearing round. She must have seen us, sir. Now she's on the port tack, sir, heading up to wind'ard of us, close hauled, sir."

"Oh, is she," said Hornblower to himself, grimly. It was an unusual experience to have a Spanish ship face about and challenge action — but he remembered that she was a Spanish ship no longer. He would not allow her to get the weather gauge of him, come what might.

"Man the braces, there!" he shouted, and then to the man at the wheel: "Port your helm. And mark ye, fellow, keep her as near the wind as she'll lie. Mr Bush, beat to quarters, if you please, and clear for action."

As the drum rolled and the hands came pouring up he remembered the woman aft by the taffrail, and his stolid fatalism changed to anxiety.

"Your place is below, Lady Barbara," he said. "Take your maid with you. You must stay in the cockpit until the action is over — no, not the cockpit. Go to the cable tier."

"Captain —," she began, but Hornblower was not in the mood for argument — if indeed she had argument in mind.

"Mr Clay!" he rasped. "Conduct her ladyship and her maid to the cable tier. See that she is safe before you leave her. Those are my *orders*, Mr Clay. Ha-h'm."

A cowardly way out, perhaps, to throw on Clay the responsibility of seeing his orders carried out. He knew it, but he was angry with the woman because of the sick feeling of worry which she was occasioning him. She left him, nevertheless, with a smile and a wave of the hand, Clay trotting before her.

For several minutes the ship was a turmoil of industry as the men went through the well-learned drill. The guns were run out, the decks sanded, the horses rigged to the pumps, the fires extinguished, the bulkheads torn down. The *Natividad* could be seen from the deck now, sailing on the opposite tack towards her, obviously clawing her hardest up to windward to get the weather gauge. Hornblower looked up at the sails to mark the least shiver.

"Steer small, blast you," he growled at the quartermaster.

The *Lydia* lay over before the gale, the waves crashing and hissing overside, the rigging playing a wild symphony. Last night she had been stealing peacefully over a calm and moonlit sea, and now here she was twelve hours later thrashing through a storm with a battle awaiting her. The wind was undoubtedly increasing, a wilder puff almost took her aback, and she staggered and rolled until the helmsman allowed her to pay off.

"*Natividad* won't be able to open her lower deck ports!" gloated Bush beside him. Hornblower stared across the grey sea at the enemy. He saw a cloud of spray break over her bows.

"No," he said heavily. He would not discuss the possibilities of the approaching action for fear lest he might be too talkative. "I'll trouble you, Mr Bush, to have two reefs taken in those tops'ls."

On opposite tacks the ships were nearing each other along the sides of an obtuse angle. Look as closely as he would, he could not decide which ship would be to windward when they met at the apex.

"Mr Gerard," he called down to the lieutenant in charge of the port side maindeck battery. "See that the matches in your tubs are alight."

"Aye aye, sir."

With all this spray breaking aboard the flint lock trigger mechanism could not be relied upon until the guns grew hot and the old-fashioned method of ignition might have to be used — in the tubs on deck were coils of slow-match to meet this emergency. He stared across again at the *Natividad*. She, too, had reefed her topsail now, and was staggering along, closehaunched, under storm canvas. She was flying the blue flag with the yellow star; Hornblower glanced up overhead to where the dingy white ensign fluttered from the peak.

"She's opened fire, sir," said Bush beside him.

Hornblower looked back at the *Natividad* just in time to see the last of a puff of smoke blown to shreds by the wind. The sound of the shot did not reach them, and where the ball went no one could say — the jet of water which it struck up somewhere was hidden in the tossing waves.

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower.

It was bad policy, even with a well-drilled crew, to open fire at long range. That first broadside, discharged from guns loaded carefully and at leisure, and aimed by crews with time to think, was too precious a thing to be dissipated lightly. It should be saved up for use at the moment when it would do maximum harm, however great might be the strain of waiting inactive.

"We'll be passing mighty close, sir," said Bush.

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower.

Still there was no means of telling which ship would hold the weather gauge when they met. It appeared as if they would meet bow to bow in collision if both captains held rigidly to their present courses. Hornblower had to exert all his willpower to keep himself standing still and apparently unemotional as the tension increased. Another puff of smoke from the *Natividad's* starboard bow, and this time they heard the sound of the shot as it passed overhead between the masts.

"Closer!" said Bush.

Another puff, and simultaneously a crash from the waist told where the shot had struck.

"Two men down at number four gun," said Bush, stooping to look forward under the gangway, and then, eyeing the distance between the two ships: "Christ! It's going to be a near thing."

It was a situation which Hornblower had visualised several times in his solitary walks on the quarterdeck. He took a last glance up at the weathervane, and at the topsails on the point of shivering as the ship tossed on the heaving sea.

"Stand by, Mr Rayner. Fire as your guns bear," he called. Rayner was in command of the starboard side maindeck battery. Then, from the corner of his mouth to the men at the wheel — "Put your helm a-weather. Catch her! Hold her so!"

The *Lydia* spun round and shot down the lee side of the *Natividad* and her starboard side guns went off almost simultaneously in a rolling crash that shook the ship to her keel. The billow of smoke that enveloped her momentarily was blown away instantly by the gale. Every shot crashed into the *Natividad's* side; the wind brought to their ears the screams of the wounded. So unexpected had the manoeuvre been that only one single shot was fired from the *Natividad*, and that did no damage — her lower deck ports on this, her lee side, were closed because of the high sea.

"Grand! Oh, grand!" said Bush. He sniffed at the bitter powder smoke eddying round him as if it had been sweet incense.

"Stand by to go about," rasped Hornblower.

A well-drilled crew, trained in months of storms under Bush's eagle eye, was ready at sheets and braces. The *Lydia* tacked about, turning like a machine, before *Natividad* could offer any counter to this unexpected attack, and Gerard fired his battery into her helpless stern. The ship's boys were cheering aimlessly in high piping trebles as they came running up from below with new charges for the guns. On the starboard side the guns were already loaded; on the port side the guns' crews were thrusting wet swabs down the bore to extinguish any residual fragments of smouldering cartridge, ramming in the charges and shot, and heaving the guns up

into firing position again. Hornblower stared across the tossing water at the *Natividad*. He could see Crespo up on her poop; the fellow actually had the insolence to wave his hand to him, airily, while in the midst of bellowing orders at his unhandy crew.

The *Lydia* had wrung the utmost advantage out of her manoeuvre; she had fired her two broadsides at close range and had only received a single shot in reply, but now she had to pay for it. By her possession of the weather gauge the *Natividad* could force close action for a space if resolutely handled. Hornblower could just see her rudder from where he stood. He saw it kick over, and next moment the two-decker had swung round and was hurtling down upon them. Gerard stood in the midst of his battery gazing with narrowed eyes into the wind at the impressive bulk close overside. His swarthy beauty was accentuated by the tenseness of the moment and the fierce concentration of his expression, but for once he was quite unconscious of his good looks.

"Cock your locks!" he ordered. "Take your aim! Fire!"

The roar of the broadside coincided exactly with that of the *Natividad*'s. The ship was enveloped in smoke, through which could be heard the rattling of splinters, the sound of cut rigging tumbling to the deck, and through it all Gerard's voice continuing with his drill — "Stop your vents!" The quicker the touch holes of the muzzle loaders were plugged after firing the less would be the wear caused by the rush of the acid gases through them.

The guns' crews strained at the tackles as the heave of the ship bade fair to send them surging back against the ship's sides. They sponged and they rammed.

"Fire as you will, boys!" shouted Gerard. He was up on the hammock-netting now, gazing through the smoke wreaths at the *Natividad* rising and swooping alongside. The next broadside crashed out raggedly, and the next more raggedly still, as the more expert gun crews got off their shots more quickly than the others; soon the sound of firing was continuous, and the *Lydia* was constantly a-tremble. At intervals through the roar of her cannon came the thunderous crash of the *Natividad*'s broadside — Crespo evidently could not trust his crew to fire independently with efficiency, and was working them to the word of command. He was doing it well, too; at intervals as the sea permitted, her lower deck ports were opening like clockwork and the big twenty-four pounders were vomiting flame and smoke.

"Hot work, this, sir," said Bush.

The iron hail was sweeping the *Lydia*'s decks. There were dead men piled round the masts, whither they had been hastily dragged so as not to encumber the guns' crews. Wounded men were being dragged along the deck and down the hatchways to where the horrors of the cockpit awaited them. As Hornblower looked he saw a powder boy flung across the deck, dissolved into a red inhuman mass as a twenty-four pounder ball hit him.

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower, but the sound was drowned in the roar of the quarterdeck carronade beside him. It was hot work indeed, too hot. This five minutes of close firing was sufficient to convince him that the *Natividad*'s guns were too well worked for the *Lydia* to have any chance against her overpowering strength broadside to broadside, despite the damage done in the first few minutes of the action. He would have to win by craft if he was to win at all.

"Hands to the braces!" he yelled, his voice, high-pitched, cutting through the din of the guns. He stared narrow-eyed at the *Natividad* with the smoke pouring from her sides, he estimated the force of the wind and the speeds of the ships. His mind was making calculations with delirious rapidity, keyed up by the excitement, as he began the new manoeuvre. Throwing the main topsail aback a trifle allowed the *Natividad* to shoot ahead without taking so much way off the *Lydia* to go about again, but even as the sheets were handed and the tacked his ship about so that the waiting starboard battery was able to fire into the *Natividad*'s stern. The *Natividad* came up into the wind in the endeavour to follow her opponent round and keep broadside to broadside with her, but the frigate was far quicker in stays than the clumsy, stumpy two-decker. Hornblower, watching his enemy with his keen gaze, tacked once more, instantly, and shot past the *Natividad*'s stern on the opposite tack while Gerard, running from gun to gun, sent every shot crashing into the shattered timbers.

"Glorious! Damme! Damn my eyes! Damn my soul! Glorious!" spluttered Bush, thumping his right fist into his left hand and leaping up and down on the quarterdeck.

Hornblower had no attention to spare for Bush nor for Bush's good opinion, although later he was to remember hearing the words and find warm comfort in them. As the ships diverged he shouted for the *Lydia* to go about again, but even as the sheets were handed and the helm put over the *Natividad* wore round to pass her to leeward. So much the better. At the cost of a single exchange of broadsides he would be able to assail that vulnerable stern again, and if the *Natividad* attempted to circle, his was the handier ship and he could rely on getting in at least two effective shots to his opponent's one. He watched the *Natividad* come foaming up; her bulwarks were riddled with shot and there was a trickle of blood from her scuppers. He caught a glimpse of Crespo on the poop — he had hoped that he might have been killed in the last two broadsides, for that would mean, almost for certain, a slackening in the attack. But her guns were run out ready, and on this, her weather side, her lower deck ports were open.

"For what we are about to receive —," said Bush, repeating the hackneyed old blasphemy quoted in every ship awaiting a broadside.

Seconds seemed as long as minutes as the two ships neared. They were passing within a dozen yards of each other. Bow overlapped bow, foremast passed foremast and then foremast passed mainmast. Rayner was looking aft, and as soon as he saw that the aftermost gun bore on the target he shouted the order to fire. The *Lydia* lifted to the recoil of the guns, ears were split with the sound of the discharge, and then, even before the gale had time to blow away the smoke, came the *Natividad's* crashing reply.

It seemed to Hornblower as if the heavens were falling round him. The wind of a shot made him reel; he found at his feet a palpitating red mass which represented half the starboard side carronade's crew, and then with a thunderous crackling the mizzen mast gave way beside him. The weather mizzen rigging entangled him and flung him down into the blood on the deck, and while he struggled to free himself he felt the *Lydia* swing round as she paid off despite the efforts of the men at the wheel.

He got to his feet, dizzy and shaken, to find ruin all round him. The mizzen mast was gone, snapped off nine feet from the deck, taking the main top gallant mast with it, and masts and yards and sails and rigging trailed alongside and astern by the imparted shrouds. With the loss of the balancing pressure of the mizzen topsail the *Lydia* had been unable to keep her course on the wind and was now drifting helplessly dead before the gale. And at that very moment he saw the *Natividad* going about to cross his stern and repay, with a crushing broadside, the several unanswered salvos to which earlier she had been forced to submit. His whole world seemed to be shattered. He gulped convulsively, with a sudden sick fear of defeat at the pit of his stomach.

Chapter XIV

But he knew, and he told himself, at the moment of his getting to his feet, that he must not delay an instant in making the *Lydia* ready for action again.

"Afterguard!" he roared — his voice sounding unnatural to himself as he spoke — "Mr Clay! Benskin! Axes here! Cut that wreckage away!"

Clay came pounding aft at the head of a rush of men with axes and cutlasses. As they were chopping at the mizzen shrouds he noticed Bush sitting up on the deck with his face in his hands — apparently a falling block had struck him down but there was no time to spare for Bush. The *Natividad* was coming down remorselessly on them; he could see exultant figures on her deck waving their hats in triumph. To his strained senses it seemed to him that even through the din on board the *Lydia* he could hear the creaking of *Natividad's* rigging and the rumble of her reloaded guns being run out. She was steering to pass as close as possible. Hornblower saw her bowsprit go by, felt her reefed fore topsail loom over him, and then her broadside crashed out as gun after gun bore on the *Lydia's* stern. The wind caught the smoke and whipped it round Hornblower, blinding him. He felt the deck leap as the shots struck home, heard a scream from Clay's party beside him, felt a splinter scream past his cheek, and then, just as annihilation seemed about to engulf him, the frightful succession of shots ended, the smoke was borne away, the *Natividad* had gone by, and he was still alive and could look round him. The slide of the aftermost carronade had been smashed, and one of Clay's men was

lying screaming on the deck with the gun across his thighs and two or three of his mates striving futilely to prise it off them.

"Stop that!" screamed Hornblower — the necessity of having to give such an order sent his voice up to the same pitch as that of the miserable wretch in his agony — "Cut that bloody wreckage away! Mr Clay, keep them at work!"

A cable's length away, over the grey topped waves the *Natividad* was slowly wearing round to return and deal a fresh blow at her helpless opponent. It was lucky that the *Natividad* was an unhandy ship, like all those stumpy fourth rates — it gave Hornblower more time between the broadsides to try and get the *Lydia* into a condition so that she could face her enemy again.

"Foretop, there! Mr Galbraith! get the headsails in."

"Aye aye, sir."

The absence of the fore-topmast-staysail and storm jib would balance to some extent the loss of the mizzen topsail and driver. He might, by juggling with the helm, get the *Lydia* to lie to the wind a trifle then, and hit back at his big opponent. But there was no hope of doing so while all this wreckage was trailing astern like a vast sea anchor. Until that was cut away she could only lie helpless, dead before the wind, suffering her enemy's blows in silence. A glance showed him that the *Natividad* had worn round now, and was heading to cross their stern again.

"Hurry up!" he screamed to the axe men. "You, there, Holroyd, Tooms, get down into the mizzen chains."

He suddenly realised how high-pitched and hysterical his voice had become. At all costs he must preserve before Clay and the men his reputation for imperturbability. He forced himself convulsively, to look casually at the *Natividad* as she came plunging down on them again, wicked with menace; he made himself grin, and shrug his shoulders, and speak in his normal voice.

"Don't mind about her, my lads. One thing at a time. Cut this wreckage away first, and we'll give the Dagoes their bellyful after."

The men hacked with renewed force at the tough tangles of cordage. Something gave way, and a new extravagant plunge on the part of the *Lydia* as a huge wave lifted her stern caused the wreckage to run out a little farther before catching again, this time on the mizzen stay, which, sweeping the deck, tumbled three men off their feet. Hornblower seized one of the fallen axes, and fell desperately on the rope as it sawed back and forth with the roll of the ship. From the tail of his eye he saw the *Natividad* looming up, but he could spare no attention for her. For the moment she represented merely a tiresome interruption to his work, not a menace to his life.

Then once more he was engulfed in the smoke and din of the *Natividad's* broadside. He felt the wind of shot round him, and heard the scream of splinters. The cries of the man under the carronade ceased abruptly, and beneath his feet he could feel the crash as the shot struck home in the *Lydia's* vitals. But he was mesmerised by the necessity of completing his task. The mizzen stay parted under his axe; he saw another rope draw up taut, and cut that as well — the pattern of the seams of the deck planking at that point caught his notice — felt another severed and flick past him, and then knew that the *Lydia* was free from the wreckage. Almost at his feet lay young Clay, sprawled upon the deck, but Clay had no head. He noted that as an interesting phenomenon, like the pattern of the deck seams.

A sudden breaking wave drenched him with spray; he swept the water from his eyes and looked about him. Most of the men who had been on the quarterdeck with him were dead, marines, seamen, officers. Simmonds had what was left of the marines lined up against the taffrail, ready to reply with musketry to the *Natividad's* twenty-four pounders. Bush was in the main top, and Hornblower suddenly realised that to him was due the cutting of the mizzen top mast stay which had finally freed the ship. At the wheel stood the two quartermasters, rigid, unmoving, gazing straight ahead; they were not the same as the men who had stood there when the action began, but the iron discipline of the Navy and its unbending routine had kept the wheel manned through the vicissitudes of the battle.

Out on the starboard quarter the *Natividad* was wearing round again. Hornblower realised with a little thrill that this time he need not submit meekly to the punishment she was determined to administer. It called for an effort to make himself work out the problem of how to work the ship round, but he forced his mind to concentrate on it, comparing the proportional leverages of the fore and main topsails, and visualising in his

mind the relative positions of the centre of the ship and the mainmast — luckily this latter was stepped a little aft.

"Man the braces, there!" he called. "Mr Bush, we'll try and bring her to the wind."

"Aye aye, sir."

He looked back at the *Natividad*, plunging and heaving towards them.

"Hard-a-starboard!" he snapped at the quartermaster. "Stand to your guns, men."

The crew of the *Natividad*, looking along their guns, suddenly saw the *Lydia's* battered stern slowly turn from them. For a fleeting half minute, while the English frigate held her way, the quartermasters straining at her wheel were able to bring the wind abeam of her as the *Natividad* swept by.

"Fire!" yelled Gerard — his voice, too, was cracking with excitement.

The *Lydia* heaved again with the recoil of the guns, and the smoke billowed over her deck, and through the smoke came the iron hail of the *Natividad's* broadside.

"Give it her again, lads!" screamed Gerard. "There goes her fore-mast! Well done, lads."

The guns' crews cheered madly, even though their two hundred voices sounded feeble against the gale. In that sudden flurry of action the enemy had been hard hit. Through the smoke Hornblower saw the *Natividad's* fore-mast shrouds suddenly slacken, tauten again, slacken once more, and then her whole foremast bowed forward; her main topmast whipped and then followed it, and the whole vanished over the side. The *Natividad* turned instantly up into the wind, while at the same time the *Lydia's* head fell off as she turned downwind despite the efforts of the men at the wheel. The gale screamed past Hornblower's ears as the strip of grey sea which divided the ships widened more and more. One last gun went off on the main deck, and then the two ships lay pitching upon the turbulent sea, each unable to harm the other.

Hornblower wiped the spray slowly from his eyes again. This battle was like some long drawn nightmare, where one situation of fantastic unreality merged into the next. He felt as if he were in a nightmare, too — he could think clearly, but only by compelling himself to do so, as though it was unnatural to him.

The gap between the ships had widened to a full half mile, and was widening further. Through his glass he could see the *Natividad's* forecastle black with men struggling with the wreck of the foremast. The ship which was first ready for action again would win. He snapped the glass shut and turned to face all the problems which he knew were awaiting his immediate solution.

Chapter XV

The captain of the *Lydia* stood on his quarterdeck while his ship, hove to under the main staysail and three-reefed main topsail, pitched and wallowed in the fantastic sea. It was raining now, with such violence that nothing could be seen a hundred yards away, and there were deluges of spray sweeping the deck, too, so that he and his clothes were as wet as if he had been swimming in the sea, but he was not aware of it. Everyone was appealing to him for orders — first lieutenant, gunner, boatswain, carpenter, surgeon, purser. The ship had to be made fit to fight again, even though there was every doubt as to whether she would even live through the storm which shrieked round her. It was the acting-surgeon who was appealing to him at the moment.

"But what am I to *do*, sir?" he said pathetically, white faced, wringing his hands. This was Laurie, the purser's steward, who had been appointed acting-surgeon when Hankey the surgeon died. He had fifty wounded down in the grim dark cockpit, maddened with pain, some with limbs torn off, and all of them begging for the assistance which he had no idea of how to give.

"What are you to *do*, sir?" mimicked Hornblower scornfully, beside himself with exasperation at this incompetence. "After two months in which to study your duties you have to ask what to do!"

Laurie only blanched a little more at this, and Hornblower had to make himself be a little helpful and put some heart in this lily-livered incompetent.

"See here, Laurie," he said, in more kindly fashion. "Nobody expects miracles of you. Do what you can. Those who are going to die you must make easy. You have my orders to reckon every man who has lost a limb as one

of those. Give them laudanum — twenty-five drops a man, or more if that won't ease them. Pretend to bandage 'em. Tell 'em they're certain to get better and draw a pension for the next fifty years. As for the others, surely your mother wit can guide you. Bandage 'em until the bleeding stops. You have rags enough to bandage the whole ship's crew. Put splints on the broken bones. Don't move any man more than is necessary. Keep every man quiet. A tot of rum to every wounded man, and promise 'em another at eight bells if they lie still. I never knew a Jack yet who wouldn't go through hell fire for a tot of rum. Get below, man, and see to it."

"Aye aye, sir."

Laurie could only think of his own responsibility and duty; he scuttled away below without a thought for the hell-turned-loose on the main deck. Here one of the twelve-pounders had come adrift, its breechings shot away by the *Natividad's* last broadside. With every roll of the ship it was rumbling back and forth across the deck, a ton and a half of insensate weight, threatening at any moment to burst through the ship's side. Galbraith, with twenty men trailing ropes, and fifty men carrying mats and hammocks, was trailing it cautiously from point to point in the hope of tying it or smothering it into helplessness. As Hornblower watched them, a fresh heave of the ship canted it round and sent it thundering in a mad charge straight at them. They parted wildly before it, and it charged through them, its trucks squealing like a forest of pigs, and brought up with a shattering crash against the mainmast.

"Now's your chance, lads! Jump to it!" yelled Hornblower.

Galbraith, running forward, risked limb and life to pass a rope's end through an eye tackle. Yet he had no sooner done it than a new movement of the ship swung the gun round and threatened to waste his effort. "Hammocks, there!" shouted Hornblower. "Pile them quick! Mr Galbraith, take a turn with that line round the mainmast. Whipple, put your rope through the breeching ring. Quick, man! Now take a turn!" Hornblower had accomplished what Galbraith had failed to do — had correlated the efforts of the men in the nick of time so that now the gun was bound and helpless. There only remained the ticklish job of manoeuvring it back to its gun port and securing it with fresh breechings. Howell the carpenter was at his elbow now, waiting until he could spare a moment's attention from this business with the gun.

"Four feet an' more in the well, sir," said Howell, knuckling his forehead. "Nearer five, an' making fast as well as I could tell. Can I have some more men for the pumps, sir?"

"Not until that gun's in place," said Hornblower, grimly. "What damage have you found?"

"Seven shot holes, sir, below water line. There's no pluggin' of 'em not with this sea runnin', sir."

"I know that," snapped Hornblower. "Where are they?"

"All of 'em for'rard, somehow, sir. One clean through the third frame timber, starboard side. Two more —"

"I'll have a sail forthered under the bottom as soon as there are enough men to spare. Your men at the pumps will have to continue pumping. Report to the first lieutenant's party with your mates now."

The first lieutenant and the boatswain were busily engaged upon the duty of erecting a jury mizzen mast. Already the boatswain had come ruefully to the captain with the information that half the spare spars secured between the gangways had been damaged by shot, but there was a main topsail yard left which would serve. But to sway up its fifty-five foot length into a vertical position was going to be a tricky business — hard enough in a smooth sea, dangerous and prolonged out here with the Pacific running mad. In harbour an old ship — a sheer hulk — would be brought alongside, and would employ the two immense spars which constituted her sheers as a crane in which to lift the new mast vertically into the ship. Here there was nothing of the sort available, and the problem of raising the spar might seem insoluble, but Bush and Harrison between them were tackling it with all the resource and energy the navy could display.

Happily there was that stump of the old mizzen mast left — its nine feet of length relieved them of the tiresome complication of steeping the new mast, which they proposed instead merely to fish to the stump. The after part of the ship was alive with working parties each intent on its own contribution to the work in hand. With tackles and rollers the spar had been eased aft until its butt was solidly against the stump of the mizzen mast. Harrison was now supervising the task of noosing shrouds to the new masthead; after that he would have to prepare the masthead to receive the cap and the trussel trees which the carpenter and his mates would now have to make.

In the mizzen chains on either side Harrison's mates were supervising the efforts of two other parties engaged upon attaching the other ends of the shrouds to the channels, where with dead eyes and lanyards the shrouds

could be kept taut as the mast rose. Bush was attending to the preparation of the jears and tackle at the mainmast which would help to accomplish a great part of the lift; the sailmaker and his mates were rousing out and adapting sails to fit the new mast, gaff, and yards. Another party of men under the gunner was engaged on the difficult task of remounting the dismantled quarterdeck carronade, while Gerard was aloft with the topmen attending to the repair of the damage done to the standing and running rigging of the remaining masts. All this was in the rain, with the wind shrieking round them; and yet the rain and the wind seemed warm to the touch, so oppressively hot was it. The half-naked seamen, slaving at their task, were running wet with sweat as well as with rainwater and spray. The ship was a nightmare of insane yet ordered activity.

A sudden flurry of rain heralded the arrival of a clear spell. Braced upon the heaving deck Hornblower set his glass to his eye; the *Natividad* was visible again, hull down now, across the tossing grey-flecked sea. She was hove-to as well, looking queerly lopsided in her partially dismantled condition. Hornblower's glass could discover no sign of any immediate replacement of the missing spars; he thought it extremely probable that there was nothing left in the ship to serve as jury masts. In that case as soon as the *Lydia* could carry enough sail aft to enable her to beat to windward he would have the *Natividad* at his mercy — as long as the sea was not running high enough to make gunnery impossible.

He glowered round the horizon; at present there was no sign of the storm abating, and it was long past noon. With the coming of night he might lose the *Natividad* altogether, and nightfall would give his enemy a further respite in which to achieve repairs.

"How much longer, Mr Harrison?" he rasped.

"Not long now, sir. Nearly ready, sir."

"You've had long enough and to spare for a simple piece of work like that. Keep the men moving, there."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower knew that the men were cursing him under their breath; he did not know they admired him as well, as men will admire a hard master despite themselves.

Now it was the cook come to report to him — the cook and his mates had been the only men in the ship who could be spared for the grisly work allotted to them.

"All ready, sir," he said.

Without a word Hornblower strode forward down the starboard side gangway, taking his prayer book from his pocket. The fourteen dead were there, shrouded in their hammocks, two to a grating, a roundshot sewn into the foot of each hammock. Hornblower blew a long blast upon his silver whistle, and activity ceased on board while he read, compromising between haste and solemnity, the office for the burial of the dead at sea.

"We therefore commit their bodies to the deep —"

The cook and his mates tilted each grating in turn, and the bodies fell with sullen splashes overside while Hornblower read the concluding words of the service. As soon as the last words were said he blew his whistle again and all the bustle and activity recommenced. He grudged those few minutes taken from the work bitterly, but he knew that any unceremonious pitching overboard of the dead would be resented by his men, who set all the store by forms and ceremonies to be expected of the uneducated.

And now there was something else to plague him. Picking her way across the maindeck below him came Lady Barbara, the little negress clinging to her skirts.

"My orders were for you to stay below, ma'am," he shouted to her. "This deck is no place for you."

Lady Barbara looked round the seething deck and then tilted her chin to answer him.

"I can see that without having it pointed out to me," she said, and then, softening her manner: "I have no intention of obstructing, Captain. I was going to shut myself in my cabin."

"Your cabin?"

Hornblower laughed. Four broadsides from the *Natividad* had blasted their way through that cabin. The idea of Lady Barbara shutting herself up there struck him as being intensely funny. He laughed again, and then again, before checking himself in hurried mistrust as an abyss of hysteria opened itself before him. He controlled himself.

"There is no cabin left for you, ma'am. I regret that the only course open to you is to go back whence you have come. There is no other place in the ship that can accommodate you at present."

Lady Barbara, looking up at him, thought of the cable tier she had just left. Pitch dark, with only room to sit hunched up on the slimy cable, rats squeaking and scampering over her legs; the ship pitching and rolling madly, and Hebe howling with fright beside her; the tremendous din of the guns, and the thunderous rumble of the gun trucks immediately over her head as the guns were run in and out; the tearing crash which had echoed through the ship when the mizzen mast fell; the ignorance of how the battle was progressing — at this very moment she was still unaware whether it had been lost or won or merely suspended: the stench of the bilge, the hunger and the thirst.

The thought of going back there appalled her. But she saw the captain's face, white with fatigue and strain under its tan, and she had noted that laugh with its hysterical pitch, abruptly cut off, and the grim effort that had been made to speak to her reasonably. The captain's coat was torn across the breast, and his white trousers were stained — with blood, she suddenly realised. She felt pity for him, then. She knew now that to speak to him of rats and stinks and baseless fears would be ridiculous.

"Very good, Captain," she said quietly, and turned to retrace her steps.

The little negress set up a howl, and was promptly shaken into silence as Lady Barbara dragged her along.

Chapter XVI

"Ready now, sir," said Bush.

The crew of the *Lydia* had worked marvellously. The guns were all secured now, and the main deck cleared of most of the traces of the fight. A sail stretched over the bottom of the ship had done much to check the inflow of water, so that now only twenty men were at work upon the pumps and the level in the well was measurably sinking. The sailmaster had his new sails ready, the boatswain his rigging, the carpenter his accessories.

Already Harrison had his men at the windlass, and the mast lay ready for hoisting.

Hornblower looked round him. All the mad effort put into the work to get it done speedily was wasted, for the gale still showed no signs of abating and with this present wind blowing it would be hopeless to try to beat over to the *Natividad*. He had driven his men hard — overdriven them — to lose no time, and now it was obvious that they might have done it all at their leisure. But the work might as well be completed now. He ran his eye over the waiting groups of men; each knew their duty, and there was an officer at each strategic point to see that orders were carried out.

"Very good, Mr Bush," he said.

"Hoist away, there!" yelled Bush to the windlass crew.

The windlass began to turn, the rope began to groan through the jears, and the mast rose, little by little, watched by every eye. The mad plunges of the ship threatened to ruin everything. There was danger of the masthead escaping from the ropes that held it; there was danger of the butt slipping away from the stump of the mizzen mast against which it rested. Everything had to be watched, every precaution taken, to see that neither of these possibilities developed. Bush watched the jears, while Gerard at the main masthead attended to the slings. Galbraith was in the mizzen chains on one side, Rayner on the other. Boatswain and carpenter stood with ropes and spars at the butt end of the mast, but it was the captain, leaning on the quarterdeck rail, whose duty it was to see that every part of the cumbrous machine did its work in its proper relation to the others. It was he whom the crew would blame for failure.

He knew it, too. He watched the dizzy heave and pitch of the ship, and the masthead wavering in the slings, and he heard the butt end grinding upon the deck as it moved uneasily between the two spars lashed as buttresses against the stump of the mizzen mast. It was an effort to think clearly, and he could only compel his mind to it by an exertion of all his will. He was sick and tired and nervous.

It was of vital importance that the hands at the shrouds and backstays only took up as much slack as was won for them by the jears, and refrained from tightening up when a roll of the ship swung the mast over on their side a trifle. Yet this was just what they persisted in doing, maddeningly, so obsessed were they with the necessity of keeping all taut to prevent the swaying mast from taking charge. Twice the grip of the slings on the masthead was imperilled in this way, and Hornblower had to key himself up to his highest pitch for several

seconds, watching the roll of the ship, so as to time precisely the next heave which would obviate the danger. His voice was hoarse with shouting.

Slowly the mast left the horizontal and swayed up towards the perpendicular. Hornblower's calculating eye, measuring stresses and reactions, saw that the crisis was now come — the moment when the jears could raise the masthead no more and the final lifting must be accomplished by the pull of the backstays aft. The next few moments were tricky ones, because the masthead would not be deprived of the positive support of the slings. The jears had to be disconnected from the windlass and their work done by the backstays. Two lengths of cable had to be passed round the sloping jury mast and the vertical stump, with gangs of men ready to tighten them, tourniquet fashion, with capstan bars as each gain was made. Yet in these first seconds the backstays were at a mechanical disadvantage and would certainly not bear the strain which would be imposed on them if the windlass were employed in an endeavour to drag the mast upright by brute force.

The motion of the ship must be utilised to help. Hornblower had to watch the motion carefully, calling to the men to wait as the ship rolled and plunged, and then, as the bow slowly emerged from the creaming sea and climbed steadily skywards, he had to set windlass men and tourniquet men and lanyard men all in action at once, and then check them all instantly as the bow began to sink again and full strain came on to the rigging. Twice he managed it successfully, and then three times — although the third time an unexpected wave lifted the *Lydia's* stern at the wrong moment and nearly wrecked everything.

Then the fourth heave settled it all. The mast was now so nearly vertical that shrouds and backstays were at a mechanical advantage, and everything could be hove taut regardless of the ship's motion. Shrouds and backstays could be set up now in normal fashion, the jury mast adequately fished to the stump — in fact all the difficult part of the work was completed. Hornblower leaned against the rail, sick with weariness, wondering dully how these ironframed men of his could find the strength to cheer as they put the finishing touches to their work.

He found Bush beside him — Bush had a rag round his head, bloodstained because of the cut in his forehead inflicted by the falling block.

"A magnificent piece of work, if I may say so, sir," he said.

Hornblower eyed him sharply, suspicious as ever of congratulation, knowing his own weakness so well. But Bush, surprisingly, seemed to mean in all sincerity what he said.

"Thank you," said Hornblower, grudgingly.

"Shall I send up the topmast and yards, sir?"

Hornblower looked round the horizon once more. The gale was blowing as madly as ever, and only a grey smudge on the distant horizon marked where the *Natividad* was battling with it. Hornblower could see that there was no chance of showing any more canvas at present, no chance of renewing the fight while the *Natividad* was still unprepared. It was a bitter pill to swallow. He could imagine what would be said in service circles when he sent in his report to the Admiralty. His statement that the weather was too bad to renew the action, after having received such a severe handling, would be received with pitying smiles and knowing wags of the head. It was a hackneyed excuse, like the uncharted rock which explained faulty navigation. Cowardice, moral or even perhaps physical, would be the unspoken comment on every side — at ten thousand miles distance no one could judge of the strength of a storm. He could divest himself of some of his responsibility by asking Bush his opinion, and requesting him to go through the formality of putting it in writing; but he turned irritably from the thought of displaying weakness before his inferior.

"No," he said, without expression. "We shall stay hove-to until the weather moderates."

There was a gleam of admiration in Bush's bloodshot eyes — Bush could well admire a captain who could make with such small debate a decision so nearly touching his professional reputation. Hornblower noticed it, but his cursed temperament forbade him to interpret it correctly.

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush, warned by the scowl on his captain's forehead not to enlarge on the subject. But his affection for his captain compelled him to open a fresh one. "If that's the case, sir, why not take a rest? You look mortally tired, sir, indeed you do. Let me send and have a berth screened off for you in the ward room." Bush found his hand twitching — he had been about to commit the enormity of patting his captain's shoulder, and restrained himself just in time.

"Fiddlesticks!" snapped Hornblower. As if a captain of a frigate could publicly admit that he was tired! And Hornblower could not trust himself to show any weakness at all — he always remembered how on his first commission his second-in-command had taken advantages of lapses on his part.

"It is rather you who need a rest," said Hornblower. "Dismiss the starboard watch, and go below and turn in. Have someone attend to that forehead of yours, first. With the enemy in sight I shall stay on deck." After that it was Polwheal who came to plague him — Hornblower wondered ineffectively whether he came of his own initiative or whether Bush sent him up.

"I've been to attend to the lady, sir," said Polwheal; Hornblower's tired mind was just beginning to grapple with the problem of what to do with Lady Barbara in a damaged ship cleared for action. "I've screened off a bit of the orlop for her, sir. The wounded's mostly quiet by now, sir. I slung a 'ammock for her — nipped into it like a bird, she did, sir. She's taken food, too, sir — what was left of that cold chicken an' a glass of wine. Not that she wanted to, sir, but I persuaded her, like."

"Very good, Polwheal," said Hornblower. It was an enormous relief to hear that one responsibility at least was lifted from his shoulders.

"An' now about you, sir," went on Polwheal. "I've got you up some dry clothes from your chest in your storeroom, sir — I'm afraid that last broadside spoilt everything in your cabin, sir. An' I've got your boat cloak, sir, all warm an' dry. Do you care to shift your clothes up here or down below, sir?"

Polwheal could take much for granted and could wheedle the rest. Hornblower had anticipated dragging his weary form in his waterlogged clothes up and down the quarterdeck all through the night, his nervous irritation not permitting him to contemplate any other course. Polwheal unearthed Lady Barbara's hammock chair from somewhere and lashed it to the rail and persuaded Hornblower to sit in it and consume a supper of biscuit and rum. Polwheal draped the boat cloak about him and airily took it for granted that he would continue to sit there, since his determination was fixed not to turn in while the enemy was still close at hand. And marvellously, as he sat there, with the spray wetting his face and the ship leaping and rolling under him, his head drooped upon his breast and he slept. It was only a broken and fitful sleep, but astonishingly restorative. He awoke every few minutes. Twice it was the sound of his own snores which roused him. At other times he woke with a start to see whether the weather was moderating; at other times still the thoughts which went running on through his mind despite his dozing called him out of his unconsciousness when they reached some fresh startling conclusion regarding what opinion England and his crew would hold of him after this battle.

Soon after midnight his sailor's instinct called him definitely into complete wakefulness. Something was happening to the weather. He scrambled stiffly to his feet. The ship was rolling more wildly than ever, but as he sniffed round him he knew that there was an improvement. He walked across to the binnacle, and Bush looked vastly out of the darkness beside him.

"Wind's shifting southerly an' moderating, sir," said Bush.

The shift of the wind was breaking up the long Pacific waves into steeper seas, as the *Lydia's* antics displayed well enough.

"Black as the Earl of Hell's riding boots, all the same, sir," grumbled Bush, peering into the darkness.

Somewhere, perhaps twenty miles from them, perhaps only two hundred yards, the *Natividad* was combating the same gale. If the moon were to break through the scurrying clouds they might be at grips with her at any moment, yet while they were talking it was so dark that they could hardly make out the loom of the main topsail from the quarterdeck.

"She was going away to leeward much faster than us when we saw her last," said Bush meditatively.

"I happened to notice that myself," snapped Hornblower.

In this present darkness, however much the gale might moderate, there was nothing they could do.

Hornblower could foresee, awaiting them, another of those long intervals of time with nothing to do and everything ready which punctuate the life of a naval officer and which were so liable to irritate him if he allowed them to. He realised that here was another opportunity to show himself as an iron-nerved man whom no tension could disturb. He yawned elaborately.

"I think I shall go to sleep again," he said, speaking with the utmost unconcern. "See that the lookouts keep awake, if you please, Mr Bush. And have me called as soon as it grows lighter."

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush, and Hornblower went back to his boat cloak and his hammock chair. He lay there for the rest of the night, unsleeping, and yet staying rigidly still so that the quarterdeck officers might think him asleep and admire the steadiness of his nerves. His mind was busy on the task of guessing what Crespo might be planning in the *Natividad*. The latter was so badly crippled that probably he would be able to make no effective repairs while at sea. It would be much to his advantage to make for the Gulf of Fonseca again. There he could step a foremast and send up a new main topmast. If the *Lydia* tried to interfere with her there she could overwhelm her by her superior weight in those confined waters; and besides, she would have the assistance of shore boats and possibly even of shore batteries. Moreover he could land his wounded and refill the gaps in his crew caused by the recent action — even landsmen would be of use in a fight to a finish. Crespo was a man of sufficient flexibility of mind not to scorn a retreat if it were to his advantage. The doubtful point was whether Crespo would dare to face el Supremo after an unsuccessful action. Hornblower lay considering the matter, balancing his estimate of Crespo's character against what he knew of el Supremo. He remembered Crespo's glibness of tongue; that man would be able to convince even el Supremo that his return to his base with the *Lydia* undefeated was all part of a cunning plan for the more certain destruction of the enemy. Certainly his best course would be to return, and probably that would be the course he would adopt, and that course implied an attempted evasion of the *Lydia*. In that case he would — Hornblower's mind began feverish calculations of the *Natividad's* present position and future course. In consequence of her bigger bulk, and her two decks, she would have made far more leeway during the night — she was far to leeward at nightfall, for that matter. With the wind shifting and moderating as it was doing at present she would soon be able to make what sail her crippled condition would permit. The wind would be nearly foul for a run to the Gulf of Fonseca. Making for the mainland would be dangerous in Crespo's opinion, for the *Lydia* could hem her in between sea and shore and compel her to fight. Most likely he would reach far out to sea, clawing southward at the same time as much as he could, and make for the Gulf of Fonseca by a long detour out of sight of land. In that case Hornblower must guess at what would be his position at dawn. He plunged into further tortuous mental calculations. Eight bells sounded; the watch was called; he heard Gerard come to take over the deck from Bush. The wind was dropping fast, although the sea showed no sign of moderating as yet. The sky as he looked up at it was perceptibly lighter — here and there he could see stars between the clouds. Crespo would certainly be able to make sail now and attempt his escape. It was time for Hornblower to come to a decision. He climbed out of the hammock chair and walked across to the wheel. "We will make sail, if you please, Mr Bush." "Aye aye, sir." Hornblower gave the course, and he knew as he gave it that it might be quite the wrong one. He might have completely miscalculated. Every yard that the *Lydia* was sailing now might be in a direction away from the *Natividad*. Crespo might at this very moment be heading past him to safety. He might never destroy the *Natividad* at all if she fortified herself in the Gulf of Fonseca. There would be some who would attribute his failure to incompetence, and there would be not a few who would call it cowardice.

Chapter XVII

From the *Lydia's* masthead, in the clear daylight of the Pacific, a ship might be seen at a distance of as much as twenty miles, perhaps. A circle of twenty miles' radius, therefore, covered the extent of sea over which she had observation. It kept Hornblower occupied, during the remaining hours of darkness, to calculate the size of the circle in which the *Natividad* would necessarily be found next morning. She might be close at hand; she might be as much as a hundred and fifty miles away. That meant that if pure chance dictated the positions of the ships at dawn, it was almost exactly fifty to one against the *Natividad* being in sight; fifty to one on the ruin of Hornblower's professional reputation and only his professional abilities to counterbalance those odds. Only if he had guessed his enemy's plans correctly would he stand justified, and his officers knew it as well as he.

Hornblower was conscious that Gerard was looking at him with interest through the darkness, and the consciousness caused him to hold himself rigid and immobile on the deck, neither walking up and down nor fidgeting, even though he could feel his heart beating faster each time he realised that dawn was approaching. The blackness turned to grey. Now the outlines of the ship could be ascertained. The main topsail could be seen clearly. So could the fore topsail. Astern of them now the faintest hint of pink began to show in the greyness of the sky. Now the bulk of the grey waves overside could be seen as well as their white edges. Overhead by now the stars were invisible. The accustomed eye could pierce the greyness for a mile about the ship. And then astern, to the eastward, as the *Lydia* lifted on a wave, a grain of gold showed over the horizon, vanished, returned, and grew. Soon it became a great slice of the sun, sucking up greedily the faint mist which hung over the sea. Then the whole disk lifted clear, and the miracle of the dawn was accomplished.

"Sail ho!" came pealing down from the masthead; Hornblower had calculated aright.

Dead ahead, and ten miles distant, she was wallowing along, her appearance oddly at contrast with the one she had presented yesterday morning. Something had been done to give her a jury rig. A stumpy topmast had been erected where her foremast had stood, raked far back in clumsy fashion; her main topmast had been replaced by a slight spar — a royal mast, presumably — and on this jury rig she carried a queer collection of jibs and foresails and spritsails all badly set — "Like old Mother Brown's washing on the line," said Bush — to enable her to keep away from the wind with main course and mizzen topsail and driver set.

At sight of the *Lydia* she put her helm over and came round until her masts were in line, heading away from the frigate.

"Making a stern chase of it," said Gerard, his glass to his eye. "He had enough yesterday, I fancy."

Hornblower heard the remark. He could understand Crespo's psychology better than that. If it were profitable to him to postpone action, and it undoubtably was, he was quite right to continue doing so, even at the eleventh hour. At sea nothing was certain. Something might prevent the *Lydia's* coming into action; a squall of wind, the accidental carrying away of a spar, an opportune descent of mist — any one of the myriad things which might happen at sea. There was still a chance that the *Natividad* might get clear away, and Crespo was exploiting that chance to the last of his ability. That was logical though unheroic, exactly as one might expect of Crespo.

It was Hornblower's duty to see that the chance did not occur. He examined the *Natividad* closely, ran his eyes over the *Lydia's* sails to see that every one was drawing, and bethought himself of his crew.

"Send the hands to breakfast," he said — every captain of a king's ship took his men into action with full bellies if possible.

He remained, pacing up and down the quarterdeck, unable to keep himself still any longer. The *Natividad* might be running away, but he knew well that she would fight hard enough when he caught her up. Those smashing twenty-four pounders which she carried on her lower deck were heavy metal against which to oppose the frail timbers of a frigate. They had wrought enough damage yesterday — he could hear the melancholy clanking of the pumps keeping down the water which leaked through the holes they had made; that clinking sound had continued without a break since yesterday. With a jury mizzen mast, and leaking like a sieve despite the sail under her bottom, with sixty-four of her attenuated crew *hors de combat*, the *Lydia* was in no condition to fight a severe battle. Defeat for her and death for him might be awaiting them across the strip of blue sea.

Polwheal suddenly appeared beside him on the quarterdeck, a tray in his hand.

"Your breakfast, sir," he said, "seeing as how we'll be in action when your usual time comes."

As he proffered the tray Hornblower suddenly realised how much he wanted that steaming cup of coffee. He took it eagerly and drank thirstily before he remembered that he must not display human weakness of appetite before his servant.

"Thank you, Polwheal," he said, sipping discreetly.

"An' 'er la'ships's compliments, sir, an' please may she stay where she is in the orlop when the action is renooed."

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower, staring at him, thrown out of his stride by this unexpected question. All through the night he had been trying to forget the problem of Lady Barbara, as a man tries to forget an aching tooth. The orlop meant that Lady Barbara would be next to the wounded, separated from them only by a canvas

screen — no place for a woman. But for that matter neither was the cable tier. The obvious truth was that there was no place for a woman in a frigate about to fight a battle.

"Put her wherever you like as long as she is not in reach of shot," he said, irritably.

"Aye aye, sir. An' 'er la'ship told me to say that she wished you the best of good fortune today, sir, an' — an' — she was confident that you would meet with the success you — you deserve, sir."

Polwheal stumbled over this long speech in a manner which revealed that he had not been quite as successful in learning it fluently as he wished.

"Thank you, Polwheal," said Hornblower, gravely. He remembered Lady Barbara's face as she looked up at him from the main deck yesterday. It was clean cut and eager — like a sword, was the absurd simile which came up in his mind.

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower angrily. He was aware that his expression had softened, and he feared lest Polwheal should have noticed it, at a moment when he knew about whom he was thinking. "Get below and see that her ladyship is comfortable."

The hands were pouring up from breakfast now; the pumps were clanking with a faster rhythm now that a fresh crew was at work upon them. The guns' crews were gathered about their guns, and the few idlers were crowded on the forecastle eagerly watching the progress of the chase.

"Do you think the wind's going to hold, sir?" asked Bush, coming on to the quarterdeck like a bird of ill omen.

"Seems to me as if the sun's swallowing it."

There was no doubting the fact that as the sun climbed higher in the sky the wind was diminishing in force. The sea was still short, steep, and rough, but the *Lydia's* motion over it was no longer light and graceful. She was pitching and jerking inelegantly deprived of the steady pressure of a good sailing wind. The sky overhead was fast becoming of a hard metallic blue.

"We're overhauling 'em fast," said Hornblower, staring fixedly at the chase so as to ignore these portents of the elements.

"Three hours and we're up to 'em," said Bush. "If the wind only holds."

It was fast growing hot. The heat which the sun was pouring down on them was intensified by its contrast with the comparative coolness of the night before. The crew had begun to seek the strips of shade under the gangways, and were lying there wearily. The steady clanking of the pumps seemed to sound louder now that the wind was losing its force. Hornblower suddenly realised that he would feel intensely weary if he permitted himself to think about it. He stood stubborn on the quarterdeck with the sun beating on his back, every few moments raising his telescope to stare at the *Natividad* while Bush fussed about the trimming of the sails as the breeze began to waver.

"Steer small, blast you," he growled at the quartermaster at the wheel as the ship's head fell away in the trough of a wave.

"I can't, sir, begging your pardon," was the reply. "There aren't enough wind."

It was true enough. The wind had died away so that the *Lydia* could not maintain the two knot speed which was sufficient to give her rudder power to act.

"We'll have to wet the sails. Mr Bush, see to it, if you please," said Hornblower.

One division of one watch was roused up to this duty. A soaking wet sail will hold air which would escape if it were dry. Whips were rove through the blocks on the yards, and sea water hoisted up and poured over the canvas. So hot was the sun and so rapid the evaporation that the buckets had to be kept continually in action. To the clanging of the pumps was now added the shrilling of the sheaves in the blocks. The *Lydia* crept, still plunging madly, over the tossing sea and under the glaring sky.

"She's boxing the compass now," said Bush with a jerk of his thumb at the distant *Natividad*. "She can't compare with this beauty. She won't find the new rig of hers any help, neither."

The *Natividad* was turning idly backwards and forwards on the waves, showing sometimes her broadside and sometimes her three masts in line, unable to steer any course in the light air prevailing. Bush looked complacently up at his new mizzen mast, a pyramid of canvas, and then across at the swaying *Natividad*, less than five miles away. The minutes crept by, their passage marked only by the monotonous noises of the ship. Hornblower stood in the scorching sunlight, fingering his telescope.

"Here comes the wind again, by God!" said Bush, suddenly. It was sufficient wind to make the ship heel a little, and to summon a faint harping from the rigging. "'Vast heaving with those buckets, there.'"

The *Lydia* crept steadily forward, heaving and plunging to the music of the water under her bows, while the *Natividad* grew perceptibly nearer.

"It will reach him quickly enough. There! What did I say?"

The *Natividad's* sails filled as the breeze came down to her. She straightened upon her course.

"'Twon't help him as much as it helps us. God, if it only holds," commented Bush.

The breeze wavered and then renewed itself. The *Natividad* was hull-up now across the water when a wave lifted her. Another hour — less than an hour — and she would be in range.

"We'll be trying long shots at her soon," said Bush.

"Mr Bush," said Hornblower, spitefully, "I can judge of the situation without the assistance of your comments, profound though they be."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Bush, hurt. He flushed angrily for a moment until he noticed the anxiety in Hornblower's tired eyes, and then stumped away to the opposite rail to forget his rage.

As if by way of comment the big main-course flapped loudly, once, like a gun. The breeze was dying away as motivelessly as it had begun. And the *Natividad* still held it; she was holding her course steadily, drawing away once more, helped by the fluky wind. Here in the tropical Pacific one ship can have a fair wind while another two miles away lies becalmed, just as the heavy sea in which they were rolling indicated that last night's gale was still blowing, over the horizon, at the farther side of the Gulf of Tehuantepec. Hornblower stirred uneasily in the blazing sun. He feared lest he should see the *Natividad* sail clean away from him; the wind had died away so much that there was no point in wetting the sails, and the *Lydia* was rolling and sagging about aimlessly now to the send of the waves. Ten minutes passed before he was reassured by the sight of the *Natividad's* similar behaviour.

There was not a breath of wind now. The *Lydia* rolled wildly, to the accompaniment of a spasmodic creaking of woodwork, flapping of sails, and clattering of blocks. Only the clangour of the pumps sounded steadily through the hot air. The *Natividad* was four miles away now — a mile and a half beyond the farthest range of any of the *Lydia's* guns.

"Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "We will tow with the boats. Have the launch and the cutter hoisted out."

Bush looked doubtful for a moment. He feared that two could play at that game. But he realised — as Hornblower had realised before him — that the *Lydia's* graceful hull would be more amenable to towing than the *Natividad's* ungainly bulk, even without counting the possibility that yesterday's action might have left her with no boat left that would swim. It was Hornblower's duty to try every course that might bring his ship into action with the enemy.

"Boats away!" roared Harrison. "Cutter's crew, launch's crew."

The pipes of his mates endorsed the orders. The hands tailed on to the tackles, and each boat in turn was swayed up into the air, and lowered outboard, the boats' crews fending off as the *Lydia* rolled in the swell. There began for the boats' crews a period of the most exhausting and exasperating labour. They would tug and strain at the oars, moving the ponderous boats over the heaving waves, until the tow ropes tightened with a jerk as the strain came upon them. Then, tug as they would, they would seem to make no progress at all, the oar blades foaming impotently through the blue water, until the *Lydia* consented to crawl forward a little and the whole operation could be repeated. The heaving waves were a hindrance to them — sometimes every man on one side of a boat would catch a simultaneous crab so that the boat would spin round and become a nuisance to the other one — and the *Lydia*, so graceful and willing when under sail, was a perfect bitch when being towed.

She yawed and she sagged, falling away in the trough on occasions so much that the launch and the cutter were dragged, with much splashing from the oars, stern first after her wavering bows, and then changing her mind and heaving forward so fast after the two ropes that the men, flinging their weight upon the oar looms in expectation of a profitless pull, were precipitated backwards with the ease of progression while in imminent danger of being run down.

They sat naked on the thwarts while the sweat ran in streams down their faces and chests, unable — unlike their comrades at the pumps — to forget their fatigues in the numbness of monotonous work when every

moment called for vigilance and attention, tugging painfully away, their agonies of thirst hardly relieved by the allowance of water doled out to them by the petty officers in the sternsheets, tugging away until even hands calloused by years of pulling and hauling cracked and blistered so that the oars were agony to touch. Hornblower knew well enough the hardship they were undergoing. He went forward and looked down at the toiling seamen, knowing perfectly well that his own body would not be able to endure that labour for more than half an hour at most. He gave orders for an hourly relief at the oars, and he did his best to cheer the men on. He felt an uneasy sympathy for them — three-quarters of them had never been sailors until this commission, and had no desire to be sailors either, but had been swept up by the all-embracing press seven months ago. Hornblower was always able (rather against his will) to do what most of his officers failed to do — he saw his crew not as topmen or hands, but as what they had been before the press caught them, stevedores, wherry men, porters.

He had waggoners and potters — he had even two draper's assistants and a printer among his crew; men snatched without notice from their families and their employment and forced into this sort of labour, on wretched food, in hideous working conditions, haunted always by the fear of the cat or of Harrison's rattan, and with the chance of death by drowning or by hostile action to seal the bargain. So imaginative an individualist as Hornblower was bound to feel sympathy with them even when he felt he ought not, especially as he (in common with a few other liberals) found himself growing more and more liberal-minded with the progress of years. But to counterbalance this weakness of his there was his restless nervous anxiety to finish off well any task he had set himself to do. With the *Natividad* in sight he could not rest until he had engaged her, and when a captain of a ship cannot rest his crew certainly cannot — aching backs or bleeding hands notwithstanding.

By careful measurement with his sextant of the subtended angles he was able to say with certainty at the end of an hour that the efforts of the boats' crews had dragged the *Lydia* a little nearer to the *Natividad*, and Bush, who had taken the same measurements, was in agreement. The sun rose higher and the *Lydia* crept inch by inch towards the enemy.

"*Natividad*'s hoisting out a boat, sir," hailed Knyvett from the foretop.

"How many oars?"

"Twelve, sir, I think. They're taking the ship in tow."

"And they're welcome," scoffed Bush. "Twelve oars won't move that old tub of a *Natividad* very far."

Hornblower glared at him and Bush retired to his own side of the quarterdeck again; he had forgotten his captain was in this unconvivial mood. Hornblower was fretting himself into a fever. He stood in the glaring sun while the heat was reflected up into his face from the deck under his feet. His shirt chafed him where he sweated. He felt caged, like a captive beast, within the limitations of practical details. The endless clanking of the pumps, the rolling of the ship, the rattle of the rigging, the noise of the oars in the rowlocks, were driving him mad, as though he could scream (or weep) at the slightest additional provocation.

At noon he changed the men at the oars and pumps, and sent the crew to dinner — he remembered bitterly that he had already made them breakfast in anticipation of immediate action. At two bells he began to wonder whether the *Natividad* might be within extreme long range, but the mere fact of wondering told him that it was not the case — he knew his own sanguine temperament too well, and he fought down the temptation to waste powder and shot. And then, as he looked for the thousandth time through his telescope, he suddenly saw a disk of white appear on the high stern of the *Natividad*. The disk spread and expanded into a thin cloud, and six seconds after its first appearance the dull thud of the shot reached his ears. The *Natividad* was evidently willing to try the range.

"*Natividad* carries two long eighteens aft on the quarterdeck," said Gerard to Bush in Hornblower's hearing.

"Heavy metal for stern chasers."

Hornblower knew it already. He would have to run the gauntlet of those two guns for an hour, possibly, before he could bring the brass nine pounder on his forecastle into action. Another puff of smoke from the *Natividad*, and this time Hornblower saw a spout of water rise from the breast of a wave half a mile ahead. But at that long range and on that tossing sea it did not mean that the *Lydia* was still half a mile beyond the *Natividad*'s reach. Hornblower heard the next shot arrive, and saw a brief fountain of water rise no more than fifty yards from the *Lydia*'s starboard quarter.

"Mr Gerard," said Hornblower. "Send for Mr Marsh and see what he can do with the long nine forward." It would cheer the men up to have a gun banging away occasionally instead of being merely shot at without making any reply. Marsh came waddling up from the darkness of the magazine, and blinked in the blinding sunshine. He shook his head doubtfully as he eyed the distance between the ships, but he had the gun cleared away, and he loaded it with his own hands, lovingly. He measured out the powder charge on the fullest scale, and he spent several seconds selecting the roundest and truest shot from the locker. He trained the gun with care, and then stood aside, lanyard in hand, watching the heave of the ship and the send of the bows, while a dozen telescopes were trained on the *Natividad* and every eye watched for the fall of the shot. Suddenly he jerked the lanyard and the cannon roared out, its report sounding flat in the heated motionless air. "Two cables' lengths astern of her!" yelled Knyvett from the fore-top. Hornblower had missed the splash — another proof, to his mind, of his own incompetence, but he concealed the fact under a mask of imperturbability.

"Try again, Mr Marsh," he said.

The *Natividad* was firing both stern chasers together now. As Hornblower spoke there came a crash forward as one of the eighteen-pounder balls struck home close above the water line. Hornblower could hear young Savage, down in the launch hurling shrill blasphemies at the men at the oars to urge them on — that shot must have passed just over his head. Marsh stroked his beard and addressed himself to the task of reloading the long nine pounder. While he was so engaged, Hornblower was deep in the calculation of the chances of battle. That long nine, although of smaller calibre, was of longer range than his shorter main deck guns, while the carronades which comprised half of the *Lydia*'s armament were useless at anything longer than close range. The *Lydia* would have to draw up close to her enemy before she could attack her with effect. There would be a long and damaging interval between the moment when the *Natividad* should be able to bring all her guns into action and the moment when the *Lydia* could hit back at her. There would be casualties, guns dismounted perhaps, serious losses. Hornblower balanced the arguments for and against continuing to try and close with the enemy while Mr Marsh was squinting along the sights of the nine pounder. Then Hornblower scowled to himself, and ceased tugging at his chin, his mind made up. He had started the action; he would go through with it to the end, cost what it might. His flexibility of mind could crystallise into sullen obstinacy.

The nine pounder went off as though to signal this decision.

"Just alongside her!" screamed Knyvett triumphantly from the foretop.

"Well done, Mr Marsh," said Hornblower, and Marsh wagged his beard complacently.

The *Natividad* was firing faster now. Three times a splintering crash told of a shot which had been aimed true. Then suddenly a thrust as if from an invisible hand made Hornblower reel on the quarterdeck, and his ears were filled with a brief rending noise. A skimming shot had ploughed a channel along the planking of the quarterdeck. A marine was sitting near the taffrail stupidly contemplating his left leg, which no longer had a foot on the end of it; another marine dropped his musket with a clatter and clapped his hands to his face, which a splinter had torn open, with the blood spouting between his fingers.

"Are you hurt, sir?" cried Bush, leaping across to Hornblower.

"No."

Hornblower turned back to stare through his glass at the *Natividad* while the wounded were being dragged away. He saw a dark dot appear alongside the *Natividad*, and lengthen and diverge. It was the boat with which they had been trying to row — perhaps they were giving up the attempt. But the boat was not being hoisted in. For a second Hornblower was puzzled. The *Natividad*'s stumpy fore mast and main mast came into view. The boat was pulling the ship laboriously round so that her whole broadside would bear. Not two, but twenty-five guns would soon be opening their fire on the *Lydia*.

Hornblower felt his breath come a little quicker, unexpectedly, so that he had to swallow in order to regulate things again. His pulse was faster, too. He made himself keep the glass to his eye until he was certain of the enemy's manoeuvre, and then walked forward leisurely to the gangway. He was compelling himself to appear lighthearted and carefree; he knew that the fools of men whom he commanded would fight more diligently for a captain like that.

"They're waiting for us now, lads," he said. "We shall have some pebbles about our ears before long. Let's show 'em that Englishmen don't care."

They cheered him for that, as he expected and hoped they would do. He looked through his glass again at the *Natividad*. She was still turning, very slowly — it was a lengthy process to turn a clumsy two-decker in a dead calm. But he could see a hint of the broad white stripes which ornamented her side.

"Ha-h'm," he said.

Forward he could hear the oars grinding away as the men in the boats laboured to drag the *Lydia* to grips with her enemy. Across the deck a little group of officers — Bush and Crystal among them — were academically discussing what percentage of hits might be expected from a Spanish broadside at a range of a mile. They were coldblooded about it in a fashion he could never hope to imitate with sincerity. He did not fear death so much — nor nearly as much — as defeat and the pitying contempt of his colleagues. The chiefest dread at the back of his mind was the fear of mutilation. An ex-naval officer stumping about on two wooden legs might be an object of condolence, might receive lip service as one of Britain's heroic defenders, but he was a figure of fun, nevertheless. Hornblower dreaded the thought of being a figure of fun. He might lose his nose or his cheek and be so mutilated that people would not be able to bear to look at him. It was a horrible thought which set him shuddering while he looked through the telescope, so horrible that he did not stop to think of the associated details, of the agonies he would have to bear down there in the dark cockpit at the mercy of Laurie's incompetence.

The *Natividad* was suddenly engulfed in smoke, and some seconds later the air and the water around the *Lydia* and the ship herself, were torn by the hurtling broadside.

"Not more than two hits," said Bush, gleefully.

"Just what I said," said Crystal. "That captain of theirs ought to go round and train every gun himself."

"How do you know he did not?" argued Bush.

As punctuation the nine pounder forward banged out its defiance. Hornblower fancied that his straining eyes saw splinters fly amidships of the *Natividad*, unlikely though it was at that distance.

"Well aimed, Mr Marsh!" he called. "You hit him squarely."

Another broadside came from the *Natividad*, and another followed it, and another after that. Time after time the *Lydia*'s decks were swept from end to end with shot. There were dead men laid out again on the deck, and the groaning wounded were dragged below.

"It is obvious to anyone of a mathematical turn of mind," said Crystal, "that those guns are all laid by different hands. The shots are too scattered for it to be otherwise."

"Nonsense!" maintained Bush sturdily. "See how long it is between broadsides. Time enough for one man to train each gun. What would they be doing in that time otherwise?"

"A Dago crew —," began Crystal, but a sudden shriek of cannon balls over his head silenced him for a moment.

"Mr Galbraith!" shouted Bush. "Have that main t'gallant stay spliced directly." Then he turned triumphantly on Crystal. "Did you notice," he asked, "how every shot from that broadside went high? How does the mathematical mind explain that?"

"They fired on the upward roll, Mr Bush. Really, Mr Bush, I think that after Trafalgar —"

Hornblower longed to order them to cease the argument which was lacerating his nerves, but he could not be such a tyrant as that.

In the still air the smoke from the *Natividad*'s firing had banked up around about her so that she showed ghostly through the cloud, her solitary mizzen topmast protruding above it into the clear air.

"Mr Bush," he asked, "at what distance do you think she is now?"

Bush gauged the distance carefully.

"Three parts of a mile, I should say, sir."

"Two-thirds, more likely, sir," said Crystal.

"Your opinion was not asked, Mr Crystal," snapped Hornblower.

At three-quarters of a mile, even at two-thirds, the *Lydia*'s carronades would be ineffective. She must continue running the gauntlet. Bush was evidently of the same opinion, to judge by his next orders.

"Time for the men at the oars to be relieved," he said, and went forward to attend it. Hornblower heard him bustling the new crews down into the boats, anxious that the pulling should be resumed before the *Lydia* had time to lose what little way she carried.

It was terribly hot under the blazing sun, even though it was now long past noon. The smell of the blood which had been spilt on the decks mingled with the smell of the hot deck seams and of the powder smoke from the nine pounder with which Marsh was still steadily bombarding the enemy. Hornblower felt sick — so sick that he began to fear lest he should disgrace himself eternally by vomiting in full view of his men. When fatigue and anxiety had weakened him thus he was far more conscious of the pitching and rolling of the ship under his feet. The men at the guns were silent now, he noticed — for long they had laughed and joked at their posts, but now they were beginning to sulk under the punishment. That was a bad sign.

"Pass the word for Sullivan and his fiddle," he ordered.

The red-haired Irish madman came aft, and knuckled his forehead, his fiddle and bow under his arm.

"Give us a tune, Sullivan," he ordered. "Hey there, men, who is there among you who dances the best hornpipe?"

There was a difference of opinion about that, apparently.

"Benskin, sir," said some voices.

"Hall, sir," said others.

"No, MacEvoy, sir."

"Then we'll have a tournament," said Hornblower. "Here, Benskin, Hall, MacEvoy. A hornpipe from each of you, and guinea for the man who does it best."

In later years it was a tale told and retold, how the *Lydia* was towed into action with hornpipes being danced on her maindeck. It was quoted as an example of Hornblower's cool courage, and only Hornblower knew how little truth there was in the attribution. It kept the men happy, which was why he did it. No one guessed how nearly he came to vomiting when a shot came in through a forward gun-port and splattered Hall with a seaman's brains without causing him to miss a step.

Then later in that dreadful afternoon there came a crash from forward, followed by a chorus of shouts and screams overside.

"Launch sunk, sir!" hailed Galbraith from the forecabin, but Hornblower was there as soon as he had uttered the words.

A round shot had dashed the launch practically into its component planks, and the men were scrambling in the water, leaping up for the bobstay or struggling to climb into the cutter, all of them who survived wild with fear of sharks.

"The Dagoes have saved us the trouble of hoisting her in," he said, loudly. "We're close enough now for them to feel our teeth."

The men who heard him cheered.

"Mr Hooker!" he called to the midshipman in the cutter. "When you have picked up those men, kindly starboard your helm. We are going to open fire."

He came aft to the quarterdeck again.

"Hard a-starboard," he growled at the quartermaster. "Mr Gerard, you may open first when your guns bear." Very slowly the *Lydia* swung round. Another broadside from the *Natividad* came crashing into her before she had completed the turn, but Hornblower actually did not notice it. The period of inaction was now over. He had brought his ship within four hundred yards of the enemy, and all his duty now was to walk the deck as an example to his men. There were no more decisions to make.

"Cock your locks!" shouted Gerard in the waist.

"Easy, Mr Hooker. Way enough!" roared Hornblower.

The *Lydia* turned inch by inch, with Gerard squinting along one of the starboard guns to judge of the moment when it would first bear.

"Take your aim!" he yelled, and stood back, timing the roll of the ship in the heavy swell. "Fire!"

The smoke billowed out amid the thunder of the discharge, and the *Lydia* heaved to the recoil of the guns.

"Give him another, lads!" shouted Hornblower through the din. Now that action was joined he found himself exalted and happy, the dreadful fears of mutilation forgotten. In thirty seconds the guns were reloaded, run out, and fired. Again and again and again, with Gerard watching the roll of the ship and giving the word.

Counting back in his mind, Hornblower reckoned five broadsides from the *Lydia*, and he could only remember two from the *Natividad* in that time. At that rate of firing the *Natividad's* superiority in numbers of guns and

weight of metal would be more than counterbalanced. At the sixth broadside a gun went off prematurely, a second before Gerard gave the word. Hornblower sprang forward to detect the guilty crew — it was easy enough from their furtive look and suspicious appearance of busyness. He shook his finger at them.

"Steady, there!" he shouted. "I'll flog the next man who fires out of turn."

It was very necessary to keep the men in hand while the range was as long as at present, because in the heat and excitement of the action the gun captains could not be trusted to judge the motion of the ship while preoccupied with loading and laying.

"Good old Horny!" piped up some unknown voice forward, and there was a burst of laughing and cheering, cut short by Gerard's next order to fire.

The smoke was banked thick about the ship already — as thick as a London fog so that from the quarterdeck it was impossible to see individuals on the forecastle, and in the unnatural darkness which it brought with it one could see the long orange flashes of the guns despite the vivid sunshine outside. Of the *Natividad* all that could be seen was her high smoke cloud and the single topmast jutting out from it. The thick smoke, trailing about the ship in greasy wreaths, made the eyes smart and irritated the lungs, and affected the skin like thundery weather until it pricked uncomfortably.

Hornblower found Bush beside him.

"*Natividad*'s feeling our fire, sir," he roared through the racket. "She's firing very wild. Look at that, sir."

Of the broadside fired only one or two shots struck home. Half a dozen plunged together into the sea astern of the *Lydia* so that the spray from the fountains which they struck up splashed round them on the quarterdeck. Hornblower nodded happily. This was his justification for closing to that range and for running the risks involved in the approach. To maintain a rapid fire, well aimed, amid the din and the smoke and the losses and the confusion of a naval battle called for discipline and practice of a sort that he knew the *Natividad*'s crew could not boast.

He looked down through the smoke at the *Lydia*'s main deck. The inexperienced eye, observing the hurry and bustle of the boys with the cartridge buckets, the mad efforts of the gun crews, the dead and the wounded, the darkness and the din, might well think it a scene of confusion, but Hornblower knew better. Everything that was being done there, every single action, was part of the scheme worked out by Hornblower seven months before when he commissioned the *Lydia*, and grained into the minds of all on board during the long and painful drills since. He could see Gerard standing by the mainmast, looking almost saintly in his ecstasy — gunnery was as much Gerard's ruling passion as women; he could see the midshipmen and other warrant officers each by his subdivision of guns, each looking to Gerard for his orders and keeping his guns working rhythmically, the loaders with their rammers, the cleaners with their sponges, the gun captains crouching over the breeches, right hands raised.

The port side battery was already depleted of most of its men; there were only two men to a gun there, standing idle yet ready to spring into action if a shift of the fight should bring their guns to bear. The remainder were on duty round the ship — replacing casualties on the starboard side, manning the pumps, whose doleful clanking continued steadily through the fearful din, resting on their oars in the cutter, hard at work aloft repairing damages. Hornblower found time to be thankful that he had been granted seven months in which to bring his crew into its present state of training and discipline.

Something — the concussion of the guns, a faint breath of air, or the send of the sea — was causing the *Lydia* to turn away a trifle from her enemy. Hornblower could see that the guns were having to be trained round farther and farther so that the rate of firing was being slowed down. He raced forward, running out along the bowsprit until he was over the cutter where Hooker and his men sat staring at the fight.

"Mr Hooker, bring her head round two points to starboard."

"Aye aye, sir."

The men bent to their oars and headed their boat towards the *Natividad*; the tow-rope tightened while another badly aimed broadside tore the water all round them into foam. Tugging and straining at the oars they would work the ship round in time. Hornblower left them and ran back to the quarterdeck. There was a white-faced ship's boy seeking him there.

"Mr Howell sent me, sir. Starboard side chain pump's knocked all to pieces."

"Yes?" Hornblower knew that Howell the ship's carpenter would not merely send a message of despair.

"He's rigging another one, sir, but it will be an hour before it works, sir. He told me to tell you the water's gaining a little, sir."

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower. The infant addressing him grew round-eyed and confidential now that the first strangeness of speaking to his captain had worn off.

"There was fourteen men all knocked into smash at the pump, sir. 'Orrible, sir."

"Very good. Run back to Mr Howell and tell him the captain is sure he will do his best to get the new pump rigged."

"Aye aye, sir."

The boy dived down to the maindeck, and Hornblower watched him running forward, dodging the hurrying individuals in the crowded space there. He had to explain himself to the marine sentry at the fore hatchway — no one could go below without being able to show that it was his duty which was calling him there.

Hornblower felt as if the message Howell had sent did not matter at all. It called for no decision on his part. All there was to do was to go on fighting, whether the ship was sinking under their feet or not. There was a comfort in being free of all responsibility in this way.

"One hour and a half already," said Bush, coming up rubbing his hands. "Glorious, sir. Glorious."

It might have been no more than ten minutes for all Hornblower could tell, but Bush had in duty bound been watching the sand glass by the binnacle.

"I've never known Dagoes stick to their guns like this before," commented Bush. "Their aim's poor, but they're firing as fast as ever. And it's my belief we've hit them hard, sir."

He tried to look through the eddying smoke, even fanning ridiculously with his hands in the attempt — a gesture which, by showing that he was not quite as calm as he appeared to be, gave Hornblower an absurd pleasure. Crystal came up as well as he spoke.

"The smoke's thinning a little, sir. It's my belief that there's a light air of wind blowing."

He held up a wetted finger.

"There is indeed, sir. A trifle of breeze over the port quarter. Ah!"

There came a stronger puff as he spoke, which rolled away the smoke in a solid mass over the starboard bow and revealed the scene as if a theatre curtain had been raised. There was the *Natividad*, looking like a wreck. Her jury foremast had gone the way of its predecessor, and her mainmast has followed it. Only her mizzen mast stood now, and she was rolling wildly in the swell with a huge tangle of rigging trailing over her disengaged side. Abreast her foremast three ports had been battered into one; the gap looked like a missing tooth.

"She's low in the water," said Bush, but on the instant a fresh broadside vomited smoke from her battered side, and this time by some chance every shot told in the *Lydia*, as the crash below well indicated. The smoke billowed round the *Natividad*, and as it cleared the watchers saw her swinging round head to the wind, helpless in the light air. The *Lydia* had felt the breeze. Hornblower could tell by the feel of her that she had steerage way again; the quartermaster at the wheel was twirling the spokes to hold her steady. He saw his chance on the instant.

"Starboard a point," he ordered. "Forward, there! Cast off the cutter."

The *Lydia* steadied across her enemy's bows and raked her with thunder and flame.

"Back the main tops'!!" ordered Hornblower.

The men were cheering again on the maindeck through the roar of the guns. Astern the red sun was dipping to the water's edge in a glory of scarlet and gold. Soon it would be night.

"She must strike soon. Christ! Why don't she strike?" Bush was saying, as at close range the broadsides tore into the helpless enemy, raking her from bow to stern. Hornblower knew better. No ship under Crespo's command and flying el Supremo's flag would strike her colours. He could see the golden star on a blue ground fluttering through the smoke.

"Pound him, lads, pound him!" shouted Gerard.

With the shortening range he could rely on his gun captains to fire independently now. Every gun's crew was loading and firing as rapidly as possible. So hot were the guns that at each discharge they leaped high in their carriages, and the dripping sponges thrust down their bores sizzled and steamed at the touch of the scorching hot metal. It was growing darker, too. The flashes of the guns could be seen again now, leaping in long orange

tongues from the gun muzzles. High above the fast fading sunset could be seen the first star, shining out brilliantly.

The *Natividad's* bowsprit was gone, splintered and broken and hanging under her forefoot, and then in the dwindling light the mizzen mast fell as well, cut through by shots which had ripped their way down the whole length of the ship.

"She must strike now, by God!" said Bush.

At Trafalgar Bush had been sent as prize master into a captured Spanish ship, and his mind was full of busy memories of what a beaten ship looked like — the dismounted guns, the dead and wounded heaped on the deck and rolling back and forth as the dismasted ship rolled on the swell, the misery, the pain, the helplessness. As if in reply to him there came a sudden flash and report from the *Natividad's* bows. Some devoted souls with tackles and hand-spikes had contrived to slew a gun round so that it would bear right forward, and were firing into the looming bulk of the *Lydia*.

"Pound him, lads, pound him!" screamed Gerard, half mad with fatigue and strain.

The *Lydia* by virtue of her top hamper was going down to leeward fast upon the rolling hulk. At every second the range was shortening. Through the darkness, when their eyes were not blinded with gun flashes, Hornblower and Bush could see figures moving about on the *Natividad's* deck. They were firing muskets now, as well. The flashes pricked the darkness and Hornblower heard a bullet thud into the rail beside him. He did not care. He was conscious now of his overmastering weariness.

The wind was fluky, coming in sudden puffs and veering unexpectedly. It was hard, especially in the darkness, to judge exactly how the two ships were nearing each other.

"The closer we are, the quicker we'll finish it," said Bush.

"Yes, but we'll run on board of her soon," said Hornblower.

He roused himself for a further effort.

"Call the hands to stand by to repel boarders," he said, and he walked across to where the two starboard side quarterdeck carronades were thundering away. So intent were their crews on their work, so hypnotised by the monotony of loading and firing, that it took him several seconds to attract their notice. Then they stood still, sweating, while Hornblower gave his orders. The two carronades were loaded with canister brought from the reserve locker beside the taffrail. They waited, crouching beside the guns, while the two ships drifted closer and closer together, the *Lydia's* main deck guns still blazing away. There were shouts and yells of defiance from the *Natividad*, and the musket flashes from her bows showed a dark mass of men crowding there waiting for the ships to come together. Yet the actual contact was unexpected, as a sudden combination of wind and sea closed the gap with a rush. The *Natividad's* bow hit the *Lydia* amidships, just forward of the mizzenmast, with a jarring crash. There was a pandemonium of yells from the *Natividad* as they swarmed forward to board, and the captains of the carronades sprang to their lanyards.

"Wait!" shouted Hornblower.

His mind was like a calculating machine, judging wind and sea, time and distance, as the *Lydia* slowly swung round. With hand spikes and the brute strength of the men he trained one carronade round and the other followed his example, while the mob on the *Natividad's* forecastle surged along the bulwarks waiting for the moment to board. The two carronades came right up against them.

"Fire!"

A thousand musket balls were vomited from the carronades straight into the packed crowd. There was a moment of silence, and then the pandemonium of shouts and cheers was replaced by a thin chorus of screams and cries — the blast of musket balls had swept the *Natividad's* forecastle clear from side to side.

For a space the two ships clung together in this position; the *Lydia* still had a dozen guns that would bear, and these pounded away with their muzzles almost touching the *Natividad's* bow. Then wind and sea parted them again, the *Lydia* to leeward now, drifting away from the rolling hulk; in the English ship every gun was in action, while from the *Natividad* came not a gun, not even a musket shot.

Hornblower fought off his weariness again.

"Cease firing," he shouted to Gerard on the main deck, and the guns fell silent.

Hornblower stared through the darkness at the vague mass of the *Natividad*, wallowing in the waves.

"Surrender!" he shouted.

"Never!" came the reply — Crespo's voice, he could have sworn to it, thin and high pitched. It added two or three words of obscene insult.

Hornblower could afford to smile at that, even through his weariness. He had fought his battle and won it.

"You have done all that brave men could do," he shouted.

"Not all, yet, Captain," wailed the voice in the darkness.

Then something caught Hornblower's eyes — a wavering glow of red about the *Natividad's* vague bows.

"Crespo, you fool!" he shouted. "Your ship's on fire! Surrender, while you can."

"Never!"

The *Lydia's* guns, hard against the *Natividad's* side, had flung their flaming wads in amongst the splintered timbers. The tinder-dry wood of the old ship had taken fire from them, and the fire was spreading fast. It was brighter already than when Hornblower had noticed it; the ship would be a mass of flames soon. Hornblower's first duty was to his own ship — when the fire should reach the powder charges on the *Natividad's* decks, or when it should attain the magazine, the ship would become a volcano of flaming fragments, imperilling the *Lydia*.

"We must haul off from her, Mr Bush," said Hornblower, speaking formally to conceal the tremor in his voice.

"Man the braces, there."

The *Lydia* swung away, close hauled, clawing her way up to windward of the flaming wreck. Bush and Hornblower gazed back at her. There were bright flames now to be seen, spouting from the shattered bows — the red glow was reflected in the heaving sea around her. And then, as they looked, they saw the flames vanish abruptly, like an extinguished candle. There was nothing to be seen at all, nothing save darkness and the faint glimmer of the wave crests. The sea had swallowed the *Natividad* before the flames could destroy her.

"Sunk, by God!" exclaimed Bush, leaning out over the rail.

Hornblower still seemed to hear that last wailing "Never!" during the seconds of silence that followed. Yet he was perhaps the first of all his ship's company to recover from the shock. He put his ship about and ran down to the scene of the *Natividad's* sinking. He sent off Hooker and the cutter to search for survivors — the cutter was the only boat left, for gig and jolly boat had been shattered by the *Natividad's* fire, and the planks of the launch were floating five miles away. They picked up a few men — two were hauled out of the water by men in the *Lydia's* chains, and the cutter found half a dozen swimmers; that was all. The *Lydia's* crew tried to be kind to them, as they stood on her deck in the lantern light with the water streaming from their ragged clothes and their lank black hair, but they were sullen and silent; there was even one who struggled for a moment, as if to continue the battle which the *Natividad* had fought so desperately.

"Never mind, we'll make topmen of them yet," said Hornblower, trying to speak lightly.

Fatigue had reached such a pitch now that he was speaking as if out of a dream, as if all these solid surroundings of his, the ship, her guns and masts and sails, Bush's burly figure, were unreal and ghostlike, and only his weariness and the ache inside his skull were existing things. He heard his voice as though he were speaking from a yard away.

"Aye aye, sir," said the boatswain.

Anything was grist that came to the Royal Navy's mill — Harrison was prepared to make seamen out of the strangest human material; he had done so all his life, for that matter.

"What course shall I set, sir?" asked Bush, as Hornblower turned back to the quarterdeck.

"Course?" said Hornblower, vaguely. "Course?"

It was terribly hard to realise that the battle was over, the *Natividad* sunk, that there was no enemy afloat within thousands of miles of sea. It was hard to realise that the *Lydia* was in acute danger, too; that the pumps, clanking away monotonously, were not quite able to keep the leaks under, that the *Lydia* still had a sail stretched under her bottom, and stood in the acutest need of a complete refit.

Hornblower came by degrees to realise that now he had to start a new chapter in the history of the *Lydia*, to make fresh plans. And there was a long line of people waiting for immediate orders, too — Bush, here, and the boatswain and the carpenter and the gunner and that fool Laurie. He had to force his tired brain to think again. He estimated the wind's force and direction, as though it were an academic exercise and not a mental

process which for twenty years had been second nature to him. He went wearily down to his cabin and found the shattered chart cases amid the indescribable wreckage, and he pored over the torn chart.

He must report his success at Panama as soon as he could; that was obvious to him now. Perhaps he could refit there, although he saw small chance of it in that inhospitable roadstead, especially with yellow fever in the town. So he must carry the shattered *Lydia* to Panama. He laid off a course for Cape Mala, by a supreme effort compelled his mind to realise that he had a fair wind, and came up again with his orders to find that the mass of people who were clamouring for his attention had miraculously vanished. Bush had chased them all away, although he never discovered it. He gave the course to Bush, and then Polwheal materialised himself at his elbow, with boat cloak and hammock chair. Hornblower had no protest left in him. He allowed himself to be wrapped in the cloak, and he fell half fainting into the chair. It was twenty-one hours since he had last sat down. Polwheal had brought food, too, but he merely ignored that. He wanted no food! all he wanted was rest.

Then for a second he was wide awake again. He had remembered Lady Barbara, battened down below with the wounded in the dark and stifling bowels of the ship. But he relaxed at once. The blasted woman could look after herself — she was quite capable of doing so. Nothing mattered now. His head sank on his breast again. The next thing to disturb him was the sound of his own snores, and that did not disturb him long. He slept and he snored through all the din which the crew made in their endeavour to get the *Lydia* ship-shape again.

Chapter XVIII

What awoke Hornblower was the sun, which lifted itself over the horizon and shone straight into his eyes. He stirred and blinked, and for a space he tried, like a child, to shield his eyes with his hands and return to sleep. He did not know where he was, and for that time he did not care. Then he began to remember the events of yesterday, and he ceased trying to sleep and instead tried to wake up. Oddly, at first he remembered the details of the fighting and could not recall the sinking of the *Natividad*. When that recollection shot into his brain he was fully awake.

He rose from his chair, stretching himself painfully, for all his joints ached with the fatigues of yesterday. Bush was standing by the wheel, his face grey and lined and strangely old in the hard light Hornblower nodded to him and received his salute in return; Bush was wearing his cocked hat over the dirty white bandage round his forehead. Hornblower would have spoken to him, but all his attention was caught up immediately in looking round the ship. There was a good breeze blowing which must have backed round during the night, for the *Lydia* could only just hold her course close hauled. She was under all plain sail; Hornblower's rapid inspection revealed to him innumerable splices both in standing and running rigging; the jury mizzenmast seemed to be standing up well to its work, but every sail that was spread seemed to have at least one shot hole in it — some of them a dozen or more. They gave the ship a little of the appearance of a tattered vagabond. The first part of today's work would be spreading a new suit of sails; new rigging could wait for a space.

It was only then, after weather and course and sail set had been noted, that Hornblower's sailor's eye came down to the decks. From forward came the monotonous clangour of the pumps; the clear white water which was gushing from them was the surest indication that the ship was making so much water that it could only just be kept in check. On the lee side gangway was a long, long row of corpses, each in its hammock.

Hornblower flinched when he saw the length of the row, and it called for all his will to count them. There were twenty-four dead men along the gangway; and fourteen had been buried yesterday. Some of these dead might be — probably were — the mortally wounded of yesterday, but thirty-eight dead seemed certainly to indicate at least seventy wounded down below. Rather more than one-third of the *Lydia*'s company were casualties, then. He wondered who they were, wondered whose distorted faces were concealed beneath those hammocks.

The dead on deck outnumbered the living. Bush seemed to have sent below every man save for a dozen men to hand and steer, which was sensible of him, seeing that every one must be worn out with yesterday's toil while one man out of every seven on board would have to be employed at the pumps until the shot holes

could be got at and plugged. The rest of the crew, at first glance, were all asleep, sprawled on the main deck under the gangways. Hardly anyone had had the strength to sling a hammock (if their hammocks had survived the battle); all the rest lay as they had dropped, lying tangled here and there, heads pillowed on each other or on more unsympathetic objects like ring bolts and the hind axletrees of the guns.

There were still evident many signs of yesterday's battle, quite apart from the sheeted corpses and the dark stains, not thoroughly swabbed, which disfigured the white planking. The decks were furrowed and grooved in all directions, with jagged splinters still standing up here and there. There were shot holes in the ship's sides with canvas roughly stretched over them. The port sills were stained black with powder; on one of them an eighteen-pounder shot stood out, half buried in the tough oak. But on the other hand an immense amount of work had been done, from laying out the dead to securing the guns and frapping the breechings. Apart from the weariness of her crew, the *Lydia* was ready to fight another battle at two minutes' notice.

Hornblower felt a prick of shame that so much should have been done while he slept lazily in his hammock chair. He forced himself to feel no illwill on that account. Although to praise Bush's work was to admit his own deficiencies he felt that he must be generous.

"Very good indeed, Mr Bush," he said, walking over to him; yet his natural shyness combined with his feeling of shame to make his speech stilted. "I am both astonished and pleased at the work you have accomplished."

"Today is Sunday, sir," said Bush, simply.

So it was. Sunday was the day of the captain's inspection, when he went round every part of the ship examining everything, to see that the first lieutenant was doing his duty in keeping the ship efficient. On Sunday the ship had to be swept and garnished, all the falls of rope flemished down, the hands fallen in by divisions in their best clothes, divine service held, the Articles of War read — Sunday was the day when the professional ability of every first lieutenant in His Britannic Majesty's Navy was tried in the balance.

Hornblower could not fight down a smile at this ingenious explanation.

"Sunday or no Sunday," he said, "you have done magnificently, Mr Bush."

"Thank you, sir."

"And I shall remember to say so in my report to the Admiralty."

"I know you'll do that, sir."

Bush's weary face was illuminated by a gleam of pleasure. A successful single ship action was usually rewarded by promotion to Commander of the first lieutenant, and for a man like Bush, with no family and no connections, it was his only hope of making that vitally important step. But a captain who was anxious to enhance his own glory could word his report so that it appeared that he had won his victory despite of, instead of by the aid of, his first lieutenant — instances were known.

"They may make much of this in England, when eventually they hear about it," said Hornblower.

"I'm certain of it, sir. It isn't every day of the week that a frigate sinks a ship of the line."

It was stretching a point to call the *Natividad* that — sixty years ago when she was built she may have been considered just fit to lie in the line, but times had changed since then. But it was a very notable feat that the *Lydia* had accomplished, all the same. It was only now that Hornblower began to appreciate how notable it was, and his spirit rose in proportion. There was another criterion which the British public was prone to apply in estimating the merit of a naval action, and the Board of Admiralty itself not infrequently used the same standard.

"What's the butcher's bill?" demanded Hornblower, brutally, voicing the thoughts of both of them — brutally because otherwise he might be thought guilty of sentiment.

"Thirty-eight killed, sir," said Bush, taking a dirty scrap of paper from his pocket. "Seventy-five wounded. Four missing. The missing are Harper, Dawson, North, and Chump the negro, sir — they were lost when the launch was sunk. Clay was killed in the first day's action —"

Hornblower nodded; he remembered Clay's headless body sprawled on the quarterdeck.

"— and John Summers, master's mate, Henry Vincent and James Clifton, boatswain's mates, killed yesterday, and Donald Scott Galbraith, third lieutenant, Lieutenant Samuel Simmonds of the Marines, Midshipman Howard Savage and four other warrant officers wounded."

"Galbraith?" said Hornblower. That piece of news prevented him from beginning to wonder what would be the reward of a casualty list of a hundred and seventeen, when frigate captains had been knighted before this for a total of eighty killed and wounded.

"Badly, sir. Both legs smashed below the knees."

Galbraith had met the fate which Hornblower had dreaded for himself. The shock recalled Hornblower to his duty.

"I shall go down and visit the wounded at once," he said, and checked himself and looked searchingly at his first lieutenant. "What about you, Bush? You don't look fit for duty."

"I am perfectly fit, sir," protested Bush. "I shall take an hour's rest when Gerard comes up to take over the deck from me."

"As you will, then."

Down below decks in the orlop it was like some canto in the Inferno. It was dark; the four oil lamps whose flickering, reddish yellow glimmer wavered from the deck beams above seemed to serve only to cast shadows. The atmosphere was stifling. To the normal stench of bilge and a ship's stores were added the stinks of sick men crowded together, of the sooty lamps, of the bitter powder smell which had drifted in yesterday and had not yet succeeded in making its way out again. It was appallingly hot; the heat and the stink hit Hornblower in the face as he entered, and within five seconds of his entry his face was as wet as if it had been dipped in water, so hot was it and so laden was the atmosphere with moisture.

As complex as the air was the noise. There were the ordinary ship noises — the creaking and groaning of timber, the vibration of the rigging transmitted downward from the chains, the sound of the sea outside, the wash of the bilge below, and the monotonous clangour of the pumps forward intensified by the ship-timbers acting as sounding boards. But all the noises acted only as accompaniment to the din in the cockpit, where seventy-five wounded men, crammed together, were groaning and sobbing and screaming, blaspheming and vomiting. Lost souls in hell could hardly have had a more hideous environment, or be suffering more.

Hornblower found Laurie, standing aimlessly in the gloom.

"Thank God you've come, sir," he said. His tone implied that he cast all responsibility, gladly, from that moment on the shoulders of his captain.

"Come round with me and make your report," snapped Hornblower. He hated this business, and yet, although he was completely omnipotent on board, he could not turn and fly as his instincts told him to do. The work had to be done, and Hornblower knew that now Laurie had proved his incompetence he himself was the best man to deal with it. He approached the last man in the row, and drew back with a start of surprise. Lady Barbara was there; the wavering light caught her classic features as she knelt beside the wounded man. She was sponging his face and his throat as he writhed on the deck.

It was a shock to Hornblower to see her engaged thus. The day was yet to come when Florence Nightingale was to make nursing a profession in which women could engage. No man of taste could bear the thought of a woman occupied with the filthy work of a hospital. Sisters of Mercy might labour there for the good of their souls; boozy old women might attend to women in labour and occasionally take a hand at sick nursing, but to look after wounded men was entirely men's work — the work of men who deserved nothing better, either, and who were ordered to it on account of their incapacity or their bad record like men ordered to clean out latrines. Hornblower's stomach revolted at the sight of Lady Barbara here in contact with dirty bodies, with blood and pus and vomit.

"Don't do that!" he said, hoarsely. "Go away from here. Go on deck."

"I have begun this work now," said Lady Barbara indifferently. "I am not going to leave it unfinished."

Her tone admitted no possibility of argument; she was apparently talking of the inevitable — much as she might say that she had caught cold and would have to bear with it until it had run its course.

"The gentleman in charge here," she went on, "knows nothing of his duties."

Lady Barbara had no belief in the nobility of nursing, to her mind it was a more degrading occupation than cooking or mending clothes (work which had only occasionally, when the exigencies of travel demanded it, engaged her capable fingers) but she had found a job which was being inefficiently done when there was no one save herself to do it better, at a time when the King's service depended in part on its being done well. She

had set herself to work with the same wholehearted attention to detail and neglect of personal comfort with which one of her brothers had governed India and another had fought the Mahrattas.

"This man," went on Lady Barbara, "has a splinter of wood under his skin here. It ought to be extracted at once."

She displayed the man's bare chest, hairy and tattooed. Under the tattooing there was a horrible black bruise, stretching from the breast bone to the right armpit, and in the muscles of the armpit was a jagged projection under the skin; when Lady Barbara laid her fingers on it the man writhed and groaned with pain. In fighting between wooden ships splinter wounds constituted a high proportion of the casualties, and the hurtling pieces of wood could never be extracted by the route by which they entered, because their shape gave them natural barbs. In this case the splinter had been deflected by the ribs so as to pass round under the skin, bruising and lacerating, to its present place in the armpit.

"Are you ready to do it now?" asked Lady Barbara of the unhappy Laurie.

"Well, madam —"

"If you will not, then I will. Don't be a fool, man."

"I will see that it is done, Lady Barbara," interposed Hornblower. He would promise anything to get this finished and done with.

"Very well, then, Captain."

Lady Barbara rose from her knees, but she showed no sign of any intention of retiring in a decent female fashion. Hornblower and Laurie looked at each other.

"Now, Laurie," said Hornblower, harshly. "Where are your instruments? Here, you, Wilcox, Hudson. Bring him a good stiff tot of rum. Now, Williams, we're going to get that splinter out of you. It is going to hurt you."

Hornblower had to struggle hard to keep his face from writhing in disgust and fear of the task before him. He spoke harshly to stop his voice from trembling; he hated the whole business. And it was a painful and bloody business, too. Although Williams tried hard to show no weakness, he writhed as the incision was made, and Wilcox and Hudson had to catch his hands and force his shoulders back. He gave a horrible cry as the long dark strip of wood was dragged out, and then fell limp, fainting, so that he uttered no protest at the prick of the needle as the edges of the wound were clumsily sewn together.

Lady Barbara's lips were firmly compressed. She watched Laurie's muddled attempts at bandaging, and then she stooped without a word and took the rags from him. The men watched her fascinated as with one hand firmly behind Williams' spine she passed the roll dexterously round his body and bound the fast-reddening waste firmly to the wound.

"He will do now," said Lady Barbara, rising.

Hornblower spent two stifling hours down there in the cockpit going the round with Laurie and Lady Barbara, but they were not nearly such agonising hours as they might have been. One of the main reasons for his feeling so unhappy regarding the care of the wounded had been his consciousness of his own incompetence. Insensibly he came to shift some of his responsibility on to Lady Barbara's shoulders; she was so obviously capable and so unintimidated that she was the person most fitted of all in the ship to be given the supervision of the wounded. When Hornblower had gone round every bed, when the five newly dead men had been dragged out, he faced her under the wavering light of the last lamp in the row.

"I don't know how I can thank you, ma'am," he said. "I am as grateful to you as any of these wounded men."

"There is no gratitude needed," said Lady Barbara, shrugging her slim shoulders, "for work which had to be done."

A good many years later her ducal brother was to say "The King's government must be carried on," in exactly the same tone. The man in the bed beside them waved a bandaged arm.

"Three cheers for her leddyship," he croaked. "Hip hip, hurrah!"

Some of the shattered invalids joined him in his cheers — a melancholy chorus, blended with the wheezing and groaning of the delirious men around them. Lady Barbara waved a deprecating hand and turned back to the captain.

"We must have air down here," she said. "Can that be arranged? I remember my brother telling me how the mortality in the hospital at Bombay declined as soon as they began to give the patients air. Perhaps those men who can be moved can be brought on deck?"

"I will arrange it, ma'am," said Hornblower.

Lady Barbara's request was strongly accented by the contrast which Hornblower noticed when he went on deck — the fresh Pacific air, despite the scorching sunshine, was like champagne after the solid stink of the orlop. He gave orders for the immediate re-establishment of the canvas ventilating shafts which had been removed when the decks were cleared for action.

"And there are certain of the wounded, Mr Rayner," he went on, "who would do better if brought up on deck. You must find Lady Barbara Wellesley and ask her which men are to be moved."

"Lady Barbara Wellesley, sir?" said Rayner, surprised and tactless, because he knew nothing of the last development.

"You heard what I said," snapped Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir," said Rayner hurriedly, and dived away below in fear lest he should say anything further to annoy his captain.

So that on board H.M.S. *Lydia* that morning divisions were held and divine service conducted a little late, after the burial of the dead, with a row of wounded swaying in hammocks on each side of the maindeck, and with the faint echo of the horrible sounds below floating up through the air shafts.

Chapter XIX

Once more the *Lydia* held her course along the Pacific coast of Central America. The grey volcanic peaks, tinged with pink, slid past her to the eastward, with the lush green of the coastal strip sometimes just visible at their feet. The sea was blue and the sky was blue; the flying-fish skimmed the surface, leaving their fleeting furrows behind them. But every minute of the day and night twenty men toiled at the pumps to keep her from sinking, and the rest of the able bodied crew worked all their waking hours at the task of refitting.

The fortnight which elapsed before she rounded Cape Mala went far to reduce her list of wounded. Some of the men were by then already convalescent — the hard physical condition which they had enjoyed, thanks to months of heavy work at sea, enabled them to make light of wounds which would have been fatal to men of soft physique. Shock and exhaustion had relieved the ship of others, and now gangrene, the grim Nemesis which awaited so many men with open wounds in those pre-antiseptic days, was relieving her of still more. Every morning there was the same ceremony at the ship's side, when two or three or six hammock-wrapped bundles were slid over into the blue Pacific.

Galbraith went that way. He had borne the shock of his wound, he had even survived the torture to which Laurie submitted him when, goaded by Lady Barbara's urgent representations, he had set to work with knife and saw upon the smashed tangle of flesh and bone which had been his legs. He had bade fair to make a good recovery, lying blanched and feeble in his cot, so that Laurie had been heard to boast of his surgical skill and of the fine stumps he had made and of the neatness with which he had tied the arteries. Then, suddenly, the fatal symptoms had shown themselves, and Galbraith had died five days later after a fortunate delirium. Hornblower and Lady Barbara drew nearer to each other during those days. Lady Barbara had fought a losing battle for Galbraith's life to the very end, had fought hard and without sparing herself, and yet seemingly without emotion as if she were merely applying herself to a job which had to be done. Hornblower would have thought this was the case if had not seen her face on the occasion when Galbraith was holding her hands and talking to her under the impression that she was his mother. The dying boy was babbling feverishly in the broad Scots into which he had lapsed as soon as delirium overcame him, clutching her hands and refusing to let her go, while she sat with him talking calmly and quietly in an effort to soothe him. So still was her voice, so calm and unmoved was her attitude, that Hornblower would have been deceived had he not seen the torment in her face.

And for Hornblower it was unexpectedly painful when Galbraith died. Hornblower always looked upon himself as a man content to make use of others, pleasingly devoid of human weaknesses. It was a surprise to him to find how hurt and sorry he was at Galbraith's death, and to find his voice trembling and tears in his eyes as he read the service, and to feel a shudder of distress at the thought of what the sharks were doing to Galbraith's

body, down there below the blue surface of the Pacific. He told himself that he was being weak, and then hastened to assure himself that he was merely annoyed at the loss of a useful subordinate, but he could not convince himself. In a fury of reaction he flung himself into the business of driving his men harder in their task of refitting the *Lydia*, and yet now when his eyes met Lady Barbara's on deck or across the dinner table, it was not with the complete lack of sympathy which had previously prevailed. There was a hint of understanding between them now.

Hornblower saw little enough of Lady Barbara. They dined together on some occasions, always with at least one other officer present, but for the most part he was busy with his professional duties and she with her care of the sick. They neither of them had the time, and he at least had not the superfluous energy to spare for the flirtations that those mild tropic nights should have brought in their train. And Hornblower, as soon as they entered the Gulf of Panama, had sufficient additional worries for the moment to drive away all possibility of a flirtation.

The Pearl Islands were just in view over the port bow, and the *Lydia*, close hauled, was heading for Panama one day's sail ahead when the guarda-costa lugger which had encountered them before hove up over the horizon to windward. At sight of the *Lydia* she altered course and came running down wind towards her, while Hornblower kept steadily on his course. He was a little elated with the prospect of making even such a fever-ridden port as badly equipped as Panama, because the strain of keeping the *Lydia* afloat was beginning to tell on him.

The lugger hove-to a couple of cables' lengths away, and a few minutes later the same smart officer in the brilliant uniform came clambering on to the *Lydia*'s deck as had boarded from her once before.

"Good morning, Captain," he said, bowing profoundly. "I trust Your Excellency is enjoying the best of health?"

"Thank you," said Hornblower.

The Spanish officer was looking curiously about him; the *Lydia* still bore many marks of her recent battle — the row of wounded in hammocks told a good part of the story. Hornblower saw that the Spaniard seemed to be on his guard, as though determined to be noncommittal at present until something unknown had revealed itself.

"I see," said the Spaniard, "that your fine ship has been recently in action. I hope that Your Excellency had good fortune in the encounter?"

"We sank the *Natividad* if that is what you mean," said Hornblower brutally.

"You sank her, Captain?"

"I did."

"She is destroyed?"

"She is."

The Spaniard's expression hardened — Hornblower was led for a moment to think that it was a bitter blow to him to hear that for a second time the Spanish ship had been beaten by an English ship of half her force.

"Then, sir," said the Spaniard, "I have a letter to give you."

He felt in his breast pocket, but with a curious gesture of hesitation — Hornblower realised later that he must have had two letters, one in one pocket and one in another, of different import, one to be delivered if the *Natividad* were destroyed and the other if she were still able to do damage. The letter which he, handed over when he was quite certain which was which was not very brief, but was worded with a terseness that implied (having regard to the ornateness of the Spanish official style) absolute rudeness, as Hornblower was quick to realise when he tore open the wrapper and read the contents.

It was a formal prohibition from the Viceroy of Peru for the *Lydia* to drop anchor in, or to enter into, any port of Spanish America, in the Viceroyalty of Peru, of the Vice-royalty of Mexico, or the Captain-Generalcy of New Granada.

Hornblower re-read the letter, and while he did so the dismal clangour of the pumps, drifting aft to his ears, made more acute the worries which instantly leaped upon him. He thought of his battered, leaking ship, his sick and wounded, his weary crew and attenuated stores, of the rounding of the Horn and the four thousand miles of Atlantic which lay between him and England. And more than that; he remembered the supplementary orders which had been given him when he left England, regarding the effort he was to make to open Spanish America to British trade and to establish an Isthmian canal.

"You are aware of the contents of this letter, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

The Spaniard was haughty, even brazen about it.

"Can you explain this most unfriendly behaviour on the part of the Viceroy?"

"I would not presume to explain my master's actions, sir."

"And yet they are in sore need of explanation. I cannot understand how any civilised man could abandon an ally who has fought his battles for him and is in need of help solely because of those battles."

"You came unasked into these seas, sir. There would have been no battle for you to fight if you had stayed in those parts of the world where your King rules. The South Sea is the property of His Most Catholic Majesty, who will tolerate no intruder upon it."

"I understand," said Hornblower.

He guessed that new orders had come out to Spanish America now that the government of Spain had heard of the presence of an English frigate in the Pacific. The retention of the American monopoly was to the Spanish mind as dear as life itself. There was no length to which the Spanish government would not go to retain it, even though it meant offending an ally while in the midst of a life and death struggle with the most powerful despot in Europe. To the Spaniards in Madrid the *Lydia's* presence in the Pacific hinted at the coming of a flood of British traders, at the drying up of the constant stream of gold and silver on which the Spanish government depended, at — worse still — the introduction of heresy into a part of the world which had been kept faithful to the Pope through three centuries. It did not matter if Spanish America were poor, misgoverned, disease ridden, nor if the rest of the world felt the pinch of being shut out at a time when the Continental System had ruined European trade.

In a clear-sighted moment Hornblower foresaw that the world could not long tolerate selfishness carried to these lengths, and that soon, amid general approval, Spanish America would throw off the Spanish yoke. Later, if neither Spain nor New Granada would cut that canal, someone else would step in and do it for them. He was minded to say so, but his innate caution restrained him. However badly he had been treated, there was nothing to be gained by causing an open breach. There was a sweeter revenge in keeping his thoughts to himself.

"Very good, sir," he said. "My compliments to your master. I will call at no port on the Spanish Main. Please convey to His Excellency my lively sense of gratitude at the courtesy with which I have been treated, and my pleasure at this further proof of the good relations between the governments of which we have the good fortune to be subjects."

The Spanish officer looked at him sharply, but Hornblower kept his face immobile while bending his spine with studied courtesy.

"And now, sir," went on Hornblower drily, "I must, much to my regret, wish you good day and a pleasant journey. I have much to attend to."

It was irksome to the Spaniard to be dismissed in this cavalier fashion, but he could take no open exception to anything Hornblower had said. He could only return Hornblower's bow and walk back to the ship's side. No sooner was he back in his boat than Hornblower turned to Bush.

"Keep the ship hove-to, if you please, Mr Bush," he said.

The *Lydia* rolled heavily, hove-to, on the swell, while her captain resumed his uninterrupted pacing of the quarterdeck, eyed furtively by those officers and men who had guessed at the bad news this latest despatch contained. Up and down, up and down, walked Hornblower, between the carronade slides on the one hand and the ring bolts on the other, while the clanking of the pumps, floating drearily on the heavy air, told him at every second how urgent it was that he should form some new decision.

First of all, however, before even the question of the condition of the ship arose, he must decide about stores and water — every ship's captain had to consider that problem first. Six weeks back he had filled his storerooms and his water barrels. But since that time he had lost a quarter of his crew. At a pinch, even allowing for a long time to refit, there was enough food to last them back to England, therefore; especially as the easterly rounding of the Horn was never as prolonged as the westerly one, and (now that all need of secrecy had disappeared) if necessary St Helena or Sierra Leone or Gibraltar would be open to him to replenish.

That was intensely satisfactory. He could devote his whole mind now to his ship. Refit he must. The *Lydia* could not hope to survive the storms of Cape Horn in her present condition, leaking like a sieve, jury rigged, and with a sail fothered under her bottom. The work could not be done at sea, and the harbours were barred to him. He must do as old buccaneers did — as Drake and Anson and Dampier had done in these very waters — find some secluded cove where he could careen his ship. It would not be easy on the mainland, for the Spaniards had settled round every navigable bay. It would have to be an island, therefore.

Those Pearl Islands on the horizon would not be suitable, for Hornblower knew them to be inhabited and to be frequently visited from Panama — besides, the lugger was still in sight and watching his movements.

Hornblower went down below and got out his charts; there was the island of Coiba which the *Lydia* had passed yesterday. His charts told him nothing of it save its position, but it was clearly the place to investigate first.

Hornblower laid off his course and then went on deck again.

"We will put the ship about, if you please, Mr Bush," he said.

Chapter XX

Inch by inch His Britannic Majesty's frigate *Lydia* crept into the bay. The cutter was out ahead, with Rayner sounding industriously, while with a dying breath of air behind her and a shred of sail set the *Lydia* felt her way between the two headlands into the tortuous channel. Those capes, one each side of the entrance, were steep rocky cliffs, and the one overlapped the other a trifle so that only an eye sharpened by necessity, and which had made the most of its recent opportunities of learning the typical rock formations of that coast could have guessed at the possibility of an expanse of water behind them.

Hornblower took his eye from the ship's course as she crawled round the corner to study the bay before him. There were mountains all round it, but on the farther side the slope down to the water was not nearly as steep, and on the water's edge there, at the foot of the dazzling green which clothed the banks all round, there was a hint of golden sand which told of the sort of bottom which he sought. It would be shelving there, without a doubt, and free from rock.

"This seems very suitable," said Hornblower to Bush.

"Aye aye, sir. Made for the job," said Bush.

"Then you may drop anchor. We shall start work at once."

It was terribly hot in that little bay in the island of Coiba. The lofty mountains all about cut off any wind that might be blowing, and at the same time reflected the heat to a focus in the bay. As the cable rasped out through the hawsehole Hornblower felt the heat descend upon him. He was wet with sweat even while he stood still on the quarterdeck; he longed for a bath and for a little leisure, to rest until the cool of the evening, but he could not allow himself any such luxury. Time was, as ever, of vital importance. He must make himself secure before the Spaniards could discover where he had hidden himself.

"Call back the cutter," he said.

On land it was even hotter than on the water. Hornblower had himself rowed to the sandy beach, sounding as he went, and examining with care the sample of the bottom which the tallow on the bottom of the lead brought up for his inspection. It was sand without a doubt — he could beach the *Lydia* safely there. He landed in the breathless jungle; there was clearly no human life here, to judge by the pathlessness of the close-packed vegetation. Tall trees and scrub, creepers and parasites, were all tangled together in their silent struggle for life. Strange birds with strange cries flitted through the twilight of the branches; Hornblower's nostrils were assailed by the reek of the decaying matter beneath his feet. With a sweating escort, musket in hand, about him, he cut his way through the forest. He emerged where the rock was too steep for vegetation ever to have gained a foothold, into the blinding sunlight at the mouth of the bay. He climbed, sweating and exhausted, up the steep ledges. The *Lydia* floated idly on the dazzling blue of the little bay. The opposite headland frowned down upon him across the mouth, and he studied its soaring ledges through his glass. Then he went back to his ship, to goad his men into frantic activity.

Before she could be beached, before the carpenter and his men could set to work upon her bottom, the *Lydia* must be lightened. And also, before she could be laid defenceless on her side, this bay must be made secure from all aggressors. Tackles were rigged, and the two-ton eighteen pounders were swayed up from the maindeck. With careful management and exact balancing the cutter could just carry one of these monsters. One at a time they were ferried to the headlands, where Rayner and Gerard were ready at work with parties preparing emplacements. Toiling gangs were set to work preparing rough paths up the faces of the cliffs, and no sooner were these complete than the men were turned on with tackles and ropes to drag the guns up the paths. Powder and shot for the guns followed them, and then food and water for the garrisons. At the end of thirty-six hours of exacting labour the *Lydia* was a hundred tons lighter, and the entrance to the bay was so defended that any vessel attempting it would have to brave the plunging fire of twenty guns.

In the meanwhile another party had been working like furies on shore above the sandy beach. Here they cleared away a section of forest, and dragged the fallen trees into a rough breast work, and into the rude fort so delimited, among the tree stumps, another party brought up beef barrels, and flour bags, and spars, and guns, and shot, and powder barrels, until the *Lydia* was a mere empty shell rolling in the tiny waves of the bay. The men stretched canvas shelters for themselves as protection against the frequent tropical showers which deluged on them, and for their officers they built rude timber huts — and one for the women as well.

In giving that order Hornblower made his sole acknowledgment of the women's existence. During this flurry of work, and under the strain of the responsibility which he bore, he had neither the time nor the surplus energy to spare for conversation with Lady Barbara. He was tired, and the steamy heat drained his energies, but his natural reaction to these conditions, having in mind the need for haste, was to flog himself into working harder and harder, obstinately and unreasonably, so that the days passed in a nightmare of fatigue, during which the minutes he passed with Lady Barbara were like the glimpses a man has of a beautiful woman during delirium.

He drove his men hard from earliest dawn as long as daylight lasted, keeping them slaving away in the crushing heat until they shook their heads over him in rueful admiration. They did not grudge him the efforts he called for; that would have been impossible for British sailors led by a man who was so little prepared to spare himself. And besides, the men displayed the constant characteristics of British crews of working the more cheerfully the more unusual the conditions. Sleeping on beds of sand instead of in their far more comfortable hammocks, working on solid earth instead of on board ship, hemmed in by dense forest instead of engirdled by a distant horizon — all this was stimulating and cheering.

The fireflies in the forest, the strange fruits which were found for them by their impressed prisoners from the *Natividad*, the very mosquitoes which plagued them, helped at the same time to keep them happy. Down the cliff face beside one of the entrance batteries there tumbled a constant stream of clear water, so that for once in their lives the men were allowed as much fresh water as they could use, and to men who for months at a time had to submit to having a sentry standing guard over their drinking water this was an inexpressible luxury.

Soon, on the sandy shore, and as far as possible from the stored powder barrels, canvas covered and sentry guarded, there were fires lit over which was melted the pitch brought from the boatswain's store. There had not been enough defaulters during those days to pick all the oakum required — some of the ship's company had to work at oakum picking while the *Lydia* was hove over and the carpenter applied himself to the task of settling her bottom to rights. The shot holes were plugged, and strained seams caulked and pitched, the missing sheets of copper were replaced by the last few sheets which the *Lydia* carried in reserve. For four days the tiny bay was filled with the sound of the caulking hammers at work, and the reek of melting pitch drifted over the still water as the smoking cauldrons were carried across to the working parties.

At the end of that time the carpenter expressed himself as satisfied, and Hornblower, anxiously going over every foot of the ship's bottom, grudgingly agreed with him. The *Lydia* was hove off, and still empty, was kedged and towed across the bay until she lay at the foot of the high cliff where one of the batteries was established — the shore was steep enough at this point to allow her to lie close in here when empty of guns and stores. At this point Lieutenant Bush had been busy setting up a projecting gallows, a hundred feet above, and vertically over, the ship's deck. Painfully, and after many trials, the *Lydia* was manoeuvred until she could be moored so that the stump of her mizzen mast stood against the plumb line which Bush dropped from the

tackles high above. Then the wedges were knocked out, the tackles set to work, and the stump was drawn out of her like a decayed tooth. That part of the work was easy compared with the next step. The seventy-five foot main yard had to be swayed up to the gallows, and then hung vertically down from them; if it had slipped it would have shot down like some monstrous arrow and would have sunk her for certain. When the yard was exactly vertical and exactly above the mizzen mast step it was lowered down, inch by inch, until its solid butt could be coaxed by anxious gangs through the maindeck and through the orlop until it came at last solidly to rest in its step upon the keelson. It only remained then to wedge it firmly in, to set up new shrouds, and the *Lydia* had once more a mizzen mast which could face the gales of the Horn.

Back at her anchorage, the *Lydia* could be ballasted once more, with her beef barrels and water barrels, her guns and her shot, save what was left in the entrance batteries. Ballasted and steady upon her keel, she could be re-rigged and her topmasts set up again. Every rope was re-rove, her standing rigging newly set up, replacements affected until she was as efficient a ship as when she had left Portsmouth newly commissioned. It was then that Hornblower could allow himself time to draw breath and relax. The captain of a ship that is no ship, but only a mere hulk helpless in a landlocked inlet, cannot feel a moment's peace. A heretic in an Inquisitor's dungeon is happy compared with him. There is the menacing land all about him, the torment of helplessness as a perpetual goad, the fear of an ignominious siege to wake him in the night. Hornblower was like a man released from a sentence of death when he trod the *Lydia*'s deck once more and allowed his eye to rove contentedly upward and ever upward through the aspiring rigging, with the clangour of the pumps which had echoed in his ears during the last fortnight's cruise completely stilled, happy in the consciousness of a staunch ship under his feet, comfortable in the knowledge that there would be no more campaigns to plan until he reached England.

At this very moment they were dismantling one of the entrance batteries, and the guns were being ferried out to the *Lydia* one by one. Already he had a broadside battery which could fire, a ship which could manoeuvre, and he could snap his fingers at every Spaniard in the Pacific. It was a glorious sensation. He turned and found Lady Barbara on the quarterdeck beside him, and he smiled at her dazzlingly.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said. "I trust you found your cabin comfortable again?"

Lady Barbara smiled back at him — in fact she almost laughed, so comical was the contrast between this greeting and the scowls she had encountered from him during the last eleven days.

"Thank you, Captain," she said. "It is marvellously comfortable. Your crew has worked wonders to have done so much in so little time."

Quite unconsciously he had reached out and taken both her hands in his, and was standing there holding them, smiling all over his face in the sunshine. Lady Barbara felt that it would only need a word from her to set him dancing.

"We shall be at sea before nightfall," he said, ecstatically.

She could not be dignified with him, any more than she could have been dignified with a baby; she knew enough of men and affairs not to resent his previous preoccupation. Truth to tell, she was a trifle fond of him because of it.

"You are a very fine sailor, sir," she said to him suddenly. "I doubt if there is another officer in the King's service who could have done all you have done on this voyage."

"I am glad you think so, ma'am," he said, but the spell was broken. He had been reminded of himself, and his cursed self-consciousness closed in upon him again. He dropped her hands, awkwardly, and there was a hint of a blush in his tanned cheeks.

"I have only done my duty," he mumbled, looking away.

"Many men can do that," said Lady Barbara, "but few can do it well. The country is your debtor — my sincerest hope is that England will acknowledge the debt."

The words started a sudden train of thought in Hornblower's mind; it was a train he had followed up often before. England would only remember that his battle with the *Natividad* had been unnecessary; that a more fortunate captain would have heard of the new alliance between Spain and England before he had handed the *Natividad* over to the rebels, and would have saved all the trouble and friction and loss which had resulted. A frigate action with a hundred casualties might be glorious, but an unnecessary action with a hundred casualties was quite inglorious. No one would stop to think that it was his careful obedience to orders and skill

in carrying them out which had been the reason of it. He would be blamed for his own merits, and life was suddenly full of bitterness again.

"Your pardon, ma'am," he said, and he turned away from her and walked forward to bawl orders at the men engaged in swaying an eighteen pounder up from the launch.

Lady Barbara shook her head at his back.

"Bless the man!" she said to herself, softly. "He was almost human for a while."

Lady Barbara was fast acquiring, in her forced loneliness, the habit of talking to herself like the sole inhabitant of a desert island. She checked herself as soon as she found herself doing so, and went below and rated Hebe soundly for some minor sin of omission in the unpacking of her wardrobe.

Chapter XXI

The rumour had gone round the crew that the *Lydia* was at last homeward bound. The men had fought and worked, first on the one side and then on the other, without understanding the trend of high politics which had decided whom they should fight and for whom they should work. That Spaniards should be first enemies, and then friends, and then almost hostile neutrals, had hardly caused one of them a single thought. They had been content to obey orders unthinkingly; but now, it seemed certain, so solidly based was the rumour, that the *Lydia* was on her way home. To the scatter-brained crew it seemed as if England was just over the horizon. They gave no thought to the five thousand stormy miles of sea that lay before them. Their heads were full of England. The pressed men thought of their wives; the volunteers thought of the women of the ports and of the joys of paying off. The sun of their rapture was not even overcast by any cloud of doubt as to the chances of their being turned over to another ship and sent off half round the world again before ever they could set foot on English soil.

They had flung themselves with a will into the labour of warping out of the bay, and not one of them looked back with regret to the refuge which alone had made their homeward voyage possible. They had chattered and played antics like a crew of monkeys when they dashed aloft to set sail, and the watch below had danced and set to partners through the warm evening while the *Lydia* bowled along with a favourable breeze over the blue Pacific. Then during the night the wind died away with its usual tropical freakishness, from a good breeze to a faint air, and from a faint air to a slow succession of fluky puffs which set the sails slatting and the rigging creaking and kept the watch continually at work at the braces trimming the sails.

Hornblower awoke in his cot in the cool hour before dawn. It was still too dark to see the tell-tale compass in the deck over his head, but he could guess from the long roll of the ship and the intermittent noises overhead that calm weather had overtaken them. It was almost time for him to start his morning walk on the quarterdeck, and he rested, blissfully free of all feeling of responsibility, until Polwheal came in to get out his clothes. He was putting on his trousers when a hail from the masthead lookout came echoing down through the scuttle.

"Sail ho! Broad on the larboard beam. It's that there lugger again, sir."

That feeling of freedom from worry vanished on the instant. Twice had that ill-omened lugger been seen in this very Gulf of Panama, and twice she had been the bearer of bad news. Hornblower wondered, with a twinge of superstition, what this third encounter would bring forth. He snatched his coat from Polwheal's hands and put it on as he dashed up the companionway.

The lugger was there, sure enough, lying becalmed some two miles away; there were half a dozen glasses trained on her — apparently Hornblower's officers shared his superstition.

"There's something about that craft's rig which gives me the horrors," grumbled Gerard.

"She's just a plain Spanish guarda-costa," said Crystal. "I've seen 'em in dozens. I remember off Havana —"

"Who hasn't seen 'em?" snapped Gerard. "I was saying — hullo! There's a boat putting off."

He glanced round and saw his captain appearing on the deck.

"Lugger's sending a boat, sir."

Hornblower did his best to make his expression one of sturdy indifference. He told himself that commanding, as he did, the fastest and most powerful ship on the Pacific coast, he need fear nothing. He was equipped and ready to sail half round the world, to fight any ship up to fifty guns. The sight of the lugger ought to cause him no uneasiness, but it did.

For long minutes they watched the boat come bobbing towards them over the swell. At first it was only a black speck showing occasionally on the crests. Then the flash of the oar blades could be seen, as they reflected the rays of the nearly level sun, and then the oars themselves, as the boat grew like some great black water beetle creeping over the surface, and at last she was within hail, and a few minutes after for the third time the young Spanish officer in his brilliant uniform mounted to the *Lydia's* deck and received Hornblower's bow.

He made no attempt to conceal his curiosity, nor the admiration which blended with it. He saw that the jury mizzen mast had disappeared and had been replaced by a new spar as trim and as efficient as any set up in a navy yard; he saw that the shot holes had been expertly patched; he noticed that the pumps were no longer at work — that in fact during the sixteen days since he last saw her the ship had been entirely refitted, and, to his certain knowledge, without any aid from the shore and in no harbour save perhaps for some deserted inlet.

"It surprises me to see you here again, sir," he said.

"To me," said Hornblower, with perfect courtesy, "it is a pleasure as well as a surprise."

"To me also it is a pleasure," said the Spaniard quickly, "but I had thought you were far on your way home by now."

"I am on my way home," said Hornblower, determined to give no cause for offence if possible, "but as you see, sir, I have not progressed far as yet. However, I have effected, as perhaps you may notice, the repairs that were necessary, and now nothing will delay me from proceeding to England with the utmost despatch — unless, sir, there is some new development which makes it advisable, for the sake of the common cause of our two countries, for me to remain longer in these waters."

Hornblower said these last words anxiously, and he was already devising in his mind excuses to free himself from the consequences of this offer if it were accepted. But the Spaniard's reply reassured him.

"Thank you, sir," he said, "but there is no need for me to take advantage of your kindness. His Most Catholic Majesty's dominions are well able to guard themselves. I am sure that His Britannic Majesty will be glad to see such a fine frigate returning to forward his cause."

The two captains bowed to each other profoundly at this exchange of compliments before the Spaniard resumed his speech.

"I was thinking, sir," he went on, "that perhaps if you would do me the great honour of visiting my ship for a moment, taking advantage of this prevailing calm, I should be able to show Your Excellency something which would be of interest and which would demonstrate our ability to continue without your kind assistance."

"What is it?" asked Hornblower, suspiciously.

The Spaniard smiled.

"It would give me pleasure if I could show it to you as a surprise. Please, sir, would you not oblige me?"

Hornblower looked automatically round the horizon. He studied the Spaniard's face. The Spaniard was no fool; and only a fool could meditate treachery when almost within range of a frigate which could sink his ship in a single broadside. And mad though most Spaniards were, they were not mad enough to offer violence to a British captain. Besides, he was pleased with the thought of how his officers would receive his announcement that he was going on board the lugger.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "It will give me great pleasure to accompany you."

The Spaniard bowed again, and Hornblower turned to his first lieutenant.

"I am going to visit the lugger, Mr Bush," he said. "I shall only be gone a short time. Call away the cutter and send her after me to bring me back."

Hornblower was delighted to see how Bush struggled to conceal his consternation at the news.

"Aye aye, sir," he said. He opened his mouth and shut it again; he wanted to expostulate and yet did not dare, and finally repeated feebly "Aye aye, sir."

In the small boat rowing back to the lugger the Spaniard was the mirror of courtesy. He chatted politely about weather conditions. He mentioned the latest news of the war in Spain — it was quite undoubted that a French army had surrendered to the Spaniards in Andalusia, and that Spanish and British armies were assembling for

a march into France. He described the ravages of yellow fever on the mainland. He contrived, all the same, to allow no single hint to drop as to the nature of the surprise which he was going to show Hornblower in the lugger.

The two captains were received with Spanish ceremony as they swung themselves up into the lugger's waist. There was a great deal of bustle and parade, and two bugles and two drums sounded a resounding march horribly out of tune.

"All in this ship is yours, sir," said the Spaniard with Castilian courtesy, and seeing no incongruity in his next sentence. "Your Excellency will take some refreshment? A cup of chocolate?"

"Thank you," said Hornblower. He was not going to imperil his dignity by asking what was the nature of the surprise in store for him. He could wait — especially as he could see the launch already half-way towards the lugger.

The Spaniard was in no hurry to make the revelation. He was evidently savouring in anticipation the Englishman's certain astonishment. He pointed out certain peculiarities in the lugger's rig; he called up his officers to present to Hornblower; he discussed the merits of his crew — nearly all native Indians as on board the *Natividad*. In the end Hornblower won; the Spaniard could wait no longer to be asked.

"Would you please to come this way, sir?" he said. He led the way on to the foredeck, and there, chained by the waist to a ring bolt, with irons on his wrist and ankles, was el Supremo.

He was in rags — half naked in fact, and his beard and hair were matted and tangled, and his own filth lay on the deck about him.

"I think," said the Spanish captain, "that you have already had the pleasure, sir, of meeting His Excellency Don Julian Maria de Jesus de Alvarado y Moctezuma, who calls himself the Almighty?"

El Supremo showed no signs of being disconcerted by the gibe.

"Captain Hornblower has indeed been presented to me already," he said loftily. "He has worked for me long and devotedly. I trust you are enjoying the best of health, Captain?"

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower.

Despite his rags, and his filth, and his chains, el Supremo bore himself with the same elaborate dignity as Hornblower remembered so well those many weeks ago.

"I too," he said, "am as well as the world could desire. It is a source of continual satisfaction to me to see my affairs progressing so well."

A negro servant appeared on the deck at that moment with a tray of chocolate; another followed him with a couple of chairs. Hornblower, at the invitation of his host, sat down. He was glad to do so, as his knees seemed suddenly weak under him, but he had no desire at all for his chocolate. The Spanish captain drank noisily, and el Supremo eyed him as he did so. There came a gleam of appetite in his face. His lips moistened and smacked softly together, his eyes brightened, his hand came out, and then next moment he was calm and indifferent again.

"I trust that the chocolate is to your liking, sirs," he said. "I ordered it specially for you. My own appetite for chocolate has long since disappeared."

"That is just as well," said the Spanish captain. He laughed loudly and drank again, smacking his lips.

El Supremo ignored him, and turned to Hornblower.

"You see I wear these chains," he said. "It is a strange whim on the part of myself and my servants that I should do so. I hope you agree with me that they set off my figure quite admirably?"

"Y-yes, sir," stammered Hornblower.

"We are on our way to Panama, where I shall mount the throne of the world. They talk of hanging; these fellows here say that there is a gallows awaiting us on the bastion of the Citadel. That will be the framework of my golden throne. Golden, it will be, with diamond stars and a great turquoise moon. It will be from there that I shall issue my next decrees to the world."

The Spanish captain guffawed again, but el Supremo still stood in quiet dignity, hugging his chains, with the sun blazing down on his tangled head.

"He will not last long in this mood," said the Spanish captain to Hornblower behind his hand. "I can see signs of the change coming. It gives me great felicity that you have had the opportunity of seeing him in both his moods."

"The sun grows in his splendour every day," said el Supremo. "He is magnificent and terrible, as I am. He can kill — kill — kill, as he killed the men I exposed to him — when was it? And Moctezuma is dead, and all his line save me, in the hundreds of years ago. I alone remain. And Hernandez is dead, but it was not the sun that killed him. They hanged Hernandez even while the blood dripped from his wounds. They hanged him in my city of San Salvador, and as they hanged him he still called upon the name of el Supremo. They hanged the men and they hanged the women, in long rows at San Salvador. Only el Supremo is left, to govern from his golden throne. His throne! His throne!"

El Supremo was staring about him now. There was a hint of bewildered realisation in his face as he jangled his chains. He peered at them stupidly.

"Chains! These are chains!"

He was bawling and shouting. He laughed madly, and then he wept and he cursed, flinging himself about on the deck, biting at his chains. His words were no longer articulate as he slobbered and writhed.

"It is interesting, is it not?" said the Spanish captain. "He will struggle and shout sometimes for twenty-four hours without a stop."

"Bah!" said Hornblower, and his chair fell with a clatter to the deck as he got to his feet. He was on the verge of vomiting. The Spaniard saw his white face and trembling lips, and was faintly amused, and made no attempt to conceal it.

But Hornblower could give no vent to the flood of protest which was welling up within him. His cautious mind told him that a madman in a ship as small as the lugger must of necessity be chained to the deck, and his conscience reminded him uneasily of the torments he had seen el Supremo inflict without expostulation. This Spanish way of making a show out of insanity and greatness was repulsive enough, but could be paralleled often enough in English history. One of the greatest writers of the English language, and a dignitary of the Church to boot, had once been shown in his dotage for a fee. There was only one line of argument which he could adopt.

"You are going to hang him, mad as he is?" he asked. "With no chance of making his peace with God?"

The Spaniard shrugged.

"Mad or sane, rebels must hang. Your Excellency must know that as well as I do."

Hornblower did know it. He was left without any argument at all, and was reduced to stammering inarticulation, even while he boiled with contempt for himself on that account. All that was left for him to do, having lost all his dignity in his own eyes, was to try and retain some few shreds of it in the eyes of his audience. He braced himself up, conscious of the hollowness of the fraud.

"I must thank you very much, sir," he said, "for having given me the opportunity of witnessing a most interesting spectacle. And now, repeating my thanks, I fear that I must regretfully take my departure. There seems to be a breath of wind blowing."

He went down the side of the lugger as stiffly as he might, and took his seat in the sternsheets of the launch. He had to brace himself again to give the word to cast off, and then he sat silent and gloomy as he was rowed back to the *Lydia*. Bush and Gerard and Lady Barbara watched him as he came on deck. It was as if there was death in his face. He looked round him, unseeing and unhearing, and then hurried below to hide his misery. He even sobbed, with his face in his cot, for a second, before he was able to take hold of himself and curse himself for a weak fool. But it was days before he lost that deathly look, and during that time he kept himself solitary in his cabin, unable to bring himself to join the merry parties on the quarterdeck whose gay chatter drifted down to him through the skylight. To him it was a further proof of his weakness and folly that he should allow himself to be so upset by the sight of a criminal madman going to meet the fate he richly deserved.

Chapter XXII

Lady Barbara and Lieutenant Bush were sitting talking in the warm moonlight night beside the taffrail. It was the first time that Bush had happened to share a *tête-à-tête* with her, and he had only drifted into it by chance — presumably if he had foreseen it he would have avoided it, but now that he had drifted into conversation

with her he was enjoying himself to the exclusion of any disquietude. He was sitting on a pile of the oakum-filled cushions which Harrison had had made for Lady Barbara, and he nursed his knees while Lady Barbara leaned back in her hammock chair. The *Lydia* was rising and falling softly to the gentle music of the waves and the harping of the rigging in the breeze. The white sails glimmered in the brilliant moon; overhead the stars shone with strange brightness. But Bush was not talking of himself, as any sensible man would do under a tropic moon with a young woman beside him.

"Aye, ma'am," he was saying. "He's like Nelson. He's nervous, just as Nelson was, and for the same reason. He's thinking all the time — you'd be surprised, ma'am, to know how much he thinks about."

"I don't think it would surprise me," said Lady Barbara.

"That's because you think, too, ma'am. It's us stupid ones who'd be surprised, I meant to say. He has more brains than all the rest of us in the ship put together, excepting you, ma'am. He's mighty clever, I do assure you."

"I can well believe it."

"And he's the best seaman of us all, and as for navigation — well, Crystal's a fool compared with him, ma'am."

"Yes?"

"Of course, he's short with me sometimes, the same as he is with everyone else, but bless you, ma'am, that's only to be expected. I know how much he has to worry him, and he's not strong, the same as Nelson wasn't strong. I am concerned about him sometimes, ma'am."

"You are fond of him."

"Fond, ma'am?" Bush's sturdy English mind grappled with the word and its sentimental implications, and he laughed a trifle selfconsciously. "If you say so I suppose I must be. I hadn't ever thought of being fond of him before. I like him, ma'am, indeed I do."

"That is what I meant."

"The men worship him, ma'am. They would do anything for him. Look how much he has done this commission, and the lash not in use once in a week, ma'am. That is why he is like Nelson. They love him not for anything he does or says, but for what he is."

"He's handsome, in a way," said Barbara — she was woman enough to give that matter consideration.

"I suppose he is, ma'am, now you come to mention it. But it wouldn't matter if he were as ugly as sin as far as we was concerned."

"Of course not."

"But he's shy, ma'am. He never can guess how clever he is. It's that which always surprises me about him. You'd hardly believe it, ma'am, but he has no more faith in himself than — than I have in myself, ma'am, to put it that way. Less, ma'am, if anything."

"How strange!" said Lady Barbara. She was accustomed to the sturdy self-reliance of her brothers, unloved and unlovable leaders of men, but her insight made her comment only one of politeness — it was not really strange to her.

"Look, ma'am," said Bush, suddenly, dropping his voice.

Hornblower had come up on deck. They could see his face, white in the moonlight, as he looked round to assure himself that all was well with his ship, and they could read in it the torment which was obsessing him. He looked like a lost soul during the few seconds he was on deck.

"I wish to God I knew," said Bush as Hornblower retreated again to the solitude of his cabin, "what those devils did to him or said to him when he went on board the lugger. Hooker who was in the cutter said he heard someone on board howling like a madman. The torturing devils! It was some of their beastliness, I suppose. You could see how it has upset him, ma'am."

"Yes," said Lady Barbara softly.

"I should be grateful if you could try to take him out of himself a little, ma'am, begging your pardon. He is in need of distraction, I suspicion. Perhaps you could — if you'll forgive me, ma'am."

"I'll try," said Lady Barbara, "but I don't think I shall succeed where you have failed. Captain Hornblower has never taken a great deal of notice of me, Mr Bush."

Yet fortunately the formal invitation to dine with Lady Barbara, which Hebe conveyed to Polwheal and he to his captain, arrived at a moment when Hornblower was just trying to emerge from the black fit which had

engulfed him. He read the words as carefully as Lady Barbara had written them — and she had devoted much care to the composition of the note. Hornblower read Lady Barbara's pretty little apology for breaking in upon him at a time when he was obviously engrossed in his work, and he went on to read how Lady Barbara had been informed by Mr Bush that the *Lydia* was about to cross the Equator, and that she thought such an occasion merited some mild celebration. If Captain Hornblower, therefore, would give Lady Barbara the pleasure of his company at dinner and would indicate to her which of his officers he considered should be invited at the same time, Lady Barbara would be delighted. Hornblower wrote back to say that Captain Hornblower had much pleasure in accepting Lady Barbara's kind invitation to dinner, and hoped that Lady Barbara would invite whomever she pleased in addition.

Yet even in the pleasure of returning to society there was some alloy. Hornblower had always been a poor man, and at the time when he commissioned the *Lydia* he had been at his wits' end about where to turn for money in the need for leaving Maria comfortably provided for. In consequence he had not outfitted himself satisfactorily, and now, all these months later, his clothes were in the last stages of decay. The coats were all patched and darned; the epaulettes betrayed in their brassy sheen the fact that they had begun life merely coated with bullion; the cocked hats were all wrecks; he had neither breeches nor stockings fit to be seen; his once white scarves were all coarsened now, and could never be mistaken again for silk. Only the sword 'of fifty guineas' value' retained its good appearance, and he could not wear that at a dinner party.

He was conscious that his white duck trousers, made on board the *Lydia*, had none of the fashionable appearance to which Lady Barbara was accustomed. He looked shabby and he felt shabby, and as he peered at himself in his little mirror he was certain that Lady Barbara would sneer at him. There were grey hairs in his brown curls, too, and then, to his horror, as he straightened his parting, he caught a glimpse of pink scalp — his baldness had increased beyond all measure of late. He eyed himself with complete disgust, and yet he felt that he would gladly give a limb or his remaining hair in exchange for a ribbon and star with which to dazzle Lady Barbara; yet even that would be of no avail, for Lady Barbara had lived all her life in an atmosphere of Garters and Thistles, orders which he could never hope to wear.

He was on the verge of sending a message to Lady Barbara to say that he had changed his mind and would not dine with her that evening, until he thought that if he did so, after all these preparations, Polwheal would guess that it was the result of his realisation of his shabbiness and would laugh at him (and his shabbiness) in consequence. He went into dinner and had his revenge upon the world by sitting silent and preoccupied at the head of the table, blighting with his gloomy presence all attempts at conversation, so that the function began as a frigid failure. It was a poor sort of revenge, but there was a slight gratification to be found in observing Lady Barbara looking down the table at him in concern. In the end he was deprived even of that, for Lady Barbara suddenly smiled and began talking lightly and captivately, and led Bush into describing his experiences at Trafalgar — a tale she had heard, to Hornblower's certain knowledge, twice at least already. The conversation became general, and then animated, for Gerard could not bear to leave all the talking to Bush, and he had to break in with the story of his encounter with an Algerine corsair off Cape Spartel in his old slaving days. It was more than Hornblower's flesh and blood could stand, to stay silent with everyone talking in this fashion. Against his will he found himself entering into the conversation, and an artless question from Lady Barbara about Sir Edward Pellew inveigled him still further in, for Hornblower had been both midshipman and lieutenant in Pellew's ship, and was proud of it. Not until the end of dinner was he able to steady himself, and decline, after the drinking of the King's health, Lady Barbara's invitation to a rubber of whist. That at least, he thought, would make an impression on her — it certainly did upon his officers, for he saw Bush and Gerard exchange startled glances on hearing their captain refuse to play whist. Back in his cabin again he listened through the bulkhead to the uproarious game of *vingt-et-un* which Lady Barbara had suggested instead. He almost wished he was playing, too, even though in his opinion *vingt-et-un* was a game for the feeble-minded. The dinner had served its purpose, however, in making it possible to meet Lady Barbara's eye again on deck. He could converse with her, too, discussing with her the condition of the few wounded who remained upon the sick list, and after a few morning encounters it was easy to fall into conversation with her during the breathless afternoons and the magic tropical nights as the *Lydia* held her course over the calm Pacific. He had grown hardened again to his shabby coats and his shapeless trousers; he was forgetting the resentful plans he had once turned over in his mind to confine Lady Barbara to her cabin; and mercifully, his memory was no

longer being so acutely troubled by the pictures of el Supremo chained to the deck, of Galbraith dying, and of poor little Clay's body sprawled headless on the bloody planks — and when those memories lapsed he could no longer accuse himself of being a coward for being worried by them.

Those were happy days indeed. The routine of the *Lydia* progressed like clockwork. Almost every hour of every day there was enough wind to give her steerage way, and sometimes it blew just hard enough to relieve the monotony. There were no storms during that endless succession of golden days, and the mind could contemplate its endlessness with tranquillity, for 50 degrees South Latitude seemed impossibly far away; they could enjoy the blissfulness of eternity, disregarding the constant warning conveyed to them as every noontide showed the sun lower in the sky and every midnight showed the South Cross higher.

They could be friends during those heavenly nights when the ship's wake showed as a long trail of fire on the faintly luminous water. They learned to talk together, endlessly. She could chatter about the frivolities of the Vice-Regal court at Dublin, and of the intrigues which could enmesh a Governor-General of India; of penniless French émigrés putting purse-proud northern iron-masters in their places; of Lord Byron's extravagancies and of the Royal Dukes' stupidities; and Hornblower learned to listen with a twinge of envy.

He could tell, in return, of months spent on blockade, combating storms off the ironbound Biscay coast, of how Pellew took his frigates into the very surf to sing the *Droits-de-l'homme* with two thousand men on board, of hardship and cruelty and privation — a monotonous toilsome life as fantastic to her as hers appeared to him. He could even tell her, as his self-consciousness dwindled, of the ambitions which he knew would seem to her as trivial as those of a child yearning for a hobby horse; of the two thousand pounds in prize money which he had decided would be all that he would require to eke out his half-pay, the few acres and the cottage and the shelves and shelves of books.

And yet she heard without a smile, with even a trace of envy in her calm face as the moon shone down on them; for her own ambitions were far more vague and far less likely to be realised. She hardly knew what it was that she wanted, and she knew that whatever it was, she could only hope to attain it by ensnaring a husband. That an earl's daughter could envy a penniless frigate captain moved Hornblower inexpressibly, as he watched her face in the moonlight; he was glad even while he was unhappy that Lady Barbara should have to envy anything of anyone.

They could talk of books and of poetry, and Hornblower championed the cause of the classical school who looked back to the days of Queen Anne against the barbarous leaders of the revolt who seemed to delight in setting every established rule at defiance. She heard him with patience, even with approval, as he talked of Gibbon (the object of his sincerest admiration) and Johnson and Swift, when he quoted from Pope and Gray, but she could approve of the barbarians as well. There was a madman called Wordsworth of whose revolutionary opinions in literature Hornblower had heard with vague horror; Lady Barbara thought there was something to be said for him. She turned the tables neatly on Hornblower by claiming Gray as a precursor of the same school; she quoted Campbell and that Gothic innovator, Scott, and she won Hornblower's grudging approval of an ungainly poem called 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' although he maintained sturdily, in the last ditch, that its only merit lay in its content, and that it would have been infinitely better had Pope dealt with the theme in heroic couplets — especially if Pope had been assisted by someone who knew more about navigation and seamanship than did this Coleridge fellow.

Lady Barbara wondered vaguely, sometimes, whether it was not strange that a naval officer should be so earnest a student of literature, but she was learning rapidly. Sea captains were not all of a class, as the uninitiated might carelessly decide. From Bush and Gerard and Crystal as well as from Hornblower she had heard of captains who write Greek elegiacs, of captains who cluttered up their cabins with marbles looted from the Greek islands, captains who classified sea-urchins and corresponded with Cuvier — these on the one hand, just as there were captains who delighted in seeing human back lacerated with the cat-o'-nine-tails, captains who drank themselves insensible every night and who raised hell in their ships during bouts of delirium tremens, captains who starved their crews and captains who turned up all hands at every bell, night and day. She found that she was sure, all the same, that Hornblower was an outstanding member of a class which people on shore tended not to credit with nearly as much ability as they actually possessed.

She had, from the time of her first arrival on board, found pleasure in Hornblower's society. Now they had formed a habit of each other, as though they were insidious drugs, and were vaguely uneasy when out of sight

of each other. The voyage had been monotonous enough, as the *Lydia* held steadily southwards, for habits to be easily formed; it had become a habit to exchange a smile when they met on the quarterdeck in the morning — a smile illumined by secret memories of the intimacy of the conversation of the night before. It was a habit now for Hornblower to discuss the ship's progress with Lady Barbara after he had taken the noon sights, a habit now for him to drink coffee with her in the afternoons, and especially was it a habit for them to meet at sunset by the taffrail, although no appointment had been made and no hint of their meeting had ever been suggested, and to lounge in the warm darkness while conversation grew up, seemingly from no roots at all, and blossomed and flowered exotically, under the magic brilliance of the stars until with a reluctance of which they were hardly conscious they drifted off to bed, hours after midnight.

They could even sit silent together now, watching, wordlessly, the mastheads circling amid the stars with the rolling of the ship, listening to the faint orchestra of the ship's fabric, and their thoughts paralleling each other's so that when eventually one of them spoke it was to harmonise completely with what was in the other's mind. At those times Lady Barbara's hand, like a healthy young woman's, was at her side where it could be touched without too great effort. When she had not wanted them to do so men had taken her hand often before, at London balls and Governor-Generals' receptions, but now, conscious though she was of how reckless and imprudent it would be to encourage the slightest physical intimacy on this voyage with months more to last, she still was reckless and imprudent enough to risk it without attempting to analyse her motives. But Hornblower seemed unconscious of that hand. She would see her face lifted to the stars, peaceful and immobile, and she found pleasure in giving herself credit for the change in it from that evening when she had talked with Bush and seen Hornblower's torment.

For happy weeks that phase of the voyage lasted, while the *Lydia* ran steadily south and still more south, until the evenings grew chill and the mornings misty, until the blue sky changed to grey and the first rain they had known for three weeks wetted the *Lydia*'s decks, and the west wind blew more blustering and searching, so that Lady Barbara had to wrap herself in a boat cloak to be able to sit on deck at all. Those evenings by the taffrail came to an imperceptible end, and the *Lydia* thrashed along through half a gale, and it grew steadily colder, even though this was the Antipodean summer. For the first time in her life Lady Barbara saw Hornblower dressed in tarpaulins and sou'wester, and she thought oddly, how well those hideous garments suited him. There were times when he would come sauntering into the cabin, his eyes bright and his cheeks flushed with wind, and she felt her pulses leap in sympathy with his.

She knew she was being foolish. She told herself that this weakness of hers only arose because Hornblower was the one man with any culture or any trace of eligibility on board the *Lydia*, and because life in close contact with him for four continuous months was bound to make her either love him or hate him — and as there was no room for hatred in her system the other thing was inevitable. She told herself, too, that as soon as she returned to civilisation, as soon as she could see Hornblower against that usual background of hers which had faded with the passage of the months almost out of her memory, he would lose his interest and his charm.

On board ship one saw things in a false perspective, she informed herself. Salt beef and salt pork, weevilly bread and dried peas, with a glass of lemon juice twice a week; that meant monotony. Trifles assumed an exaggerated importance when leading a life like that. Just as toothache tended to disappear when something occurred to distract the mind, so would this heartache of hers disappear when she had other things to think about. It was all very true; but strangely it made not the least difference to her present feelings.

They had reached the region of westerly trade winds now. Every day they roared harder and harder, and every day the sea rose higher and higher. The *Lydia* was thrashing along magnificently now; there were two or three days when she logged over two hundred and forty nautical miles as her day's run from noon to noon. It was cold, and it rained in torrents, and the main deck was often knee deep in water. There were days when all Lady Barbara could do was to brace herself in her cot while the ship tossed and rolled as though at any moment she would turn completely over, while Hebe (who never succeeded quite in overcoming her seasickness) moaned in her blankets on the deck and her teeth chattered with the cold. No fire could be kept alight; nothing could be cooked, while the groaning of the ship's timbers swelled into a volume of sound comparable with that of an organ in a church.

At the very climax of the voyage, at their farthest south, the freakishness of Cape Horn weather displayed itself, when Lady Barbara awoke one morning to find the ship rising and swooping once more in orderly fashion, and Polwheal knocked at the cabin door with a message from the captain to the effect that this morning Lady Barbara might, if she wished, take advantage of the break in the weather to take the air on deck. She found the sky blue and the air clear though keen enough to make the duffle coat which Gerard had lent her grateful. The wind had died away to a mere fresh breeze, before which the *Lydia* was careering gaily along under all sail to the royals, and there was a bright sun shining all around them. It was a joy to walk the deck once more. It was if anything an even greater joy to drink hot coffee, steaming hot, again, served by a grinning Polwheal to Lady Barbara and the officers on the quarterdeck. There was an excruciating pleasure in filling her lungs with pure air after days of breathing the mephitic vapours of below decks. She caught Hornblower's eyes and they exchanged smiles of delight. In all the rigging the sailors' clothes, spread hastily to dry, were gesticulating as though with joy waving a thousand glad arms and legs in the sparkling air.

Cape Horn allowed them just that one pleasurable morning; before noon a thin cloud had spread itself over the sun, and the wind was increasing in force again, and to windward there were solid banks of black clouds coming up and overhauling them rapidly.

"Get the royals in, Mr Bush," growled Hornblower, glowering aft. "Lady Barbara, I am afraid that you will have to retire to your cabin again."

The gale fell on them with a shriek when Lady Barbara had hardly reached her cabin; they ran before it all the afternoon, and at evening Lady Barbara could tell by the motion of the ship (so experienced a sailor had she become) that Hornblower had been compelled to heave her to. For thirty-six hours the *Lydia* remained hove to, while the heavens tore themselves to pieces around her, but there was comfort in the knowledge that on her easterly course all her drift to leeward helped her on her way. Lady Barbara found it hard to believe that men had ever succeeded in sailing a ship westward round the Horn. It helped her to agree with Hornblower that before very long, at the latest as soon as a general peace was concluded, the whole world would arise and write in the demand for the cutting of a canal through the Isthmus of Panama. Meanwhile there was nothing to do except to wait for the happy day when they would reach St Helena, and could enjoy fresh meat again, and vegetables, even — impossibly Utopian though it might seem — milk and fruit.

Chapter XXIII

On that voyage the change in conditions after rounding the Horn was most dramatic. It seemed to Lady Barbara almost as if one day they were labouring along over grey seas before the south-westerly gales, cold and uncomfortable, with waves running as high as the yard arms, and the next they were enjoying blue skies and gentle breezes from the south-east. They had in fact been fortunate, for the last thundering gale from the south-west had carried them well into the region of the southerly trades. They were leaving the Antipodean autumn behind them, and the northern spring was coming down in the track of the sun to meet them. The sea was blue again, as blue as any blue well could be, in its usual marvellous contrast with the white foam. There were flying-fish furrowing the enamelled surface. In a flash the privations and discomforts of the Horn were forgotten.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world that as night fell Lady Barbara should find herself seated as ever by the taffrail, and just as natural that Hornblower should loom up in the half light beside her and should accept her unvaryingly polite invitation to a seat beside her. It was perfectly natural that the officers should accept this state of affairs as one which had long existed, and that the officer of the watch should confine his walk to the forward part of the quarterdeck. At eight bells when Gerard came up to relieve Rayner the latter with a jerk of his thumb and a cock of his head called the former's attention to the little dark group by the taffrail. Gerard grinned, his white teeth in his swarthy face gleaming in the starlight.

He had made his trial of the lady's virtue in the long ago, before the captain had noticed her existence. He did not think that Hornblower would succeed where he had failed, and in any case Gerard prided himself on having sufficient sense not to try to compete with his own captain. Gerard had conquests enough to think

about during the silent night watches, and he was philosopher enough to wish his captain good luck while keeping his back turned squarely to them as they talked quietly, only just out of earshot of him.

Yet to Hornblower — and to Lady Barbara — things were not the same here in the Atlantic as they had been in the Pacific. Hornblower seemed to feel a tension he had not felt before. Perhaps the rounding of the Horn had forced it home upon him that even sailing ship voyages must end some time, that even the five thousand odd miles that lay between them and Portsmouth would not last for ever. In the Pacific, appropriately enough, he had found peace in Lady Barbara's company. Here in the Atlantic he was conscious of uneasiness, as he might if the barometer were falling rapidly in a glassy calm in West Indian waters.

For some reason — perhaps merely because he had been thinking of England — the image of Maria had been much before his eyes of late; Maria, short and tubby, with a tendency to spots in her complexion, with the black silk parasol which she affected; or Maria in her flannel nightshirt and curl papers with a loving note sounding hoarsely in her voice; Maria arguing with a lodging-house keeper, and Maria on board the ship at Portsmouth, her poor opinion of common sailors evident in her expression. It was disloyal to think of Maria like that; rather should he think of her as she was that feverish night in the Southsea lodgings, her eyes red with weeping, struggling bravely to keep her lips from trembling while little Horatio died of the smallpox in her arms and little Maria lay dead in the next room.

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower, harshly, and he stirred uneasily in his seat.

Lady Barbara looked at his face in the starlight. It bore that bleak, lonely expression which she had come to dread.

"Can you tell me what is the matter, Captain?" she asked gently.

Hornblower sat silent for some seconds before he shook his head. No, he could not tell her. For that matter he did not know himself; introspective though he was, he had not dared to admit to himself that he had been making comparisons between someone short and stout and someone tall and slender, between someone with apple cheeks and someone with a classic profile.

Hornblower slept badly that night, and his morning walk which followed was not devoted to the purpose for which it had originally been destined. He could not keep his mind at work upon the problems of stores and water, of how to keep the crew busy and out of mischief, of winds and courses, which he was accustomed to solve at this time so as to appear a man of decision the rest of the day. Part of the time he was too unhappy to think connectedly, and for the rest his mind was busy wrestling with suppositions so monstrous that they appalled him. He was tempted to make advances to Lady Barbara; that, at least, he could admit to himself. He wanted to do so badly. There was an ache in his breast, a most painful yearning as he thought of it.

What was monstrous about his thoughts was the suspicion that possibly Lady Barbara would not repulse him. It seemed inconceivable and yet possible, like something in a nightmare. He might even put his hot hand on her cool bosom — a thought which made him writhe in strange anguish. His longing to taste her sweetness was excruciating. He had been nearly a year cooped up in the *Lydia* now, and a year of unnatural living breeds strange fancies. Somewhere just over the gloomy horizon of Hornblower's mind there lurked fancies stranger yet; dark phantoms of rape and murder.

Yet even while Hornblower thus toyed with madness his cursed analytical powers were at work upon other pros and cons. Whether he offended Lady Barbara, or whether he seduced her, he was playing with fire. The Wellesley family could blast him at their whim. They could snatch him from his command and leave him to rot for ever on half pay; even worse, they could find, somewhere in his actions of the past year, if their animosity were sufficient, grounds for a court martial, and a court martial under Wellesley pressure could strip him of his commission and leave him a pauper dependent on parish relief. That was the worst that could happen — save perhaps for a duel with a result fatal to himself — and the very best was not much better. Supposing, as was just conceivable, the Wellesleys could tolerate the seduction of their sister — supposing that, confronted with a *fait accompli*, they resolved to try to make the best of things. No, that was not conceivable at all. He would have to produce a divorce from Maria, and that would involve an act of parliament and the expenditure of five thousand pounds.

To meddle with Lady Barbara would mean risking utter ruin — professional, social, and financial. And he knew he could not trust himself where risks were concerned. When he had had the *Lydia* towed into range of the *Natividad* and had fought it out with her gun to gun he had run such appalling risks that to this day he felt a

little chill down his spine on recalling them. Risk and danger lured him even while he knew he was a fool to expose himself to them, and he knew that no risk would deter him once he had embarked on a course of action. Even at this moment, thinking about it in cold blood, there was something dangerously fascinating in the thought of wiping the eye of the whole Wellesley family and then daring them to do their worst. And then all these cold-blooded considerations were swept away to nothing again in a white hot wave of passion as he thought of her, slim and lovely, understanding and sweet. He was trembling with passion, the hot blood running under his skin, and muddled images streamed through his mind in a fantastic panorama. He stood by the rail staring unseeing over the blue sea with its patches of golden weed, conscious of nothing save the riot in his own body and mind. When his heart had at last slowed down to normal, and he turned to look round over the ship, everything was oddly sharp and clear. He could see the smallest details of the complicated splicing which one of the hands was engaged upon on the forecastle a hundred and twenty feet away. Immediately afterwards he was heartily glad that he had regained his self control, for Lady Barbara came on deck, smiling as she always did when the sun shone on her face on emerging from the deck cabin, and soon he was in conversation with her.

"I spent last night dreaming dreams," said Lady Barbara.

"Indeed?" said Hornblower, awkwardly. He, too, had been dreaming.

"Yes," said Lady Barbara. "I was dreaming mostly of eggs. Fried eggs, and buttered eggs. And slices of white bread spread thick with butter. And café au lait with plenty of cream. And cabbage — plain boiled cabbage. My dreams were not extravagant enough to run to a purée of spinach, but I almost attained to a dish of young carrots. And behold, this morning Hebe brings me my black coffee and my weevilly maize bread, and Polwheal sends in to ask me if I will be pleased to take beef or pork for my dinner. Today I think I start on the seventh brother of the pig whose chops I first tasted at Panama. I know his breed by now."

Lady Barbara could still laugh and show her white teeth in her brown face, as she made this speech, and her laugh whisked away Hornblower's passion for a space. He was in sympathy with her — months of ship's fare set everyone literally dreaming of fresh food — but her fine naturalness acted upon Hornblower's state of mind like an open window on a stuffy room. It was that talk about food which staved off the crisis for a few more days — golden days, during which the *Lydia* kept the south-east trades on her beam and reached steadily across the south Atlantic for St Helena.

The wind did not fail her until the very evening when the lookout at the masthead, the setting of the sun in a golden glory having enabled him to gaze ahead once more, caught sight of the tip of the mountain top just as the light was fading from the sky, and his cry of "Land ho!" told Hornblower that once more he had made a perfect landfall. All day long the wind had been dying away, and with the setting of the sun it dwindled to nothing, tantalisingly, just when a few more hours of it would have carried the *Lydia* to the island. From the deck there was still no sign of land, and as Gerard pointed out to Lady Barbara, she would have to take its proximity on trust until the wind condescended to blow again. Her disappointment at this postponement of her promised buttered eggs was so appealing that Crystal hastened forward and stuck his open clasp-knife in the mainmast. That was a sure way of raising a wind, he said — and if by any mishap it should fail on this occasion he would set all the snip's boys whistling in unison and chance the tempest such imprudence might summon from the deep.

It may have been the mere fact of this respite working on Hornblower's subconscious mind which precipitated the crisis; for undoubtedly Hornblower had a lurking fear that the call at St Helena might well bring about some undesired alteration in affairs on board the *Lydia*. On the other hand, the thing was bound to happen, and perhaps coincidence merely allotted that evening for it. It was coincidence that Hornblower should come into the main cabin in the half light at a moment when he thought Lady Barbara was on deck, and it was coincidence that his hand should brush against her bare arm as they stood cramped between the table and the locker and he apologised for his intrusion. She was in his arms then, and they kissed, and kissed again. She put one hand behind his shoulder and touched the back of his neck, and they were giddy with passion. Then a roll of the ship forced him to let her go, and she sank down upon the locker, and she smiled at him as she sat so that he came down on his knees beside her, his head on her breast, and she stroked his curls, and they kissed again as if they would never tire. She spoke to him with the endearments which her nurse had used to her when she was a child — she had never learned yet to use endearments.

"My dear," she whispered. "My sweet. My poppet."

It was hard to find words that would tell him of her love for him.

"Your hands are beautiful," she said, spreading one of them on her own palm, and playing with the long slender fingers. "I have loved them ever since Panama."

Hornblower had always thought his hands bony and ugly, and the left one bore the ingrained powder stain he had acquired at the boarding of the *Castilla*. He looked at her to see if she were teasing him, and when he saw that she was not he could only kiss her again — her lips were so ready for his kisses. It was like a miracle that she should want to be kissed. Passion carried them away once more.

Hebe's entrance made them part; at least it made Hornblower spring up, to sit bolt upright and self-conscious, while Hebe grinned at them with sly eyes. To Hornblower it was a dreadful thing for a captain to be caught toying with a woman on board his ship actually in commission. It was contrary to the Articles of War — worse, it was undignified, subversive of discipline, dangerous. Lady Barbara remained quite unruffled.

"Go away, Hebe," she said, calmly. "I shall not need you yet." And she turned back to Hornblower, but the spell was broken. He had seen himself in a new light, grovelling furtively on a couch with a passenger. He was blushing hotly, angry with himself, and already wondering how much the officer of the watch and the man at the wheel had heard of their murmurings through the open skylight. "What are we to do?" he asked feebly.

"Do?" she replied. "We are lovers, and the world is ours. We do as we will."

"But —," he said, and again "but —"

He wanted to explain to her in half a dozen words the complications he could see hedging him in. There was a cold fit on him; he wanted to tell her of how he dreaded the ill-concealed amusement of Gerard, the utterly tactless tactfulness of Bush, and how the captain of a ship was not nearly as much his own master as she apparently thought, but it was hopeless. He could only stammer, and his hands flapped feebly, and his face was averted. He had forgotten all these practical details in those mad dreams of his. She put her hand on his chin and made him turn to her.

"Dear," she asked. "What is troubling you? Tell me, dear."

"I am a married man," he said, taking the coward's way out.

"I know that. Are you going to allow that to interfere with — us?"

"Besides —," he said, and his hands flapped again in the hopeless effort to express all the doubts which consumed him. She condescended to sink her pride a little further.

"Hebe is safe," she said, softly. "She worships me. Nor would she dare to be indiscreet."

She saw the look in his face, and rose abruptly. Her blood and lineage were outraged at this. However veiled her offer had been, it had been refused. She was in a cold rage now.

"Please have the kindness, Captain," she said, "to open that door for me."

She swept out of the cabin with all the dignity of an earl's daughter, and if she wept when in the privacy of her own cabin, Hornblower knew nothing of it. He was pacing the deck above, up and down, up and down, endlessly. This was the end of his fine dreams. This was how he showed himself a man to whom danger and risk only made a plan more attractive. He was a fine lady-killer, a devil of a buck. He cursed himself in his shame, he jeered at himself as a man who could face the wrath of the Wellesleys in imagination and who flinched from the amusement of Gerard in practice.

It all might have come right in the end. If the calm had persisted for two or three days, so that Lady Barbara could have forgotten her wrath and Hornblower his doubts, more might have happened. There might have been an echoing scandal in high life. But as it was, at midnight a little wind began to blow — perhaps it was Crystal's clasp-knife which had summoned it — and Gerard came to him for orders. Again he could not flout public opinion. He could not face the thought of the suspicions which would arise and the secret questions which would be asked if he gave orders for the ship to be put about and to head away from St Helena at a time when the wind held fair.

Chapter XXIV

"There's the devil of a lot of shipping there," said Bush, his glass to his eye, as they opened up the roadstead in the dawn. "The devil of a lot. Men o' war, sir. No, Indiamen. Men o' war and Indiamen, sir. There's a three decker! It's the old *Téméraire*, sir, or I'm a Dutchman, with a rear-admiral's flag. Must be the rendezvous for the homeward bound convoy, sir."

"Pass the word for Mr Marsh," said Hornblower.

There would be salutes to be fired, calls to be paid — he was caught up in the irresistible current of naval routine, and he would be too busy now for hours to have a word with Lady Barbara even if she condescended to allow him one. He did not know whether to be glad or sorry.

The *Lydia* made her number, and the sound of the salutes began to roll slowly round the bay. Hornblower was in his shabby full dress — the faded blue coat with the brassy epaulettes, the worn white breeches, the silk stockings with the innumerable ladders which Polwheal had cobbled roughly together. The port officer came up the side to receive his certificate of the absence of infectious disease on board. A moment later the anchor roared out overside, then Hornblower called for the cutter to take him over to the Admiral. He was actually going over the side when Lady Barbara came on deck — he saw her, just for a second, gazing with pleasure up the green mountain slopes, and looking with surprise at the massed shipping inshore. He longed to stop and speak to her, but once more the dignity expected of a captain checked him. Nor could he take her with him — no captain starting on an official round of calls could go round in his boat with a woman in the sternsheets beside him, not even when subsequent explanation would reveal her to be a Wellesley.

The cutter pulled steadily over to the *Téméraire*.

"*Lydia*," shouted the coxswain in reply to the hail from her deck, and he held up four fingers which indicated the presence in the boat of a captain as a warning for them to prepare the correct ceremonial.

Sir James Saumarez received Hornblower in the quarter gallery of his flagship. He was tall and spare, of youthful appearance until he took off his hat and revealed his snow-white hair. He listened courteously to Hornblower's brief explanation of his presence; after forty years at sea and sixteen years of continuous warfare he could guess at the wild adventures which remained undescribed in Hornblower's verbal report. There was a gleam of approval in his fierce blue eyes when he heard that the *Lydia* had sunk a fifty-gun twodecker in a ship to ship duel.

"You can accompany me and the convoy," he said, at the end. "I have no more than two ships of the line and not a single frigate to escort the whole East Indian convoy. One would have thought that the Government would have learnt the need of frigates since the war started in 'ninety-three, don't you think? I will send you written orders this morning. And now, sir, perhaps you will give me the pleasure of your company at the breakfast party at which I am about to be host?"

Hornblower pointed out that it was his duty to call upon the governor.

"His Excellency is breakfasting with me," said the Admiral.

Hornblower knew that it was ill to continue to raise a series of objections to a suggestion by an Admiral, but he had to raise a fresh one.

"There is a lady on board the *Lydia*, sir," he said, and when the Admiral's eyebrows went up he hurriedly began to explain Lady Barbara's presence to him.

The Admiral whistled.

"A Wellesley!" he said. "And you brought her round the Horn? Here, we must tell Lady Manningtree of this."

He led the way unceremoniously into the lofty Admiral's cabin. There was a long table with a snowy cloth, glittering with crystal and silver, and by the table there stood chatting a little group of men and women, beautifully dressed. The Admiral made hurried introductions — His Excellency the Governor, and Her Excellency; the Earl and Countess of Manningtree, Sir Charles and Lady Wheeler.

Lady Manningtree was a short and dumpy woman with good humour in every line of her face. She showed no sign of the dignity and reserve which might be expected of the wife of an ex-governor-general returning from his term of office.

"Captain Hornblower has brought Lady Barbara Wellesley with him from Darien," said Sir James, and plunged into rapid explanation. Lady Manningtree listened in perfect horror.

"And you have left her there? On that little ship?" she said. "The poor lamb! She must not stay there another moment! I shall go and bring her away this very instant! Sir James, you must excuse me. I will not have a moment's peace until she is comfortably in the cabin next to mine on board the *Hanbury Castle*. Sir James, would you be so good as to order a boat for me?"

She left in a whirl of apologies and explanations, a fluttering of petticoats and a perfect torrent of objurgations, mainly directed at Hornblower.

"When women take charge," said Sir James philosophically, after she had departed, "it is best for the men to stand from under. Will you sit here, Captain?"

Curiously, Hornblower could eat almost nothing of that delicious breakfast. There were heavenly mutton cutlets. There was coffee with fresh milk. There was new wheaten bread. There was butter, there were fruits, there were vegetables, all the things Hornblower had dreamed about when his thoughts had not been occupied with Lady Barbara, and now he could only eat a mouthful here and there. Fortunately his lack of appetite went unnoticed because he was kept so busy answering the questions which were rained on him, about Lady Barbara, about his adventures in the Pacific, about his passage round the Horn, and then back to Lady Barbara again.

"Her brother is doing great things in Spain," said Sir James. "Not the eldest one, the Marquis, but Arthur — the one who won the battle of Assaye. He came well out of that court of inquiry after Vimiero. Now he has bundled Soult out of Portugal, and when I left Lisbon he was in full march on Madrid. Since Moore was killed he is the most promising soldier in the army."

"Humph," said Lady Wheeler. The name of Wellesley was still anathema to a certain section of Anglo-Indians.

"This Lady Barbara is a good deal younger than he is, I fancy? I remember her as quite a child in Madras."

Eyes were turned towards Hornblower, but Lord Manningtree in the kindness of his heart spared him the embarrassment of having to explain Lady Barbara's age.

"She's no child," he said, bluffly. "She's a very talented young woman. Declined a dozen good offers in India, too, and God knows how many since then."

"Humph," said Lady Wheeler again.

The breakfast began to seem interminable to Hornblower, and he was glad when the party showed signs of breaking up. The Governor seized the opportunity to discuss with him the matter of the stores for which the *Lydia* would have to indent — naval routine still claimed him for her own. There was urgent need for him to return to his ship; he made his excuses to Sir James and said good-bye to the rest of the company.

The Admiral's barge was still hooked on to the *Lydia*'s chains when he returned to her; her crew were dressed in crimson coats with gold-laced hats. Hornblower had known frigate captains who dressed their gig's crews in fancy costumes in this fashion, too, but they were wealthy men who had been fortunate in the matter of prize money, not penniless fellows like himself. He went on board; Lady Barbara's baggage was piled on the gangway waiting to be swung down into the barge. Down in the main cabin could be heard a continuous chatter of female voices. Lady Manningtree and Lady Barbara were sitting there deep in conversation; obviously there had been so much to say that they could not wait until they had reach the *Hanbury Castle*. One topic had led to another so enthralling that they had forgotten the barge, forgotten the waiting baggage, forgotten even about breakfast.

Apparently Lady Barbara had taken the opportunity, when her baggage had been brought up from the storeroom, to unpack some new clothes. She was wearing a new gown which Hornblower had not seen before, and a new turban and veil. She was very obviously the great lady now. To Hornblower's startled mind she seemed as she stood up to be six inches taller than when he saw her last. And clearly Hornblower's arrival, breaking the thread of their conversation, constituted for them a signal for their departure.

"Lady Barbara has been telling me all about your voyage," said Lady Manningtree, buttoning her gloves. "I think you deserve a world of thanks for the care you have taken of her."

The kind-hearted old lady was one of those people who can never think evil. She looked round the tiny ugly cabin.

"Nevertheless," she went on, "I think that it is high time that she enjoyed a little more comfort than you can offer her here."

Hornblower managed to gulp out a few words regarding the superior arrangements for passengers on board a luxurious Indiaman.

"I don't mean to imply that it is your fault, Captain," protested Lady Manningtree, hastily. "I'm sure your ship is a very beautiful ship. A frigate, isn't it? But frigates were never made to carry females, and that's all one can say. And now we must say good-bye, Captain. I hope we may have the pleasure of receiving you on the *Hanbury Castle* later. There will be sure to be opportunities during this very tedious voyage home. Good-bye, Captain."

Hornblower bowed and allowed her to pass before him. Lady Barbara followed.

"Good-bye," she said. Hornblower bowed again as she went down in a curtsy. He was looking straight at her, but somehow he could see no detail of her face — only a white blur.

"Thank you for all your kindness," said Lady Barbara.

The barge left the ship's side, and rowed steadily away. She was all blurred, too, a vague patch of red and gold. Hornblower found Bush beside him.

"The victualling officer's signalling, sir," he said.

Hornblower's duties were clamouring for his attention. As he turned away from the ship's side to plunge into them he found himself, idiotically, remembering that in two months' time or so he would be seeing Maria again. He felt vaguely glad about that before it passed out of his mind again. He felt he would be happy with Maria. Overhead the sun was shining brightly, and before him rose the steep green slopes of St Helena.



Vice Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson by Lemuel Francis Abbott

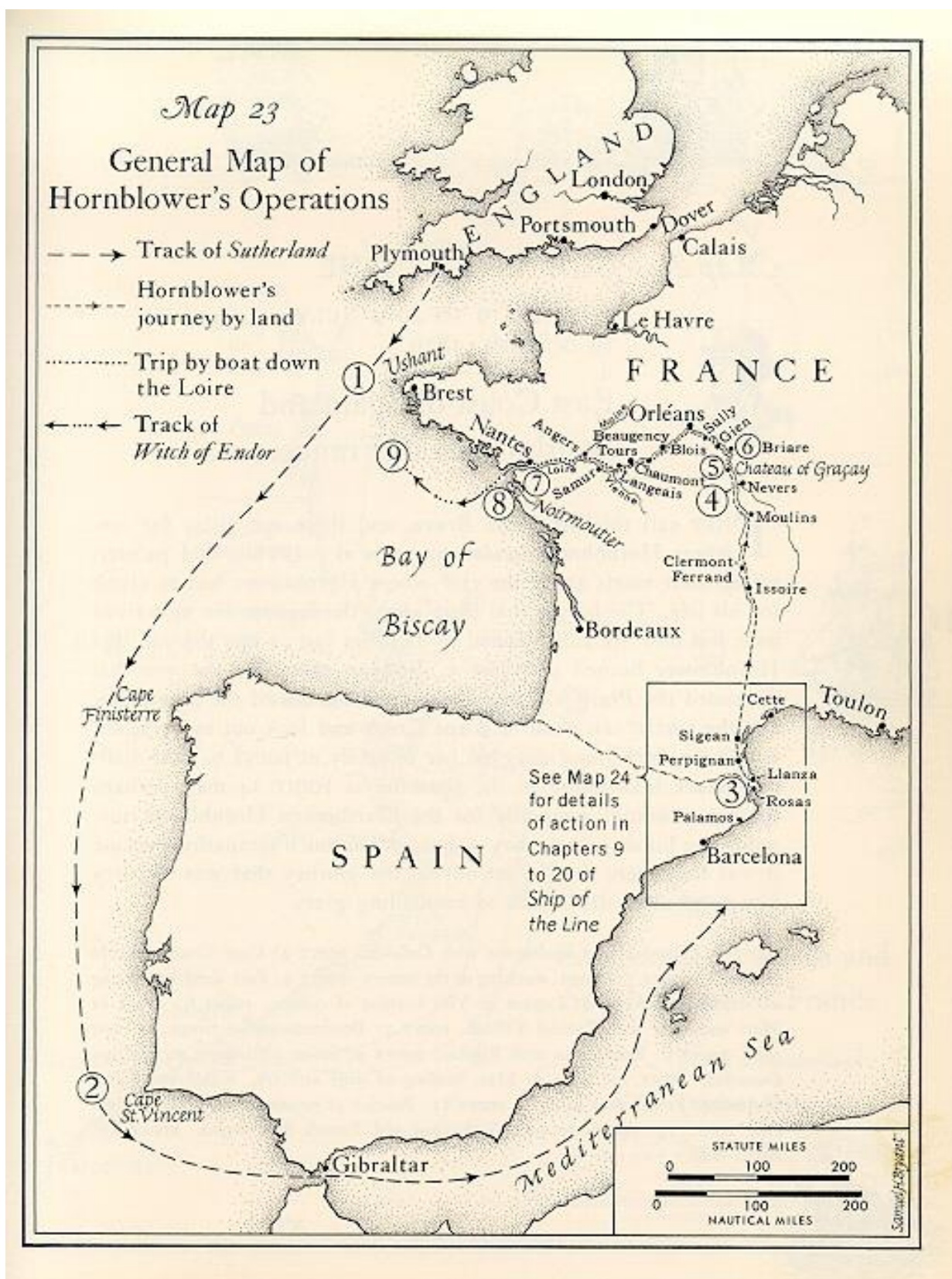
A HORATIO HORNBLOWER TALE OF THE SEA

C. S. FORESTER

~ A SHIP ~
OF THE LINE



NEW INTRODUCTION BY BERNARD CORNWELL



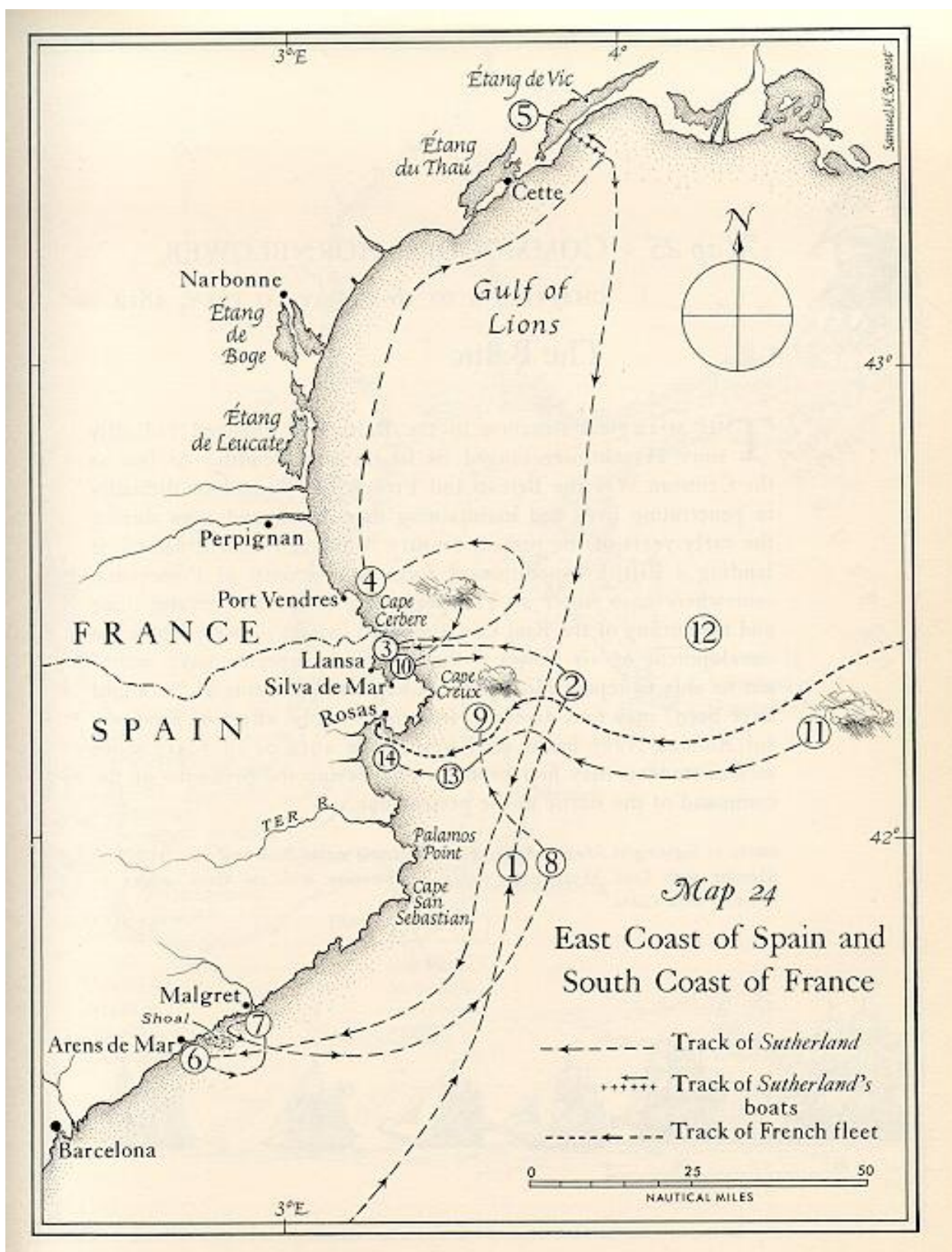
Ship of the Line and Flying Colours

May, 1810 to June, 1811

Map 23 - General Map of Hornblower's Operations

- ① Battle with privateer luggers off Ushant. ② Parting company with East India convoy off Cape St. Vincent.
Special Note: Operations on the Spanish coast are indicated in Map 24. Following points are *after* the Battle of Rosas.
 ③ Hornblower taken by Colonel Caillard by coach from Rosas.
 ④ Escape for the party from their escort. ⑤ Château of Graçay.
 ⑥ Briare: first camp. ⑦ Nantes: capture of the *Witch of Endor*.
 ⑧ Noirmoutier: battle with the shore boats. ⑨ Meeting with the Channel fleet.





Ship of the Line

Chapters 9 to 20 July to October, 1810

Map 24 - East Coast of Spain and South Coast of France

- | | |
|---|--|
| ① Palmos Point rendezvous with <i>Caligula</i> . | ② Cape Creux: capture of <i>Amelie</i> . |
| ③ Llansa: storming of the battery. | ④ Port Vendres: cutting out expedition. |
| ⑤ Lagoon de Vic: burning of coaster. | ⑥ Arens de Mar: encounter with Colonel Villena. |
| ⑦ Bombardment of troops on coast road. | ⑧ Rendezvous with flagship. |
| ⑨ Storm off Cape Creux: <i>Pluto</i> dismasted. | ⑩ Silva de Mar: landing of siege artillery. |
| Point 11: Sights <i>Cassandra</i> : French fleet in sight. | Point 12: Position of remainder of British squadron. |
| Point 13: Action between <i>Sutherland</i> and French fleet begins. | Point 14: Battle ends. |

A Ship of the Line

C. S. Forester

(1938)

Chapter I

Captain Horatio Hornblower was reading a smudgy proof which the printers had just sent round to his lodgings.

"To all Young Men of *Spirit*," he said. "Seamen, Landsmen, and Boys, who wish to strike a Blow for Freedom and to cause the Corsican Tyrant to wish that he had never dared the Wrath of these British Isles. His Majesty's Ship *Sutherland* of two decks and seventy-four guns is at present commissioning at Plymouth, and a few *Vacancies* still exist to complete her Crew. Captain *Horatio Hornblower* in command has lately returned from a Cruise in the *South Sea* during which in command of the Frigate *Lydia* of thirty-six guns, he engaged and *sank* the Spanish vessel *Natividad* of two decks and more than *twice the force*. The Officers, Petty Officers, and men of the *Lydia* have all joined him in the *Sutherland*. What Heart of Oak can resist this Appeal to Join this Band of Heroes and Share with them the new Glories which await them? Who will teach Monsieur *Jean Crapaud* that the Seas are *Britannia's* where no Frog-eating *Frenchman* can show his Face? Who wishes for a Hatful of Golden Louis d'or for *Prize Money*? There will be *Fiddlers* and *Dancing* every evening, and Provisions at *sixteen* ounces to the Pound, the Best of Beef, and Best of Bread, and *Grog* at midday every Day of the Week and *Sundays*, all in addition to the *Pay* under the *Warrant* of His Most Gracious Majesty King *George!* In the *Place* where this notice is read can be found an Officer of His Majesty's Ship *Sutherland* who will enlist any *Willing Hearts* who Thirst for Glory."

Captain Hornblower struggled against hopelessness as he read the proof. Appeals of this sort were to be read in dozens in every market town. It hardly seemed likely that he could attract recruits to a humdrum ship of the line when dashing frigate captains of twice his reputation were scouring the country and able to produce figures of prize money actually won in previous voyages. To send four lieutenants, each with half a dozen men, round the southern counties to gather recruits in accordance with this poster was going to cost him practically all the pay he had accumulated last commission, and he feared lest it should be money thrown away.

Yet something had to be done. The *Lydia* had supplied him with two hundred able bodied seamen (his placard said nothing of the fact that they had been compulsorily transferred without a chance of setting foot on English soil after a commission of two years' duration) but to complete his crew he needed another fifty seamen and two hundred landsmen and boys. The guardship had found him none at all. Failure to complete his crew might mean the loss of his command, and from that would result unemployment and half pay — eight shillings a day-for the rest of his life. He could form no estimate at all of with how much favour he was regarded at the Admiralty, and in the absence of data it was natural to him to believe that his employment hung precariously in the balance.

Anxiety and strain brought oaths to his lips as he tapped on the proof with his pencil — silly blasphemies of whose senselessness he was quite well aware even as he mouthed them. But he was careful to speak softly; Maria was resting in the bedroom through the double doors behind him, and he did not want to rouse her. Maria (although it was too early to be certain) believed herself to be pregnant, and Hornblower was sated with her cloy tenderness. His irritation increased at the thought of it; he hated the land, the necessity of recruiting, the stuffy sitting-room, the loss of the independence he had enjoyed during the months of his last commission. Irritably he took his hat and stole quietly out. The printer's messenger was waiting, hat in hand, in the hall. To him Hornblower abruptly handed back the proof with a curt order for one gross of placards to be struck off, and then he made his way into the noisy streets.

The tollkeeper at the Halfpenny Gate Bridge at sight of his uniform let him through without payment; a dozen watermen at the ferry knew him as the captain of the *Sutherland* and competed to catch his eye — they could expect an ample fee for rowing a Captain to his ship up the long length of the Hamoaze. Hornblower took his seat in a pair-oared wherry; it gave him some satisfaction to say no word at all as they shoved off and began the long pull through the tangle of shipping. Stroke oar shifted his quid and was about to utter some commonplace or other to his passenger, but at sight of his black brow and ill-tempered frown he thought better of it and changed his opening word to a self-conscious cough — Hornblower, acutely aware of the by-play although he had spared the man no open glance, lost some of his ill-temper as a result. He noticed the play of muscles in the brown forearms as the man strained at his oar; there was tattooing on the wrist, and a thin gold ring gleamed in the man's left ear. He must have been a seaman before he became a waterman — Hornblower longed inexpressibly to have him haled on board when they should reach the *Sutherland*; if he could only lay his hands on a few dozen prime seamen his anxiety would be at an end. But the fellow of course would have a certificate of exemption, else he would never be able to ply his trade here in a part where a quarter of the British Navy came seeking for men.

The victualling yard and the dock yard as they rowed past were swarming with men, too, all of them able bodied, and half of them seamen — shipwrights and riggers — at whom Hornblower stared at longingly and as helplessly as a cat at goldfish in a bowl. The rope walk and the mast house, the sheer hulk and the smoking chimneys of the biscuit bakery went slowly by. There was the *Sutherland*, riding to her moorings off Bull Point; Hornblower, as he gazed at her across the choppy water, was conscious of a queer admixture of conservative dislike in the natural pride which he felt in his new command. Her round bow looked odd at a time when every British built ship of the line had the beakhead to which his eye had long grown accustomed; her lines were ungainly and told their tale (as Hornblower noticed every time he looked at her) of more desirable qualities sacrificed for shallow draught. Everything about her — save for the lower masts which were of English origin — proved that she was Dutch built, planned to negotiate the mudbanks and shallow estuaries of the Dutch coast. The *Sutherland*, in fact, had once been the Dutch 74 *Eendracht*, captured off the Texel and, now rearmed, the ugliest and least desirable two-decker in the Navy List.

God help him, thought Hornblower, eyeing her with a distaste accentuated by his lack of men to man her, if ever he should find himself trying to claw off a lee shore in her. She would drift off to leeward like a cocked-hat paper boat. And at the subsequent court-martial nobody would believe a word of the evidence regarding her unweatherly qualities.

"Easy!" he snapped at the wherry men, and the oars ceased to grind in the rowlocks as the men rested; the sound of the waves slapping the side of the boat became suddenly more apparent.

As they drifted over the dancing water Hornblower continued his discontented examination. She was newly painted, but in as niggardly a fashion as the dockyard authorities could manage — the dull yellow and black was unrelieved by any white or red. A wealthy captain and first lieutenant would have supplied the deficiency out of their own pockets, and would have shown a lick of gold leaf here and there, but Hornblower had no money to spare for gold leaf, and he knew that Bush, who kept four sisters and a mother on his pay, had none either — not even though his professional future depended in some part on the appearance of the *Sutherland*. Some captains would by hook or by crook have cozened more paint — gold leaf, too, for that matter — out of the dockyard, as Hornblower ruefully told himself. But he was not good at cozening; not the prospect of all the gold leaf in the world could lead him to slap a dockyard clerk on the back and win his favour with flattery and false bonhomie; not that his conscience would stop him, but his self-consciousness would.

Someone on deck spied him now. He could hear the pipes twittering as preparations were made to receive him. Let 'em wait a bit longer; he was not going to be hurried today. The *Sutherland*, riding high without her stores in her, was showing a wide streak of her copper. That copper was new, thank God. Before the wind the ugly old ship might show a pretty turn of speed. As the wind swung her across the tide she revealed her run to him. Looking over her lines, Hornblower occupied his mind with estimates of how to get the best performance out of her. Twenty-two years of sea going experience helped him. Before his mind's eye he called up a composite diagram of all the forces that would be at work on her at sea — the pressure of the wind on her sails, the rudder balancing the headsails, the lateral resistance of the keel, the friction of the skin, the impact of waves against her bows. Hornblower sketched out a preliminary trial arrangement, deciding just how (until

practical tests gave him more data) he would have the masts raked and the ship trimmed. But next moment he remembered bitterly that at present he had no crew to man her, and that unless he could find one all these plans would be useless.

"Give way," he growled to the wherry men, and they threw their weight on the oars again.

"Easy, Jake," said bow oar to stroke, looking over his shoulder.

The wherry swung round under the *Sutherland's* stern — trust those men to know how a boat should be laid alongside a ship of war — giving Hornblower a sight of the stern gallery which constituted to Hornblower one of the most attractive points about the ship. He was glad that the dockyard had not done away with it, as they had done in so many ships of the line. Up in that gallery he would be able to enjoy wind and sea and sun, in a privacy unattainable on deck. He would have a hammock chair made for use there. He could even take his exercise there, with no man's eye upon him — the gallery was eighteen feet long, and he would only have to stoop a little under the overhanging cove. Hornblower yearned inexpressibly for the time when he would be out at sea, away from all the harassing troubles of the land, walking his stern gallery in the solitude in which alone he could relax nowadays. Yet without a crew all this blissful prospect was withheld from him indefinitely. He must find men somewhere.

He felt in his pockets for silver to pay the boatmen, and although silver was woefully short his self-consciousness drove him into overpaying the men in the fashion he attributed to his fellow captains of ships of the line.

"Thank 'ee, sir. Thank 'ee," said the stroke oar, knuckling his forehead.

Hornblower went up the ladder and came in through the entry port with its drab paint where in the Dutchmen's time gilding had blazed bravely. The pipes of the boatswain's mates twittered wildly, the marine guard presented arms, the sideboys stood rigidly at attention. Gray, master mate — lieutenants kept no watch in harbour — was officer of the watch and saluted as Hornblower touched his hat to the quarterdeck.

Hornblower did not condescend to speak to him, although Gray was a favourite of his; the rigid guard he kept on himself for fear of unnecessary loquacity forbade. Instead he looked round him silently.

The decks were tangled with gear as the work of rigging the ship proceeded, but the tangle, as Hornblower was careful to note, carried under its surface the framework of orderliness. The coils of rope, the groups at work on the deck, the sailmaker's party sewing at a topsail on the forecastle, gave an impression of confusion, but it was disciplined confusion. The severe orders which he had issued to his officers had borne fruit. The crew of the *Lydia* when they had heard that they were to be transferred bodily to the *Sutherland* without even a day on shore, had nearly mutinied. They were in hand again now.

"Master-at-arms wishes to report, sir," said Gray. "Send for him, then," answered Hornblower.

The master-at-arms was the warrant officer responsible for enforcing discipline, and was a man new to Hornblower, named Price. Hornblower concluded that he had allegations of indiscipline to lodge, and he sighed even while he set his face in an expression of merciless rigidity. Probably it would be a matter of flogging, and he hated the thought of the blood and the agony. But, at the beginning of a commission like this, with a restive crew under his orders, he must not hesitate to flog if necessary — to have the skin and flesh stripped from the offenders' backbones.

Price was coming along the gangway now at the head of the strangest procession. Two by two behind him came a column of thirty men, each one handcuffed to his neighbour, save for the last two who clanked drearily along with leg irons at their ankles. Nearly all of them were in rags, and the rags had no sort of nautical flavour about them at all. The rags of a great many of them were sacking, some had corduroy, and Hornblower, peering closer, saw that one wore the wrecks of a pair of moleskin breeches. Yet another wore the remains of what had once been a respectable black broadcloth suit — white skin showed through a rent in the shoulder. All of them had stubby beards, black, brown, golden, and grey, and those who were not bald had great mops of tangled hair. The two ship's corporals brought up the rear.

"'Alt," ordered Price. "Orf 'ats."

The procession shuffled to a halt, and the men stood sullenly on the quarterdeck. Some of them kept their eyes on the deck, while the others gaped sheepishly round them.

"What the devil's all this?" demanded Hornblower sharply.

"New 'ands, sir," said Price. "I signed a receipt to the sodgers what brought 'em, sir."

"Where did they bring them from?" rasped Hornblower.

"Exeter Assizes, sir," said Price, producing a list. "Poachers, four of 'em. Waites, that's 'im in the moleskin breeches, sir, 'e was found guilty of sheepstealing. That 'un in black, 'is crime's bigamy, sir — 'e was a brewer's manager before this 'appened to 'im. The others is larceny mostly, sir, 'cept for them two in front what's in for rick burning and t'other two in irons. Robbery with violence is what they done."

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower, wordless for the moment. The new hands blinked at him, some with hope in their eyes, some with hatred, some with indifference. They had chosen service at sea rather than the gallows, or transportation, or the gaol. Months in prison awaiting trial accounted for their dilapidated appearance. Here was a fine addition to the ship's company, thought Hornblower, bitterly — budding mutineers, sullen skulkers, half-witted yokels. But hands they were and he must make the most of them. They were frightened, sullen, resentful. It would be worth trying to win their affection. His naturally humanitarian instincts dictated the course he decided to pursue after a moment's quick thinking.

"Why are they still handcuffed?" he demanded, loud enough for them all to hear. "Release them at once."

"Begging you pardon, sir," apologised Price. "I didn't want to without orders, sir, seeing what they are and 'ow they come 'ere."

"That's nothing to do with it," snapped Hornblower. "They're enlisted in the King's service now. And I'll have no man in irons in *my* ship unless he's given *me* cause to order it."

Hornblower kept his gaze from wavering towards the new hands, and steadily addressed his declamation to Price — it was more effectively delivered that way, he knew, even while he despised himself for using rhetorical tricks.

"I never want to see new hands in charge of the master-at-arms again," he continued, hotly. "They are recruits in an honourable service, with an honourable future before them. I'll thank you to see to it another time. Now find one of the purser's mates and see that each of these men is properly dressed in accordance with my orders."

Normally it might be harmful to discipline to rate a subordinate officer in front of the men, but in the case of the master-at-arms Hornblower knew that little damage was being done. The men would come to hate the master-at-arms any way sooner or later — his privileges of rank and pay were given him so that he might be a whipping boy for the crew's discontent. Hornblower could drop the rasp in his voice and address the hands directly, now.

"A man who does his duty as best he can," he said, kindly, "has nothing to fear in this ship, and everything to hope for. Now I want to see how smart you can look in your new clothes, and with the dirt of the place you have come from washed off you. Dismiss."

He had won over some of the poor fools, at least, he told himself. Some of the faces which had been sullen with despair were shining with hope now, after this experience of being treated as men and not as brutes — for the first time for months, if not the first time in their lives. He watched them off the gangway. Poor devils; in Hornblower's opinion they had made a bad bargain in exchanging the gaol for the navy. But at least they represented thirty out of the two hundred and fifty additional human bodies which he needed to drag at ropes and to heave at capstan bars so as to take this old *Sutherland* out to sea.

Lieutenant Bush came hastening on to the quarterdeck, and touched his hat to his captain. The stern swarthy face with its incongruous blue eyes broke into a smile just as incongruous. It gave Hornblower a queer twinge, almost of conscience, to see the evident pleasure which Bush experienced at sight of him. It was odd to know that he was admired — it might even be said that he was loved — by this very capable sailor, this splendid disciplinarian and fearless fighter who boasted so many of the good qualities in which Hornblower felt himself to be lacking.

"Good morning, Bush," he said. "Have you seen the new draft?"

"No, sir. I was rowing guard for the middle watch and I've only just turned out. Where do they hail from, sir?" Hornblower told him, and Bush rubbed his hands with pleasure.

"Thirty!" he said. "That's rare. I never hoped for more than a dozen from Exeter Assizes. And Bodmin Assizes open today. Please God we get another thirty there."

"We won't get topmen from Bodmin Assizes," said Hornblower, comforted beyond measure at the equanimity with which Bush regarded the introduction of gaolbirds into the *Sutherland's* crew.

"No, sir. But the West India convoy's due this week. The guards ought to nab two hundred there. We'll get twenty if we get our rights."

"M'm," said Hornblower, and turned away uneasily. He was not the sort of captain — neither the distinguished kind nor the wheedling kind — who could be sure of favours from the Port Admiral. "I must look round below." That changed the subject effectively enough.

"The women are restless," said Bush. "I'd better come, too, sir, if you don't object."

The lower gun deck offered a strange spectacle, lit vaguely by the light which came through half a dozen open gun ports. There were fifty women there. Three or four were still in their hammocks, lying on their sides looking out on the others. Some were sitting in groups on the deck, chattering loud-voiced. One or two were chaffering for food through the gun ports with the occupants of shore boats floating just outside; the netting which impeded desertion had a broad enough mesh to allow a hand to pass through. Two more, each backed by a supporting group, were quarrelling violently. They were in odd contrast — one was tall and dark, so tall as to have to crouch round-shouldered under the five foot deck beams, while the other, short, broad, and fair, was standing up boldly before her menacing advance.

"That's what I said," she maintained stoutly. "And I'll say it again. I ain't afeared o' *you*, Mrs Dawson, as you call yourself."

"A-ah," screamed the dark one at this crowning insult. She swooped forward, and with greedy hands she seized the other by the hair, shaking her head from side to side as if she would soon shake it off. In return her face was scratched and her shins were kicked by her stout-hearted opponent. They whirled round in a flurry of petticoats, when one of the women in the hammocks screamed a warning to them.

"Stop it, you mad bitches! 'Ere's the cap'n."

They fell apart, panting and tousled. Every eye was turned towards Hornblower as he walked forward in the patchy light, his head bowed under the deck above.

"The next woman fighting will be put ashore instantly," growled Hornblower. The dark woman swept her hair from her eyes and sniffed with disdain.

"You needn't put *me* ashore, Cap'n," she said. "I'm goin'. There ain't a farden to be had out o' this starvation ship."

She was apparently expressing a sentiment which was shared by a good many of the women, for the speech was followed by a little buzz of approval.

"Ain't the men *never* goin' to get their pay notes?" piped up the woman in the hammock.

"Enough o' that," roared Bush, suddenly. He pushed forward anxious to save his captain from the insults to which he was exposed, thanks to a government which left its men still unpaid after a month in port. "You there, what are you doing in your hammock after eight bells?"

But this attempt to assume a counter offensive met with disaster.

"I'll come out if you like, Mr Lieutenant," she said, flicking off her blanket and sliding to the deck. "I parted with my gown to buy my Tom a sausage, and my petticoat's bought him a soop o' West Country ale. Would you have me on deck in my shift, Mr Lieutenant?"

A titter went round the deck.

"Get back and be decent," spluttered Bush, on fire with embarrassment.

Hornblower was laughing, too — perhaps it was because he was married that the sight of a half-naked woman alarmed him not nearly as much as it did his first lieutenant.

"Never will I be decent now," said the woman, swinging her legs up into the hammock and composedly draping the blanket over her, "until my Tom gets his pay warrant."

"An' when he gets it," sneered the fair woman. "What can he do with it without shore leave? Sell it to a bumboat shark for a quarter!"

"Fi' pound for twenty-three months' pay!" added another. "An me a month gone a'ready."

"Avast there," said Bush.

Hornblower beat a retreat, abandoning — forgetting, rather — the object of his visit of inspection below. He could not face those women when the question of pay came up again. The men had been scandalously badly treated, imprisoned in the ship within sight of land, and their wives (some of them certainly were wives, although by Admiralty regulations a simple verbal declaration of the existence of a marriage was sufficient to

allow them on board) had just cause of complaint. No one, not even Bush, knew that the few guineas which had been doled out among the crew represented a large part of Hornblower's accumulated pay — all he could spare, in fact, except for the necessary money to pay his officers' expenses when they should start on their recruiting journeys.

His vivid imagination and absurd sensitiveness between them perhaps exaggerated part of the men's hardships. The thought of the promiscuity of life below decks, where a man was allotted eighteen inches' width in which to swing his hammock, while his wife was allowed eighteen inches next to him, all in a long row, husbands, wives, and single men, appalled him. So did the thought of women having to live on the revolting lower deck food. Possibly he made insufficient allowance for the hardening effect of long habit. He emerged through the fore hatchway on to the maindeck a little unexpectedly. Thompson, one of the captains of the forecabin, was dealing with the new hands.

"P'raps we'll make sailors of you," he was saying, "and p'raps we won't. Overside with a shot at your feet, more likely, before we sight Ushant And a waste o' good shot, too. Come on wi' that pump, there. Let's see the colour o' your hides, gaol-birds. When the cat gets at you we'll see the colour o' your backbones, too, you —" "Enough of that, Thompson," roared Hornblower, furious.

In accordance with his standing orders the new hands were being treated to rid them of vermin. Naked and shivering, they were grouped about the deck. Two of them were having their heads shorn down to the bare skin; a dozen of them, who had already submitted to this treatment (and looking strangely sickly and out of place with the prison pallor still on them) were being herded by Thompson towards the wash-deck pump which a couple of grinning hands were working. Fright was making them shiver as much as cold — not one of them, probably, had ever had a bath before, and what with the prospect, and Thompson's bloodcurdling remarks and the strange surroundings, they were pitiful to see.

It enraged Hornblower, who somehow or other had never forgotten the misery of his early days at sea. Bullying was abhorrent to him like any other sort of wanton cruelty, and he had no sympathy whatever with the aim of so many of his brother officers, to break the spirit of the men under him. One of these days his professional reputation and his future might depend on these very men risking their lives cheerfully and willingly — sacrificing them, if need be — and he could not imagine cowed and broken-spirited men doing that. The shearing and the bath were necessary, if the ship was to be kept clear of the fleas and bugs and lice which could make life a misery on board, but he was not going to have his precious men cowed more than was unavoidable. It was curious that Hornblower, who never could believe himself to be a leader of men, would always lead rather than drive.

"Under the pump with you, men," he said kindly, and when they still hesitated — "When we get to sea you'll see *me* under that pump, every morning at seven bells. Isn't that so, there?"

"Aye aye, sir," chorused the hands at the pump — their captain's strange habit of having cold seawater pumped over him every morning had been a source of much discussion on board the *Lydia*.

"So under with you, and perhaps you'll all be captains one of these days. You, there, Waites, show these others you're not afraid." It was blessed good fortune that Hornblower was able not only to remember the name, but to recognise in his new guise Waites, the sheepstealer with the moleskin breeches. They blinked at this resplendent captain in his gold lace, whose tone was cheerful and whose dignity still admitted taking a daily bath. Waites steeled himself to dive under the spouting hose, and, gasping, rotated heroically under the cold water. Someone threw him a lump of holystone with which to scrub himself, while the others jostled for their turn — the poor fools were like sheep; it was only necessary to set one moving to make all the rest eager to follow.

Hornblower caught sight of a red angry welt across one white shoulder. He beckoned Thompson out of earshot. "You've been free with that starter of yours, Thompson," he said. Thompson grinned uneasily, fingering the two-foot length of rope knotted at the end, with which petty officers were universally accustomed to stimulate the activity of the men under them.

"I won't have a petty officer in my ship," said Hornblower, "who doesn't know when to use a starter and when not to. These men haven't got their wits about 'em yet, and hitting 'em won't remedy it. Make another mistake like that, Thompson, and I'll disrate you. And then you'll clean out the heads of this ship every day of this commission. That'll do."

Thompson shrank away, abashed by the genuine anger which Hornblower displayed.

"Keep your eye on him, Mr Bush, if you please," added Hornblower. "Sometimes a reprimand makes a petty officer take it out of the men more than ever to pay himself back. And I won't have it."

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush, philosophically.

Hornblower was the only captain he had ever heard of who bothered his head about the use of starters. Starters were as much part of Navy life as bad food and eighteen inches per hammock and peril at sea. Bush could never understand Hornblower's disciplinary methods. He had been positively horrified when he had heard his captain's public admission that he, too, had baths under the washdeck pump — it seemed madness for a captain to allow his men to guess that they were of the same flesh as his. But two years under Hornblower's command had taught him that Hornblower's strange ways sometimes attained surprising results. He was ready to obey him, loyally though blindly, resigned and yet admiring.

Chapter II

"The boy from the Angel has brought a note, sir," said the landlady, when Hornblower called her in in reply to her knock at the sitting-room door. "He waits an answer."

Hornblower felt a shock as he read the address — the clear feminine handwriting which he recognised although it was months since he saw it last meant so much to him. He tried to disguise his feelings as he spoke to his wife.

"It is addressed to both of us, my dear," he said. "Shall I open it?"

"As you please," said Maria.

Hornblower broke the wafer and unfolded the note.

The Angel Inn, Plymouth.

Fourth May, 1810.

Rear Admiral Sir Percy and Lady Barbara Leighton would esteem it an Honour if Captain and Mrs Horatio Hornblower would dine with them at this address Tomorrow, the Fifth, at four o'clock.

"The Admiral is at the Angel. He wants us to dine with him tomorrow," said Hornblower, as casually as his beating heart would allow. "Lady Barbara is with him. I think we must accept, my dear." He passed the note over to his wife.

"I have only my blue sack gown," said Maria, looking up from reading it.

The first thing a woman ever thought about on receiving an invitation was what she should wear. Hornblower tried to bend his mind to the consideration of the blue sack gown, when all the time his heart was singing songs at the knowledge that Lady Barbara was only two hundred yards away.

"It looks perfect on you, my dear," he said. "You know how much I have always liked it."

It would call for a far better gown to look well on Maria's dumpy figure. But Hornblower knew that they must — they *must* — accept the invitation, and it would be a kindness to reassure Maria. It did not matter what clothes Maria wore as long as she thought she looked well in them. Maria smiled happily at the compliment, giving Hornblower a prick of conscience. He felt like Judas. Maria would look coarse and badly dressed and stupid beside Lady Barbara, and yet he knew that as long as he pretended to be in love with her she would be happy and unconscious.

He wrote a careful acceptance, and rang the bell for it to be given to the messenger. Then he buttoned his uniform coat.

"I must go down to the ship," he said.

Maria's reproachful look hurt him. He knew that she had been looking forward to spending the afternoon with him, and indeed he had not intended to visit the ship that day. It was only an excuse to gain privacy for himself. He could not bear the thought of being mewed up in that sitting-room with Maria and her platitudes. He wanted to be alone to hug to himself the thought that Lady Barbara was in the same town, that he was

going to see her tomorrow. He could not sit still with those thoughts bubbling within him. He could have sung for joy as he walked briskly down to the ferry, thrusting aside all remembrance of Maria's dutiful acquiescence in his departure — well she knew how great were the demands made upon a captain by the commissioning of a ship of the line.

In his yearning for solitude he urged the rowers of his boat until they sweated. On deck he gave the briefest of salutes to the quarterdeck and to the officer of the watch, before plunging below to the security and peace for which he had been yearning. There were a hundred matters to which he could have devoted his attention but he would not stay for one of them. He strode across his cabin — littered with the preparations made for when he should come on board — and out through the stern window into the great stern gallery. There, sheltered from all interruption, he could lean against the rail, and stare across the water.

The ebb was running, and with the wind light from the north-east the *Sutherland's* stern gallery looked southward down the length of the Hamoaze. To his left lay the dockyard, as busy as a beehive. Before him the glittering water was studded with shipping, with shore boats rowing hither and thither. In the distance beyond the roofs of the victualling yard he could see Mount Edgcumbe — Plymouth was out of his sight, round the corner from the Devil's Point; he would not have the satisfaction of gazing upon the roof that sheltered Lady Barbara.

Still, she was there, and he would see her tomorrow. He gripped the rail in his ecstasy until his fingers hurt him. He turned away and began to walk up and down the gallery, his hands behind his back to counterbalance the stoop necessitated by the cove above. The pain he had felt at first, three weeks back, when he had heard of Lady Barbara's marriage to Admiral Leighton was gone by now. There was only the joy in the thought that she still remembered him. Hornblower dallied with the idea that she might have travelled down to Plymouth with her husband in the expectation of seeing him. It was possible — Hornblower would not stop to think that she might have been influenced by the desire to spend a few more days with her new husband. She must have cajoled Sir Percy into sending this invitation on the moment of his arrival; Hornblower would not make allowance for the fact that any admiral must be anxious for an early opportunity to study an unknown captain placed under his command. She must have made Sir Percy ask at the Admiralty for his services — that would explain why they had found for him a new ship and a new command without a single month's interval of half pay. It was to Lady Barbara that he owed the very comforting addition of ten shillings a day to his pay which went with the command of a ship of the line.

He was a quarter of the way up the captains' list now. In less than twenty years' time — long before he was sixty — if he continued to obtain commands in this fashion he would hoist his flag as an Admiral. Then they might yellow him if they wanted to; he would be satisfied with Admiral's rank. On Admiral's half pay he could live in London, find a patron who would nominate him to a seat in Parliament. He would know power, and dignity, and security. All this was possible — and Lady Barbara still remembered him, cherished a kindly thought of him, was anxious to see him again despite the ludicrous way in which he had behaved towards her. High spirits bubbled within him again.

A seagull, wheeling motionless up wind, suddenly flapped its wings until it hovered stationary, and screamed raucously in his face. It flapped and screamed aimlessly along the gallery, and then, equally aimlessly, wheeled away again. Hornblower followed it with his eyes, and when he resumed his walk the thread of his thoughts was broken. Instantly there loomed up again into his consciousness the knowledge of the frightful need of men under which he laboured. Tomorrow he would have to confess miserably to his Admiral that the *Sutherland* was still a hundred and fifty men short of complement; he would be found wanting in the very first of a captain's duties. An officer might be the finest possible seaman, the most fearless fighter (and Hornblower did not think himself either) and yet his talents were useless if he could not man his ship.

Probably Leighton had never asked for his services at all, and he had been allotted to Leighton's squadron by some trick of fate. Leighton would suspect him of having been his wife's lover, would be consumed with jealousy, and would watch for every opportunity to achieve his ruin. He would make his life a misery to him, would plague him to madness, and would finally have him broken and dismissed the service — any admiral could break any captain if he set his mind to it. Perhaps Lady Barbara had planned to put him thus in Leighton's power, and was working his ruin in revenge for his treatment of her. That seemed much more likely than his earlier wild imaginings, thought Hornblower, the cold fit working on him.

She must have guessed just what Maria was like, and must have sent the invitation so as to have the pleasure of gloating over her weaknesses. The dinner tomorrow would be one long humiliation for him. He could not venture to draw on his next quarter's pay for another ten days at least; otherwise he would have taken Maria out to buy her the finest gown in Plymouth — although what would a Plymouth gown avail in the sight of an Earl's daughter who would undoubtedly buy all her clothes from Paris? He had not twenty pounds in the whole world now, having sent Bush and Gerard and Rayner and Hooker, his four lieutenants, out to drum up recruits. They had taken thirty men with them, the only trustworthy men in the whole ship, too. Probably there would be trouble on the lower deck in consequence — probably reaching a head tomorrow while he was dining with his admiral.

Gloomy anticipation could go no further than that. He jerked his head up with irritation, and hit it hard against one of the beams of the cove above. Then he clenched his fists and cursed the service, as he had cursed it a thousand times before. That made him laugh at himself — if Hornblower had never been able to laugh at himself he would have been, long ago, another of the mad captains in the Navy List. He took a firmer grip on his emotions and set himself to thinking seriously about the future.

The orders which had attached him to Admiral Leighton's squadron had stated briefly that he was destined for service in the Western Mediterranean, and it was an uncovenanted mercy on the part of the lords of the Admiralty to give him that much warning. He had known of captains who had laid in personal stores in the expectation of service in the West Indies only to find that they had been allotted to the Baltic convoy. The Western Mediterranean meant the Toulon blockade, the protection of Sicily, harassing the Genoese coasters, and, presumably, taking a hand in the war in Spain. It meant a more variegated life than the blockade of Brest, at least, although now that Spain was England's ally there would be far less chance of prize money.

His ability to speak Spanish seemed to make it certain that the *Sutherland* would be employed on the coast of Catalonia in concert with the Spanish army. Lord Cochrane had distinguished himself there, but Cochrane was under a cloud now. The courts martial which had followed the action in the Basque Roads were still echoing through the service, and Cochrane would be lucky if he ever got another ship — he was the standing example of the folly of an officer on the active list taking part in politics. Perhaps, thought Hornblower, trying to combat both optimism and pessimism simultaneously, he was intended by the Admiralty to supply Cochrane's place. If that were the case, it meant that his professional reputation was far higher than he dared believe. Hornblower had to battle sternly with his feelings at that thought; he found himself grinning when he warned himself that excess of emotion only resulted in his hitting his head on the beams above.

That quieted him, and he began to tell himself philosophically that all this anticipation was merely waste of effort; he would know sooner or later anyway, and all the worrying in the world would not alter his destiny a ha'porth. There were a hundred and twenty British ships of the line at sea, and nearly two hundred frigates, and in every one of these three hundred and twenty ships there was a post captain, each one a god to his crew, and presumably each one a puppet to the Admiralty. He must act like a sensible man, empty his mind of all these imaginings, and go home and spend a quiet evening with his wife untroubled by thoughts of the future.

Yet even as he left the stern gallery to pass the word for his gig to take him back a new wave of delirious anticipation surged through him at the thought of seeing Lady Barbara tomorrow.

Chapter III

"Do I look well?" asked Maria, her toilet completed.

Hornblower was buttoning his full-dress coat as he stood and looked at her; he made himself smile admiringly at her.

"Admirable, my dear," he said. "The gown sets off your figure better than any you have ever worn."

His tact was rewarded by a smile. It was no use speaking the truth to Maria, telling her that that particular shade of blue revolted against the heavy red of her cheeks. With her thick figure and coarse black hair and bad complexion Maria could never appear well dressed. At best she looked like a shopkeeper's wife; at worst like

some scrub woman dressed in finery cast off by her mistress. Those stubby red hands of hers, thought Hornblower, looking at them, were very like a scrub woman's.

"I have my Paris gloves," said Maria, noting the direction of his glance. It was the very devil, the way in which she was eager to anticipate every wish of his. It was in his power to hurt her horribly, and the knowledge made him uncomfortable.

"Better and better, he said gallantly. He stood before the mirror and twitched his coat into position.

"Full dress suits you well," said Maria, admiringly.

Hornblower's first act when he had returned to England in the *Lydia* had been to buy himself new uniforms — there had been humiliating incidents last commission as a result of the poverty of his wardrobe. He eyed himself tolerantly in the glass. This coat was of the finest blue broadcloth. The heavy epaulettes that hung at the shoulders were of real bullion, and so was the broad gold lace round the edges and the buttonholes. Buttons and cuffs flashed as he moved; it was pleasant to see the heavy gold stripes on his cuffs that marked him as a Captain with more than three years' seniority. His cravat was of thick China silk. He approved the cut of his white kerseymere breeches. The thick white silk stockings were the best that he could find — he remembered with a twinge of conscience as he gloated over them that Maria wore concealed under her skirt only cheap cotton stockings at four shillings a pair. From the crown of his head to his ankles he was dressed as a gentleman should be dressed; only about his shoes was he doubtful. Their buckles were merely pinchbeck, and he feared lest their brassiness should be accentuated by contrast with the genuine gold everywhere else — funds had begun to run low when he bought them, and he had not dared spend twenty guineas on gold buckles. He must take care this evening to do nothing to call attention to his feet. It was a pity that the sword of one hundred guineas' value voted him by the Patriotic Fund for his fight with the *Natividad* had not yet reached him. He still had to wear the fifty guinea sword which had been awarded him eight years ago after the capture of the *Castilla* as a mere lieutenant.

He took up his cocked hat — the button and lace on it were real gold, too — and his gloves.

"Are you ready, my dear?" he asked.

"Quite ready, Horatio," said Maria. She had early learned how he hated unpunctuality, and dutifully took care never to offend in this respect.

The afternoon sunlight in the street sparkled on his gold; a militia subaltern whom they passed saluted him respectfully. Hornblower noted that the lady who hung on the subaltern's arm looked more keenly at Maria than at him, and he thought he read in her glance the pitying amusement he expected. Maria was undoubtedly not the sort of wife one would expect to see on the arm of a distinguished officer. But she was his wife all the same, the friend of his childhood, and the self-indulgent soft-heartedness which had moved him to marry her had to be paid for now. Little Horatio and little Maria had died of the smallpox in a Southsea lodging — he owed her his devotion on account of that if for nothing else. And she thought she was carrying another child of his now. That had been madness, of course, but madness excusable in a man whose heart was torn with jealousy at the news that Lady Barbara was married. Still, it had to be paid for in more devotion to Maria; all his decent instincts as well as his soft-heartedness and irresolution compelled him to remain faithful to her, to give her pleasure, to act as if he were her truly devoted husband.

Nor was that all. His pride would never permit him to make public acknowledgment that he had made a mistake, a silly blunder worthy of any foolish boy. On that account alone, even if he could steel himself to break Maria's heart, he would never come to an open breach with her. Hornblower could remember the lewd comments of the navy over Nelson's matrimonial affairs, and there were Bowen's and Samson's after that. As long as he held loyalty to his wife that kind of thing would never be said about him. People were tolerant of eccentricity while they laughed at weakness. They might marvel at his devotion, but that was all. While he carried himself as if Maria was the only woman in the world for him people would be forced to assume that there was more in her constitution than was apparent to an onlooker.

"It is the Angel to which we are bidden, is it not, my dear?" asked Maria, breaking in on his thoughts.

"Why, yes."

"We have walked straight past it. You did not hear me when I spoke before."

They retraced their steps, and a jolly Devon servant maid led them through into the cool dark depths at the back of the inn. There were several persons in the oak-panelled room into which they were ushered, but for

Hornblower there was only one. Lady Barbara was there in a blue silk dress, blue-grey, the exact colour of her eyes. From a gold chain round her neck hung a sapphire pendant, but the sapphires seemed lifeless compared with her glance. Hornblower made his bow, and mumbled as he presented Maria. The fringes of the room seemed to be deep in mist; only Lady Barbara could be clearly seen. The golden sunburn which Hornblower had last seen in her cheeks had disappeared now; her complexion was as creamy white as any great lady's should be.

Hornblower became aware that someone else was speaking to him — had been speaking for some time. "A most pleasurable occasion, Captain Hornblower," he was saying. "May I present you? Captain Hornblower, Mrs Elliott. Captain Hornblower, Mrs Bolton. My Flag-captain, Captain Elliott, of the *Pinto*. And Captain Bolton of the *Caligula*, who tells me he was shipmates with you in the old *Indefatigable*."

The mists were clearing from Hornblower's eyes a little. He was able to stammer a few words, but fortunately the entrance of the innkeeper with the announcement of dinner gave him a little longer in which to collect himself. It was a circular table at which they were seated. Opposite him sat Bolton, with his ruddy cheeks and open, honest face. Hornblower still felt Bolton's grip lingering on his palm and remembered the horniness of his hand. There was nothing of the elegant world about Bolton, then. Nor was there about Mrs Bolton, who sat on Hornblower's right, between him and the Admiral. She was as plain and as dowdy as Maria herself — to Hornblower's infinite relief.

"I must congratulate you, Captain, on your appointment to the *Sutherland*," said Lady Barbara on his left. A breath of perfume was wafted from her as she spoke, and Hornblower's head swam. To smell the scent of her, and to hear her voice again, was still some romantic drug to him. He did not know what he said in reply.

"The innkeeper here," announced the Admiral to the table at large, dipping a ladle into the silver tureen before him, "swore to me that he knew the art of turtle soup, and I entrusted a turtle to his care. God send he spoke the truth. The sherry wine — George, the sherry — I trust you will find tolerable."

Hornblower incautiously took a mouthful of soup far too hot, and the pain he experienced while swallowing it down helped to bring him back to reality. He turned his head to study the Admiral to whom he would owe obedience for the next two or three years, who had won Lady Barbara's hand in marriage after a courtship that could not have endured more than three weeks. He was tall and heavily built and darkly handsome. The star of the Bath and the red ribbon set off his glittering uniform. In age he could hardly be much over forty — only a year or two older than Hornblower — so that he must have attained to post rank at the earliest age family influence could contrive it. But the perceptible fullness about his jowl indicated to Hornblower's mind either self-indulgence or stupidity; both, perhaps.

So much Hornblower saw in a few seconds' inspection. Then he forced himself to think of his manners, although between Lady Barbara and the Admiral it was hard to think clearly.

"I trust you are enjoying the best of health, Lady Barbara?" he said. A quaint quarterdeck rasp of formality crept into his voice as he tried to hit the exact tone he thought the complicated situation demanded. He saw Maria on the other side of Captain Elliott beyond Lady Barbara, raise her eyebrows a little — Maria was always sensitive to his reactions.

"Indeed, yes," said Lady Barbara, lightly. "And you, Captain?"

"I have never known Horatio better," said Maria interposing.

"That is good news," said Lady Barbara, turning towards her. "Poor Captain Elliott here is still shaken sometimes with the ague he acquired at Flushing."

It was deftly done; Maria and Lady Barbara and Elliott were at once engaged in a conversation which left no room for Hornblower. He listened for a moment, and then forced himself to turn to Mrs Bolton. She had no fund of small talk. "Yes" and "No" were all she could say, seemingly, and the Admiral on her other side was deep in talk with Mrs Elliott. Hornblower lapsed into gloomy silence. Maria and Lady Barbara continued a conversation from which Elliott soon dropped out, and which was continued across his unresisting body with a constancy which not even the arrival of the next course could interrupt.

"Can I carve you some of this beef, Mrs Elliot?" asked the Admiral. "Hornblower, perhaps you will be good enough to attend to those ducks before you. Those are neats' tongues, Bolton, a local delicacy — as you know, of course. Will you try them, unless this beef claims your allegiance? Elliott, tempt the ladies with that ragout. They may be partial to foreign kickshaws — made dishes are not to my taste. On the sideboard there is a cold

beefsteak pie which the landlord assures me is exactly like those on which his reputation is founded, and a mutton ham such as one only finds in Devonshire. Mrs Hornblower? Barbara, my dear?"

Hornblower, carving the ducks, felt a real pain in his breast at this casual use of the Christian name which was sacred to him. For a moment it impeded his neat dissection of long strips from the ducks' breasts. With an effort he completed his task, and, as no one else at the table seemed to want roast duck, he took for himself the plateful he had carved. It saved him from having to meet anyone's eyes. Lady Barbara and Maria were still talking together. It seemed to his heated imagination as if there was something specially pointed about the way Lady Barbara turned her shoulder to him. Perhaps Lady Barbara had decided that it was a poor compliment to her that he should have loved her, now that she had discovered the crudity of his taste from his choice of a wife. He hoped Maria was not being too stupid and gauche — he could overhear very little of their conversation. He could eat little of the food with which the table was covered — his appetite, always finicking, had quite disappeared. He drank thirstily of the wine which was poured for him until he realised what he was doing, and he checked himself; he disliked being drunk even more than over-eating. Then he sat and fiddled with his food on his plate, making a pretence at eating; fortunately Mrs Bolton beside him had a good appetite and was content to be silent while indulging it, as otherwise they would have made a dull pair.

Then the table was swept clear to make room for cheese and dessert.

"Pineapples not as good as we enjoyed at Panama, Captain Hornblower," said Lady Barbara, turning back to him unexpectedly. "But perhaps you will make a trial of them?"

He was almost too flustered to cut the thing with the silver knife, so much was he taken off his guard. He helped her eventually, awkwardly. Now that he had her attention again he longed to talk to her, but the words would not come — or rather, seeing that what he found he wanted to ask her was whether she liked married life, and, while he just had enough sense not to blurt out that question, he did not have enough to substitute another for it.

"Captain Elliott and Captain Bolton," she said, "have been plying me incessantly with questions about the battle between the *Lydia* and the *Natividad*. Most of them were of too technical a nature for me to answer, especially, as I told them, since you kept me immured in the orlop where I could see nothing of the fight. But everyone seems to envy me even that experience."

"Her ladyship's right," roared Bolton, across the table — his voice was even louder than when Hornblower had known him as a young lieutenant. "Tell us about it, Hornblower."

Hornblower flushed and fingered his neckcloth, conscious of every eye upon him.

"Spit it out, man," persisted Bolton; no lady's man, and oppressed by the company, he had said hardly a word so far, but the prospect of having the battle described found his tongue for him.

"The Dons put up a better fight than usual?" asked Elliott.

"Well —" began Hornblower, lured into explaining the conditions in which he had fought. Everybody listened; apt questions from one or other of the men drew him on, bit by bit. Gradually the story unfolded itself, and the loquaciousness against which Hornblower was usually on his guard led him into eloquence. He told of the long duel in the lonely Pacific, the labour and slaughter and agony, up to the moment when, leaning weakly against the quarterdeck rail, he had known triumph at the sight of his beaten enemy sinking in the darkness. He stopped self-consciously there, hot with the realisation that he had been guilty of the unforgivable sin of boasting of his own achievements. He looked round the table from face to face, expecting to read in them awkwardness or downright disapproval, pity or contempt. It was with amazement that instead he saw expressions which he could only consider admiring. Bolton, over there, who was at least five years his senior as a captain and ten in age, was eyeing him with something like hero-worship. Elliott, who had commanded a ship of the line under Nelson, was nodding his massive head with intense appreciation. The admiral, when Hornblower could bring himself to steal a glance at him, was still sitting transfixed. There might possibly be a shade of regret in his dark handsome face that his lifetime in the navy had brought him no similar opportunity for glory. But the simple heroism of Hornblower's tale had fascinated him, too; he stirred himself and met Hornblower's gaze admiringly.

"Here's a toast for us," he said, lifting his glass. "May the captain of the *Sutherland* rival the exploits of the captain of the *Lydia*."

The toast was drunk with a murmur of approval while Hornblower blushed and stammered. The admiration of men whose approval he valued was overwhelming; more especially as now he was beginning to realise that he had won it under false pretences. Only now was the memory returning to him of the sick fear with which he had waited the *Natividad's* broadsides, the horror of mutilation which had haunted him during the battle. He was one of the contemptible few, not like Leighton and Elliott and Bolton, who had never known fear in their lives. If he had told the whole truth, told of his emotions as well as of the mere manoeuvres and incidents of the fight, they would be sorry for him, as for a cripple, and the glory of the *Lydia's* victory would evaporate. His embarrassment was relieved by Lady Barbara arising from the table and the other women following her example.

"Do not sit too long over your wine," said Lady Barbara, as the men stood for them. "Captain Hornblower is a whist player of renown, and there are cards waiting for us."

Chapter IV

When they walked away from the Angel through the pitch dark street Maria clung eagerly to Hornblower's arm.

"A delightful evening, my dear," she said. "Lady Barbara seems to be a very genteel person."

"I'm glad you have enjoyed yourself," said Hornblower. He knew only too well that Maria after any party to which he accompanied her delighted in discussing the others who had been present. He shrank from the inevitable dissection of Lady Barbara which was bound to come.

"She had breeding," said Maria, inexorably, "far beyond what I was led to expect by what you told me about her."

Searching back in his memory Hornblower realised that he had only laid stress on her fine courage and her ability to mix with men without embarrassment. At that time it had pleased Maria to think of an Earl's daughter as a masculine hoyden; now she was just as pleased to revert to the traditional attitude, admiring her for her breeding, and being gratified at her condescension.

"She is a very charming woman," he said, cautiously falling in with Maria's mood.

"She asked me if I were going to accompany you on your approaching voyage, and I explained that with the hopes of the future which we were beginning to cherish it was inadvisable."

"You told her *that*?" asked Hornblower sharply. At the last moment he was able to keep the anguish out of his voice.

"She wished me joy," said Maria, "and asked me to give you her fe-felicitations."

It irked Hornblower inexpressibly to think of Maria's discussing her pregnancy with Lady Barbara. He would not allow himself to think why. But the thought of Lady Barbara's knowledge was one more complexity in the whirl of thoughts in his mind, and there was no chance of straightening anything out in the course of the short walk to their lodgings.

"Oh," said Maria when they were in their bedroom. "How tight those shoes were!"

She chaffed her feet in the white cotton stockings as she sat in the low chair; from the candle on the dressing table her shadow danced on the opposite wall. The shadow of the bed tester lay in a grim black rectangle on the ceiling.

"Hang up that best coat of yours carefully," said Maria, beginning to take the pins out of her hair.

"I'm not ready for sleep," said Hornblower, despairingly.

He felt that no price would be too great to pay at the moment to be able to slip away to the solitude of his ship. But he certainly could not do that; the hour would make such a thing odd and the full dress uniform he wore would make it preposterous.

"Not ready for sleep!" It was so like Maria to repeat his words. "How strange, after this tiring evening! Did you eat too much roast duck?"

"No," said Hornblower. It was hopeless to try to explain a too rapidly working mind to Maria, hopeless to try to escape. Any attempt to do so would only hurt her feelings, and he knew by experience he could never make himself do that. With a sigh he began to unbuckle his sword.

"You have only to compose yourself in bed and you will sleep," said Maria, from her own constant experience.

"We have few enough nights together left to us now, darling."

That was so; Admiral Leighton had told them that the *Pluto*, *Caligula* and *Sutherland* were ordered to escort as far as the Tagus an East India convoy which was even then assembling. And that raised once more the cursed question of the shortage of men — how the devil was he to complete his crew in time? Bodmin Assizes might send him a few more criminals. His lieutenants, due to return any day now, might bring in a few volunteers. But he needed fifty more topmen, and topmen could not be picked up in gaols, nor in the market squares.

"It is a hard service," said Maria, thinking of the approaching separation.

"Better than counters at eightpence a week," replied Hornblower, forcing himself to speak lightly.

Before their marriage Maria had taught in a school with graduated fees — readers paid fourpence, writers sixpence, and counters eightpence.

"Indeed yes," said Maria. "I owe much to you, Horatio. Here's your nightshirt, ready for you. The torment I went through when Miss Wentworth found I had taught Alice Stone the multiplication table although her parents only paid fourpence! And then the ungrateful minx egged that little Hopper boy to let those mice loose in the schoolroom. But I'd suffer it all again, darling, if — if that would keep you near me."

"Not while duty calls, my dear," said Hornblower, diving into his nightshirt. "But I'll be back with a bagful of guineas for prize money before two years are up. Mark my words."

"Two years!" said Maria pitifully.

Hornblower yawned elaborately, and Maria rose to the bait thus deftly cast, just as Hornblower had been sure she would.

"And you said you were not ready for sleep!" she said.

"It has come upon me now," said Hornblower. "Perhaps the admiral's port is beginning to take effect. I can hardly keep my eyes open. I shall say 'good night' now, my love."

He kissed her as she sat before the dressing table, and, turning hastily away, he climbed up into the big bed. There, lying on the farthest edge, keeping rigidly still, he lay until Maria had blown out the candle and climbed up beside him, until her breathing grew quiet and regular. Only then could he relax and change position and give rein to the galloping thoughts coursing through his mind.

He remembered what Bolton had said to him with a wink and a nod when they found themselves together at one time during the evening in a corner where they could not be overheard.

"He means six votes to the Government," said Bolton, jerking his head towards the Admiral.

Bolton was as stupid as a good seaman could be, but he had been in London recently and attended a levee and had heard the gossip. The poor old King was going mad again, a Regency was imminent, and with the Regency the Tories might go out and the Whigs might come in — the six votes of the Leighton interests were valuable. With the Marquis Wellesley as Foreign Secretary, and Henry Wellesley as Ambassador in Spain, and Sir Arthur Wellesley — what was his new title? Lord Wellington of course — as Commander in Chief in the Peninsula it was not surprising to find Lady Barbara Wellesley married to Sir Percy Leighton, and still less to find the latter given a command in the Mediterranean. The virulence of the Opposition was growing day by day, and the history of the world hung in the balance.

Hornblower shifted restlessly in bed at the thought, but a slight movement by Maria in reply fixed him rigid again. It was only a small party of men — the Wellesleys chief among them — who still had the resolution to continue the struggle against the Corsican's dominion. The smallest check, on land, at sea, or in Parliament, might pull them from their high positions, bring their heads perilously near the block, and tumble all Europe into ruin.

Some time during the evening Lady Barbara had been pouring tea, and Hornblower had found himself standing alone beside her, waiting for his refilled cup.

"It gave me pleasure," she had murmured, "when my husband told me you had been given the *Sutherland*. England needs all her best captains at present."

She must have meant more than she said then. Probably she was hinting at the necessity for maintaining Leighton in his command. It had been no indication, all the same, that she had exerted herself to obtain the appointment for Hornblower. But it was satisfactory to be able to think that she had married Sir Percy for some other reason than love. Hornblower hated the thought of Lady Barbara being in love with anyone. He began to remember every word she had said to her husband, every look she had given him. Certainly she did not seem in the least like an adoring bride. But the fact remained that she was Leighton's wife — that she was in bed with him at this very minute. Hornblower writhed in fresh anguish at the thought.

Then he checked himself. He told himself very sensibly that only misery and madness lay before him if he allowed himself to think about that, and, grasping resolutely at the tail of the first train of thought which recurred to him, he began to analyse the whist he had been playing. If he had not taken that unsuccessful finesse against that lead of Elliott's he would have saved the rubber. His play had been correct — the chances were three to two — but a gambler would not have stopped to consider that. He would have gone baldheaded for results and in this case would have achieved them. But only a gambler could risk a king being unguarded. He prided himself on the precision and science of his play. Nevertheless, he was two guineas the poorer as the result of this evening, and the loss of two guineas was a devilish serious matter at present.

He wanted to buy a litter of pigs, and two dozen fowls — a couple of sheep as well, for that matter — before weighing anchor in the *Sutherland*. There was the wine he needed, too. Some he could buy later and more advantageously in the Mediterranean, but it would be well to have five or six dozen on board at the start. The effect on the officers and men might be bad for discipline if he were not provided with every luxury as a captain should be; and if the voyage out were long and lazy he would have to entertain his brother captains — the Admiral, too, most likely — and they would look at him askance if he offered them the ship's fare on which he was content to live. The list of things he needed stretched longer and longer in his imagination. Port, sherry, and madeira. Apples and cigars. Raisins and cheeses. A dozen at least of shirts. Four more pairs of silk stockings if there was to be much shore-going formality, as seemed likely. A chest of tea. Pepper and cloves and allspice. Prunes and figs. Wax candles. All these things were necessary to his dignity as captain — and to his own pride, for he hated the idea of people thinking him poor.

He could spend all the next quarter's pay on these things and still not have bought too much. Maria would feel the pinch during the next three months, but Maria, fortunately, was used to poverty and to staving off creditors. It was hard on Maria, but if ever he became an admiral he would repay her loyalty with luxury. There were books which he wanted to buy as well; not for entertainment — he had a chest of books, including Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* for bedside reading, all old friends — but to fit him for the coming campaign. In the *Morning Chronicle* yesterday there had been a notice of 'An Account of the Present War in Spain' which he would like to have, and there were half a dozen others. The more he knew about the peninsula on whose coast he was going to fight, and of the leaders of the nation he was to help, the better. But books cost money, and he did not know where to turn for money.

He rolled over again and thought of the ill-fortune which had always dogged him in the matter of prize money. The Admiralty had refused to pay out a penny on account of the sunk *Natividad*. Since the capture of the *Castilla* when he was a young lieutenant he had never had a windfall, while frigate captains whom he knew had made thousands of pounds. It was maddening — especially as in his present poverty-stricken condition he was hampered in his exertions to complete the *Sutherland's* crew. That shortage of men was the most harassing of all his worries — that and the thought of Lady Barbara in Leighton's arms. Hornblower's thoughts had gone a full circle now, and were starting all over again. There was plenty to keep him restless and wakeful all through the weary night, until the dawn began to creep through the curtains; fantastic theories about Lady Barbara's state of mind, and hard-headed plans for making the *Sutherland* efficient for sea.

Chapter V

Captain Hornblower was walking up and down his quarterdeck amid all the last minute bustle of getting ready for sea. He was raging to himself at the length of time necessary for these final preparations although he knew

quite well that every factor causing delay was susceptible to a reasonable explanation. Two-thirds of the men scurrying about the decks, urged on by the cane of Harrison the boatswain and the rope's ends of the petty officers, were landsmen most of whom until lately had never seen the sea, let alone been in a ship. The simplest order left them merely bewildered, and they had to be led to their tasks and the ropes actually put into their hands; even then they were far more inefficient than trained seamen, because they had not learned the knack of throwing all their weight simultaneously on the rope and walking away with it. And having once set them heaving, it was hard for a petty officer to remember that a shout of 'Avast' or 'Belay' meant nothing to them. More than once the few trained seamen among them, obeying promptly, were thrown off their feet and trampled upon by the rush of landsmen still heaving away. On one occasion of this sort a water butt while being hove up by a whip to the main yardarm had simply gone away with a run again, and only the mercy of providence had saved it from going clean through the bottom of the longboat overside.

It was owing to Hornblower's own orders that the water was so late in being brought aboard. Water left months in cask became so foul and so alive with living things that he had put off bringing it aboard until the last possible moment. Even a gain of a day or two was desirable. That twelve tons of biscuit had also been delayed was the result of the usual incompetence of the victualling yard, whose officials seemed incapable of reading or writing or figuring. The complication due to the fact that a shore boat with captain's stores was having to be unloaded at the same time, and its precious cargo passed carefully down the after hatchway, was due to the Patriotic Fund's delay in sending down to him the sword value one hundred guineas which he had been awarded for his fight with the *Natividad*. No shopkeeper or ship chandler would give credit to a captain about to sail on a new commission. The sword had only arrived yesterday, barely in time for him to pledge it with Duddingstone the chandler, and Duddingstone had only grudgingly given him credit on it, forcing him to promise faithfully to redeem it at the earliest opportunity.

"A sight too much writing on this for me," said Duddingstone, pointing with a stubby forefinger at the wordy legend which the Patriotic Fund had had engraved, at vast expense, upon the blue steel of the blade.

Only the gold on the hilt and scabbard, and the seed pearls on the pommel, had any intrinsic value.

Duddingstone, to give him his due, had been quite right in saying that it was hardly worth forty guineas' credit at his shop, even allowing for his profit and the chance of its being redeemed. But he had kept his word and had sent off the stores at dawn next morning — one more complication in the business of preparing for sea. Along the gangway Wood the purser was dancing with rage and anxiety.

"God damn and blast all you hamfisted yokels!" he was saying. "And you, sir, down there. Take that grin off your face and be more careful, or I'll have you clapped under hatches to sail with us today. Easy, there, easy! Christ, rum at seven guineas an anker isn't meant to be dropped like pig iron!"

Wood was supervising the loading of the rum. The old hands were doing their best to make sure that the clumsiness of the new ones would result in the staving of a keg or two, so as to swill from the leaks, and the grinning lightermen overside were abetting them. Hornblower could see by the red faces and uncontrollable hilarity that some of the men had succeeded in getting at the spirits, despite Wood's eagle eye and the marine sentries on guard; but he had no intention of interfering. It would merely compromise his dignity to try and keep sailors from stealing rum if they had the barest opportunity — no one had ever yet succeeded in that task.

From this position of vantage beside the quarterdeck rail he looked down upon a curious bit of bye-play on the main deck. A bewildered young giant — a tin miner, Hornblower guessed, from his biceps — had rounded upon Harrison, apparently driven frantic by the volley of orders and blasphemy hurled at him. But Harrison at forty-five had fought his way up to the boatswain's rank through hundreds of such encounters, and in his prime might have contested the highest honours of the prize ring. He slipped the Cornishman's clumsy punch and felled him with a crashing blow on the jaw. Then without ceremony he seized him by the scruff of the neck and kicked him across the deck to the tackle which was waiting. Dazed, the Cornish-man took hold with the others and heaved with them, while Hornblower nodded approvingly.

The Cornishman had made himself liable to 'death, or such less penalty' — as the Articles of War said, by raising his hand to his superior officer. But it was not the moment to invoke the Articles of War, even though they had been read over to the Cornishman last night on his compulsory enlistment. Gerard had sailed round with the longboat and had raided Redruth and Camborne and St Ives, taking each place by surprise and

returning with fifty stout Cornish-men who could hardly be expected yet to appreciate the administrative machinery of the service which they had joined. In a month's time, perhaps, when everyone on board would have learnt the heinousness of such an offence, a court martial might be needed, and a flogging — death, perhaps — but at the present time it was best to do what Harrison had just done, and crack the man on the jaw and set him to work again. Hornblower found time to thank God he was a captain and out of the hurly burly, for any attempt on his part at cracking men on the jaw would be a lamentable failure, he knew. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, and was reminded of the fact that he was horribly tired. Night after night now he had not slept, and his days had been spent in all the numerous activities necessitated by commissioning a ship of the line. The nervous tension induced by his worrying about Lady Barbara and Maria, by money troubles and manning troubles, had prevented him from leaving the details to Bush and Gerard, even though he knew they were perfectly capable of dealing with everything. Worry and anxiety would not allow him to rest, and had goaded him into activity. He felt sick and stupid and weary. Day after day he had longed for the moment when he should get to sea, and could settle down into the comfortable solitude which surrounds a ship's captain, leaving all shore worries behind him, even leaving Lady Barbara behind him. He had the sense to realise that this new meeting with her had thoroughly upset him. He had given up as insoluble the problem of whether or not she had secured his nomination to the *Sutherland*; he had tried his hardest to combat his consuming jealousy of her husband. He had persuaded himself in the end that what he had wanted more than anything else was to escape from her, just as he wanted to escape from Maria's cloying sweetness and lovable stupidity, from all the complex misery of life on land. He had yearned for the sea as a castaway yearns for a drink of water. Two days ago the prospect of thus standing on the deck in the final bustle of departure seemed marvellously desirable to him. Now, he realised with a gulp, he was not quite so sure. It was like having a limb torn out by the roots to be leaving Lady Barbara like this. And, oddly enough, he was distressed at leaving Maria, too. There would be a child born before he could be home again, a child well over a year old, running about, perhaps even saying its first few words. Maria would have to go through her pregnancy and confinement without his moral support; and he knew, despite the brave way in which she had dismissed the subject, and despite her stout-hearted good-bye, how much she would miss him. It was that which made it so painful to leave her.

With all her courage her lips had trembled and her eyes had been wet when she lifted her face to him, in the sitting-room of their lodgings; they had agreed long ago that it was foolish to prolong the pangs of parting by her accompanying him on board. Even then the urge to be off had still been strong enough to take him from her arms without a pang, but it was different now. Hornblower mentally spurned himself as a sentimental fool, and glanced impatiently up at the masthead vane. Without a doubt the wind was backing northerly. If it should come round to north or nor'east the admiral would be anxious to start. The convoy, and the *Pluto* and *Caligula*, were assembled now, or pretty nearly, in Cawsand Bay; if the admiral decided not to wait for the stragglers he would be irritated at the *Sutherland's* delay, be it never so unavoidable.

"Keep the men to it, Mr Bush," shouted Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir," answered Bush, patiently.

That patience in his voice irritated Hornblower further. It implied a slight rebuke, a rebuke only apparent to Bush and Hornblower. Hornblower knew that Bush was working as hard as he could, and that he was working the men as hard as he could, too. Hornblower's order had been a mere manifestation of impatience, and Bush knew it. Hornblower was annoyed with himself for having so unguardedly broken his rule of never saying an unnecessary word to his officers, and by way of advancing a reason for having spoken he went down below to his cabin, as he had not intended to do.

The sentry stood aside for him as he entered the door of his sleeping cabin on the half deck. There was plenty of room here; even the present of a twelve pounder left ample space for his cot and his desk and his chest. Polwheal had set everything to rights here already; Hornblower passed through into the main cabin. Here there was ample room, too; the Dutchmen who designed the *Sutherland* had lofty ideas regarding the comfort of the captain. The cabin extended across the whole width of the stern, and the great stern windows gave plenty of light. The stone-coloured paint made the cabin sunny and cheerful, and the black bulks of a twelve pounder on each side made an effective colour scheme. A couple of hands were standing by Polwheal in here while he lay on his stomach packing away cases of wine into the lockers. Hornblower glared at them, realising

that he could not yet retire to the solitude of the stern gallery while he should be under their observation through the stern windows.

He went back to the sleeping cabin and threw himself with a sigh on his cot, but his restlessness brought him to his feet again and across to his desk. He took out a crackling document and sat down to look through it again.

Orders to the Inshore Squadron, Western Mediterranean, by Sir Percy Gilbert Leighton, K.B., Rear Admiral of the Red, Commanding.

There was nothing unusual about them at all-night signals, private signals, British, Spanish, and Portuguese; rendezvous in case of separation; a line or two regarding the tactics to be adopted in the event of encountering while with the convoy a hostile squadron of any force. The flagship would accompany the Lisbon convoy of transports into the Tagus — calling for orders, presumably; the *Caligula* was to take the storeships *Harriet* and *Nancy* to Port Mahon; the *Sutherland* was to escort the East Indiamen as far as Latitude 35° before heading for the Straits, to the final rendezvous off Palamos Point. Captains of His Britannic Majesty's Ships were informed that the coast of Andalusia, with the exception of Cadiz and Tarifa, was in the hands of the French, and so also was the coast of Catalonia from the frontier of Tarragona. At the same time captains entering any Spanish port whatever must take the most careful precautions lest the French should be in occupation there. The attached schedule of instructions to masters of ships in the convoy was mostly repetition of all this.

But to Hornblower, musing over these orders, they told a very full and complicated story. They told how, although Trafalgar had been fought five years back, and although England was maintaining at sea the greatest fleet the world had ever seen, she was still having to strain every nerve in the struggle. The Corsican was still building fleets in nearly every port in Europe, Hamburg, Antwerp, Brest, Toulon, Venice, Trieste, and a score of places in between, so that outside every port storm-beaten squadrons of English battleships had to maintain an unceasing watch — a hundred and twenty ships of the line could be found employment, if they could have been spared, on the blockade alone, without regard to the other duties. And at the same time every creek and fishing harbour along half the coasts of Europe maintained privateers, even if hardly better than big rowboats full of men, always ready to dash out and capture the helpless British merchant ships to be found in every sea. To guard against these depredations British frigates had to maintain unceasing patrol, and no King's ship could be despatched on any mission whatever without taking advantage of the opportunity given to convoy merchant shipping on part of their journey at least. In this war against the world only the most careful and scientific distribution of force could prevail, and now, mustering all her strength, England was taking the offensive. Her armies were on the march in Spain, and three ships of the line, scraped together from other duties from which they might just be spared, were being sent to attack the vulnerable flank which Bonaparte had incautiously exposed by his advance into the Peninsula. The *Sutherland* was destined to be the point of the spearhead which was making the thrust against the tyranny which dominated all Europe.

All very well, said Hornblower to himself. Automatically he was pacing up and down again, his head bent under the deck beams, and his walk limited to four strides between the twelve pounder and the door. It was an honourable and responsible position, and yet he had not the men to man his ship. To make or set sail in the way it should be done in a King's ship — or rather, with the rapidity and facility which might make the difference between defeat and victory — called for two hundred and fifty trained seamen. And if all the trained men were aloft at once there would be none at the guns. To serve the guns, if both broadsides were in action at once, called for four hundred and fifty men — two hundred of them, he admitted, might be untrained — and nearly a hundred more carrying powder and engaged upon necessary duties about the ship. He had a hundred and ninety trained men from the *Lydia* and a hundred and ninety raw landsmen. During the commissioning of the *Sutherland* only twenty old *Lydias* had deserted, abandoning two years' pay and risking the penalty of a thousand lashes, and he knew he was lucky at that. Some captains would have lost two-thirds of their crews during as long a stay as this in a home port. But those twenty missing men would have been desperately useful now. He was a hundred and seventy men — a hundred and seventy *trained* men — short of complement. In six weeks he might drill his landsmen, all except that proportion of hopeless ones, diseased, crippled, or idiotic whom he could expect to find among them, into passable seamen and gunners. But in less than six weeks, possibly in less than three, he would be in action on the coast of Spain. By tomorrow night,

even, he might be at grips with the enemy — the wind was backing towards the east and might bring out a French squadron of ships of the line from Brest, evading the blockading squadron, and crammed with men, to fall upon such a tempting prize as the East India convoy. What chance would the *Sutherland* stand, yardarm to yardarm with a French first rate, with only two-thirds of her proper crew, and half of them seasick?

Hornblower clenched his fists again, boiling with exasperation at the thought. It was he who would be held responsible for any disaster, who would have to sustain the contempt or the pity — either alternative horrible to contemplate — of his brother captains. He yearned and hungered for men, more passionately than ever a miser desired gold, or a lover his mistress. And now he had no more chance of finding any. Gerard's raid upon St Ives and Redruth had been his last effort; he knew that he had been fortunate to get as many as fifty men from there. There would be no chance of obtaining any from the convoy. Government transports to Lisbon, government Storeships to Port Mahon, East India Company's ships — he could not take a man from any of those. He felt like a man in a cage.

He went across to his desk again and took out his private duplicate of the ship's watch bill, which he and Bush had sat up through most of the night to draw up. It was largely upon that watch bill that the efficiency of the ship would depend in her short-handed condition; the trained men had to be distributed evenly over every strategic point, with just the right proportion of landsmen to facilitate training, and yet not to impede the working of the ship. Foretop, maintop, and mizzen top; forecastle and afterguard; every man had to be assigned a duty, so that whatever evolution out of the thousand possible was being carried out, in fair weather or foul, in daylight or darkness, he would go to his position without confusion or waste of time knowing exactly what he had to do. He had to have his place at the guns allotted him under the command of the officer of his division.

Hornblower looked through the watch bill again. It was satisfactory as far as it went. It had a kind of cardcastle stability — adequate enough at first sight, but incapable of standing any strain or alteration. Casualties or disease would bring the whole thing down in ruins. He flung the watch bill down as he remembered that, if the cruise were a healthy one, he might expect one death every ten days from accident or natural causes without regard to hostile action. Fortunately it was the unseasoned men who were the more likely to die.

Hornblower cocked his ear at the din on the main deck. The hoarse orders, the pipes of the boatswain's mates, and the stamp-and-go of many feet told him that they were heaving up the longboat from overside. A strange squeaking, unlike that of the sheaves in the blocks, which had reached him for some time and which he had been unable to identify so far, he suddenly realised was the noise of the various families of pigs — captain's stores and wardroom stores — at last come on board. He heard a sheep bleating and then a cock crowing to the accompaniment of a roar of laughter. He had brought no cock along with his hens; it must belong to someone in the wardroom or the midshipmen's berth.

Someone thumped on the cabin door, and Hornblower snatched up his papers and dropped into his chair. Not for worlds would he be seen standing up and obviously awaiting the hour of departure with discomposure.

"Come in!" he roared.

A scared young midshipman put his head round the door — it was Longley, Gerard's nephew, newly come to sea.

"Mr Bush says the last of the stores are just coming on board, sir," he piped.

Hornblower eyed him with a stony indifference which was the only alternative to grinning at the frightened little imp.

"Very good," he growled, and busied himself with his papers.

"Yes, sir," said the boy, after a moment's hesitation, withdrawing.

"Mr Longley!" roared Hornblower.

The child's face, more terrified than ever, reappeared round the door.

"Come inside, boy," said Hornblower, testily. "Come in and stand still. What was it you said last?"

"Er — sir — I said — Mr Bush —"

"No, nothing of the sort. What was it you said *last*?"

The child's face wrinkled into the extreme of puzzlement, and then cleared as he realised the point of the question.

"I said 'Yes, sir'," he piped.

"And what ought you to have said?"

"Aye aye, sir."

"Right. Very good."

"Aye aye, sir."

That boy had a certain amount of quickness of wit, and did not allow fright to bereave him entirely of his senses. If he learned quickly how to handle the men he would make a useful warrant officer. Hornblower put away his papers and locked his desk; he took a few more turns up and down his cabin, and then, a sufficient interval having elapsed to conserve his dignity, he went up to the quarterdeck.

"Make sail when you're ready, Mr Bush," he said.

"Aye aye, sir. Easy with those falls there, you — you —"

Even Bush had reached the condition when there was no more savour in oaths. The ship was in a horrible state of muddle, the decks were filthy, the crew exhausted. Hornblower stood with his hands behind him in a careful attitude of Olympian detachment as the order was given for all hands to make sail, and the petty officers drove the crew, stupid with weariness, to their stations. Savage, the senior midshipman, whom Hornblower had seen grow from boyhood to manhood under his eye, came shouting for the afterguard to man the main topsail halliards. Savage was wan and his eyes were bloodshot; a night of debauchery in some foul haunt in Plymouth had not left him in the best of conditions. As he shouted he put his hand to his temple, where clearly the din he was making was causing him agony. Hornblower smiled to himself at the sight — the next few days would sweat him clean again.

"Captain of the afterguard!" yelled Savage, his voice cracking. "I don't see the afterguard coming aft! Quicker than that, you men! Clap on to the main topsail halliards, there! I say, you master-at-arms. Send the idlers aft. D'ye hear, there!"

A boatswain's mate headed a rush to the mizzen rigging at Hornblower's elbow. Hornblower saw young Longley standing hesitating for a second, looking up at the men preceding him, and then, with a grimace of determination, the boy leaped for the ratlines and scrambled up after them. Hornblower appreciated the influences at work upon him — his fear of the towering height above him, and then his stoical decision that he could follow wherever the other men could venture. Something might be made of that boy.

Bush was looking at his watch and fuming to the master.

"Nine minutes already! God, look at them! The marines are more like sailors!"

The marines were farther aft, at the mizzen topsail halliards. Their booted feet went clump-clump-clump on the deck. They did their work like soldiers, with soldierly rigidity, as if at drill. Sailors always laughed at that, but there was no denying that at the present moment it was the marines who were the more efficient. The hands scurried from halliards to braces. A roar from Harrison forward told that the mooring was slipped, and Hornblower, casting a final glance up at the windvane, saw that the wind had backed so far easterly that rounding Devil's Point was not going to be simple. With the yards braced round the *Sutherland* turned on her keel and slowly gathered way. Women's screeches and a fluttering of handkerchiefs from the shore boats told how some of the wives whom Hornblower had turned out twenty-four hours ago had put off to say good-bye. Close overside he saw a woman in the stern-sheets of a boat blubbering unashamed, her mouth wide open and the tears running like rivers. It was no more than an even chance that she would never see her man again.

"Keep your eyes inboard, there!" yelled Harrison, who had detected some member of the crew waving farewell. Every man's attention must be kept strictly to the business in hand now.

Hornblower felt the ship heel as Bush directed her course as near to the wind as she would lie; with Devil's Point ahead, and an unfamiliar ship to handle, it was clearly as well to get as far to windward as possible. That heeling of the ship awakened a storm of memories. It was not until one was in a ship under sail, with the deck unstable under one's feet, and the familiar rattle of the blocks and piping of the rigging in one's ear, that the thousand and one details of life at sea became vivid and recognisable again. Hornblower found himself swallowing hard with excitement.

They were shaving the Dockyard Point as closely as possible. Most of the dockyard hands left their work to stare at them, stolidly, but not a soul among them raised a cheer. In seventeen years of warfare they had seen too many King's ships putting out to sea to be excited about this one. Hornblower knew that he ought to have a band on board, to strike up 'Britons, Strike Home' or 'Come cheer up, my lads, 'tis to glory we steer,' but he

had no band; he had not the money for one, and he was not going to call on the marine fifer or the ship's fiddler to make a tinny little noise at this moment. Stonehouse Pool was opening up before them now, and beyond it lay the roofs of Plymouth. Maria was there somewhere; perhaps she could see the white topsails, closehailed to the wind. Perhaps Lady Barbara was there, looking out at the *Sutherland*. Hornblower gulped again.

A little flaw of wind, blowing down Stonehouse Pool, took the ship nearly aback. She staggered until the helmsman allowed her to pay off. Hornblower looked round to starboard. They were coming dangerously close in to Cremyll — he had been correct in his surmise that the *Sutherland* would make plenty of leeway. He watched the wind, and the set of the tide off the point. He looked ahead at Devil's Point on the starboard bow. It might be necessary at any moment to put the ship about and beat up to the northward again before breasting the tide once more. At the very moment when he saw that they would weather the point he saw Bush raise his head to bark the orders to go about.

"Keep her steady as she goes, Mr Bush," he said; the quiet order was an announcement that he had taken charge, and Bush closed the mouth which had opened to give the order.

They cleared the buoy a bare fifty yards from any danger, with the water creaming under the lee now as she lay over to the fresh breeze. Hornblower had not interfered to demonstrate the superiority of his seamanship and judgment, but merely because he could not stand by and watch something being done a little less artistically than was possible. In the cold-blooded calculation of chances he was superior to his lieutenant, as his ability at whist proved. Hornblower stood sublimely unconscious of his motives; in fact he hardly realised what he had done — he never gave a thought to his good seamanship.

They were heading straight for the Devil's Point now; Hornblower kept his eye on it as they opened up the Sound.

"You can put the helm aport now," he said. "And set the t'gallant sails, Mr Bush."

With the wind abeam they headed into the Sound, the rugged Staddon Heights to port and Mount Edgcumbe to starboard. At every yard they advanced towards the open sea the wind blew fresher, calling a keener note from the rigging. The *Sutherland* was feeling the sea a little now, heaving perceptibly to the waves under her bows. With the motion, the creaking of the wooden hull became audible — noticeable on deck, loud below until the ear grew indifferent to the noise.

"God blast these bloody farmers!" groaned Bush, watching the way in which the top gallant sails were being set

Drake's Island passed away to windward; the *Sutherland* turned her stern to it as with the wind on her port quarter she headed down the Sound. Before the top gallant sails were set they were abreast of Picklecomb Point and opening up Cawsand Bay. There was the convoy — six East Indiamen with their painted ports like men of war, all flying the gridiron flag of the Honourable Company and one sporting a broad pendant for all the world like a king's commodore; the two naval storeships and the four transports destined for Lisbon. The three-decker *Pluto* and the *Caligula* were rolling to their anchors to seaward of them.

"Flagship's signalling, sir," said Bush, his glass to his eye. "You ought to have reported it a minute ago, Mr Vincent."

The *Pluto* had not been in sight more than thirty seconds, but there was need for promptness in acknowledging this, the first signal made by the admiral.

"*Sutherland's* pendant, sir," said the unfortunate signal midshipman, staring through his glass. "Negative. No. 7. Number Seven is 'Anchor,' sir."

"Acknowledge," snapped Hornblower. "Get those t'gallants in again and back the main topsail, Mr Bush."

With his telescope Hornblower could see men racing up the rigging of the ships. In five minutes both the *Pluto* and the *Caligula* had a cloud of canvas set.

"They commissioned at the Nore, blast 'em," growled Bush.

At the Nore, the gateway of the busiest port in the world, ships of the Royal Navy had the best opportunity of completing their crews with prime seamen taken from incoming merchant vessels, in which it was not necessary to leave more than half a dozen hands to navigate their ships up to London river. In addition, the *Pluto* and *Caligula* had enjoyed the advantage of having been able to drill their crews during the voyage down channel. Already they were standing out of the bay. Signals were soaring up the flagship's halliards.

"To the convoy, sir," said Vincent. "Make haste. Up anchor. Make all sail conformable with the weather, sir. Jesus, there's a gun."

An angry report and a puff of smoke indicated that the admiral was calling pointed attention to his signals. The Indiamen, with their heavy crews and man o' war routine, were already under weigh. The shoreships and transports were slower, as was only to be expected. The other ships were backing and filling outside for what seemed an interminable time before the last of them came creeping out.

"Nother signal from the flagship, sir," said Vincent, reading the flags and then hurriedly referring to the signal book. "Take up stations as previously ordered."

That would be to windward of the convoy, and, with the wind abaft as it was, in the rear. Then the ships of war could always dash down to the rescue if a Frenchman tried to cut off one of the convoy under their noses. Hornblower felt the freshening breeze on his cheek. The flagship's top gallants were set, and as he looked, he saw her royals being spread as well. He would have to conform, but with the wind increasing as it was he fancied that it would not be long before they would have to come in again. Before nightfall they would be reefing topsails. He gave the order to Bush, and watched while the crew gathered at Harrison's bellow of "All hands make sail." He could see the landsmen flinch, not unnaturally — the *Sutherland's* main royal yard was a hundred and ninety feet above the deck and swaying in a dizzy circle now that the ship was beginning to pitch to the Channel rollers.

Hornblower turned his attention to the flagship and the convoy; he could not bear the sight of frightened men being hounded up the rigging by petty officers with ropes' ends. It was necessary, he knew. The Navy did not — of necessity could not — admit the existence of the sentences 'I cannot' and 'I am afraid.' No exceptions could be made, and this was the right moment to grain it into the men, who had never known compulsion before, that every order must be obeyed. If his officers were to start with leniency, leniency would always be expected, and leniency, in a service which might at any moment demand of a man the willing sacrifice of his life, could only be employed in a disciplined crew which had had time to acquire understanding. But Hornblower knew, and sympathised with, the sick terror of a man driven up to the masthead of a ship of the line when previously he had never been higher than the top of a haystack. It was a pitiless, cruel service.

"Peace'll be signed," grumbled Bush to Crystal, the master, "before we make sailors out of these clodhoppers." A good many of the clodhoppers in question had three days before been living peacefully in their cottages with never a thought of going to sea. And here they were under a grey sky, pitching over a grey sea, with a keener breeze than ever they had known blowing round them, overhead the terrifying heights of the rigging, and underfoot the groaning timbers of a reeling ship.

They were well out to sea now, with the Eddystone in sight from the deck, and under the pressure of the increased sail the *Sutherland* was growing lively. She met her first big roller, and heaved as it reached her bow, rolled corkscrew fashion, as it passed under her, and then pitched dizzily as it went away astern. There was a wail of despair from the waist.

"Off the decks, there, blast you!" raved Harrison. "Keep it off the decks!"

Men were being seasick already, with the freedom of men taken completely by surprise. Hornblower saw a dozen pale forms staggering and lurching towards the lee rails. One or two men had sat down abruptly on the deck, their hands to their temples. The ship heaved and corkscrewed again, soaring up and then sinking down again as if she would never stop, and the shuddering wail from the waist was repeated. With fixed and fascinated eyes Hornblower watched a wretched yokel vomiting into the scuppers. His stomach heaved in sympathy, and he found himself swallowing hard. There was sweat on his face although he suddenly felt bitterly cold.

He was going to be sick, too, and that very soon. He wanted to be alone, to vomit in discreet privacy, away from the amused glances of the crowd on the quarterdeck. He braced himself to speak with his usual stern indifference, but his ear told him that he was only achieving an unsuccessful perkiness.

"Carry on, Mr Bush," he said. "Call me if necessary."

He had lost his sea legs, too, during this stay in harbour — he reeled as he crossed the deck, and he had to cling with both hands to the rail of the companion. He reached the halfdeck safely and lurched to the after cabin door, stumbling over the coaming, Polwheal was laying dinner at the table.

"Get out!" snarled Hornblower, breathlessly. "Get out!"

Polwheal vanished, and Hornblower reeled out into the stern gallery, fetching up against the rail, leaning his head over towards the foaming wake. He hated the indignity of seasickness as much as he hated the misery of it. It was of no avail to tell himself, as he did, despairingly, while he clutched the rail, that Nelson was always seasick, too, at the beginning of a voyage. Nor was it any help to point out to himself the unfortunate coincidence that voyages always began when he was so tired with excitement and mental and physical exertion that he was ready to be sick anyway. It was true, but he found no comfort in it as he leaned groaning against the rail with the wind whipping round him.

He was shivering with cold now as the nor'easter blew; his heavy jacket was in his sleeping cabin, but he felt he could neither face the effort of going to fetch it, nor could he call Polwheal to bring it. And this, he told himself with bitter irony, was the calm solitude for which he had been yearning while entangled in the complications of the shore. Beneath him the pintles of the rudder were groaning in the gudgeons, and the sea was seething yeastily in white foam under the counter. The glass had been falling since yesterday, he remembered, and the weather was obviously working up into a nor'easterly gale. Hounded before it, across the Bay of Biscay he could see no respite before him for days, at this moment when he felt he could give everything he had in the world for the calm of the Hamoaze again.

His officers were never sick, he thought resentfully, or if they were they were just sick and did not experience this agonising misery. And forward two hundred seasick landsmen were being driven pitilessly to their tasks by overbearing petty officers. It did a man good to be driven to work despite his seasickness, always provided that discipline was not imperilled thereby as it would be in his case. And he was quite, quite sure that not a soul on board felt as miserable as he did, or even half as miserable. He leaned against the rail again, moaning and blaspheming. Experience told him that in three days he would be over all this and feeling as well as ever in his life, but at the moment the prospect of three days of this was just the same as the prospect of an eternity of it. And the timbers creaked and the rudder groaned and the wind whistled and the sea hissed, everything blending into an inferno of noise as he clung shuddering to the rail.

Chapter VI

When the first paroxysm was over Hornblower was able to note that the breeze was undoubtedly freshening. It was gusty, too, sudden squalls bringing flurries of rain which beat into the stern gallery where he was standing. He was suddenly consumed with anxiety as to what would happen aloft if the *Sutherland* were caught in a wilder squall than usual with a crew unhandy at getting in sail. The thought of the disgrace involved in losing spars or canvas in sight of the whole convoy drove all thought of seasickness out of his head. Quite automatically he went forward to his cabin, put on his pilot coat, and ran up on deck. Gerard had taken over from Bush.

"Flagship's shortening sail, sir," he said, touching his hat.

"Very good. Get the royals in," said Hornblower, turning to look round the horizon through his glass.

The convoy was behaving exactly as convoys always did, scattering before the wind as if they really wanted to be snapped up by a privateer. The Indiamen were in a fairly regular group a mile ahead to leeward, but the six other ships were hull down and spread out far beyond them.

"Flagship's been signalling to the convoy, sir," said Gerard.

Hornblower nearly replied "I expect she has," but refrained himself in time and limited himself to the single word "Yes". As he spoke a fresh series of flaghoists soared up the *Pluto's* halliards.

"*Caligula's* pendant," read off the signal midshipman. "Make more sail. Take station ahead of convoy."

So Bolton was being sent ahead to enforce the orders which the transports had disregarded. Hornblower watched the *Caligula* re-set her royals and go plunging forward over the grey sea in pursuit of the transports. She would have to run down within hailing distance and possibly have to fire a gun or two before she could achieve anything; masters of merchant ships invariably paid no attention at all to flag signals even if they could read them. The Indiamen were getting in their top gallants as well — they had the comfortable habit of shortening sail at nightfall. Happy in the possession of a monopoly of the Eastern trade, and with passengers

on board who demanded every luxury, they had no need to worry about slow passages and could take care that their passengers ran no risk of being disturbed in their sleep by the stamping and bustle of taking off sail if the weather changed. But from all appearances it might have been deliberately planned to spread the convoy out still farther. Hornblower wondered how the admiral would respond, and he turned his glass upon the *Pluto*.

Sure enough, she burst into hoist after hoist of signals, hurling frantic instructions at the Indiamen.

"I'll lay he wishes he could court martial 'em," chuckled one midshipman to the other.

"Five thousand pounds, those India captains make out of a round voyage," was the reply. "What do they care about admirals? God, who'd be in the Navy?"

With night approaching and the wind freshening there was every chance of the convoy being scattered right at the very start of its voyage. Hornblower began to feel that his admiral was not showing to the best advantage. The convoy should have been kept together; in a service which accepted no excuses Sir Percy Leighton stood already condemned. He wondered what he would have done in the admiral's place, and left the question unanswered, vaguely telling himself the profound truth that discipline did not depend on the power to send before a court martial; he did not think that he could have done better.

"*Sutherland's* pendant," said the signal midshipman, breaking in on his reverie. "Take — night — station."

"Acknowledge," said Hornblower.

That was an order easy to obey. His night station was a quarter of a mile to windward of the convoy. Here he was drawing up fast upon the Indiamen to his correct position. He watched the *Pluto* go down past the Indiamen in the wake of the *Caligula*; apparently the admiral had decided to make use of his flagship as a connecting link between the halves of the convoy. Night was coming down fast and the wind was still freshening.

He tried to walk up and down the reeling deck so as to get some warmth back into his shivering body; his stomach was causing him terrible misgivings again now with this period of waiting. He fetched up against the rail, hanging on while he fought down his weakness. Of all his officers, Gerard, handsome, sarcastic, and able, was the one before whom he was least desirous of vomiting. His head was spinning with sickness and fatigue, and he thought that if he could only lie down he might perhaps sleep, and in sleep he could forget the heaving misery of his interior. The prospect of being warm and snug in his cot grew more and more urgent and appealing. Hornblower held on grimly until his eye told him, in the fast fading light, that he was in his correct station. Then he turned to Gerard.

"Get the t'gallants in, Mr Gerard."

He took the signal slate, and wrote on it, painfully, while warring with his insurgent stomach, the strictest orders his mind could devise to the officer of the watch with regard to keeping in sight, and to windward, of the convoy.

"There are your orders, Mr Gerard," he said. He quavered on the last word, and he did not hear Gerard's "Aye aye, sir", as he fled below.

This time it was agony to vomit, for his stomach was completely empty. Polwheal showed up in the cabin as he came staggering back, and Hornblower cursed him savagely and sent him away again. In his sleeping cabin he fell across his cot, and lay there for twenty minutes before he could rouse himself to sit up. Then he dragged off his two coats, and, still wearing his shirt and waistcoat and breeches, he got under the blankets with a groan. The ship was pitching remorselessly as she ran before the wind, and all the timbers complained in spasmodic chorus. Hornblower set his teeth at every heave, while the cot in which he lay soared upward twenty feet or more and then sank hideously downward under the influence of each successive wave.

Nevertheless, with no possibility of consecutive thinking, it was easy for exhaustion to step in. He was so tired that with his mind empty he fell asleep in a few minutes, motion and noise and seasickness notwithstanding. So deeply did he sleep that when he awoke he had to think for a moment before he realised where he was. The heaving and tossing, of which he first became conscious, was familiar and yet unexpected. The door into the after cabin, hooked open, admitted a tiny amount of grey light, in which he blinked round him. Then, simultaneously with the return of recollections, his stomach heaved again. He got precariously to his feet, staggered across the after cabin, to the rail of the stern gallery, and then peered miserably across the grey sea in the first faint light of dawn, with the wind whipping round him. There was no sail in sight from there, and

the consequent apprehension helped him to recover himself. Putting on coat and greatcoat again, he walked up to the quarterdeck.

Gerard was in charge of the deck, so that the middle watch was not yet ended. Hornblower gave a surly nod in reply to Gerard's salute, and stood looking forward over the grey sea, flecked with white. The breeze was shrilling in the rigging, just strong enough for it to be unnecessary to reef topsails, and right aft, blowing round Hornblower's ears as he stood with his hands on the carved rail. Ahead lay four of the Indiamen, in a straggling line ahead, and then he saw the fifth and sixth not more than a mile beyond them. Of the flagship, of the transports, of the store ships, of the *Caligula*, there was nothing to be seen at all. Hornblower picked up the speaking trumpet.

"Masthead, there! What do you see of the flagship!"

"Northin', sir. Northin' in right nowhere, sir, 'cepting for the Indiamen, sir."

And that was that, thought Hornblower, replacing the speaking trumpet. A rare beginning to a voyage. The traverse board showed that the *Sutherland* had held steadily on her course through the night, and the deck log on the slate showed speeds of eight and nine knots. Before long Ushant should be in sight in this clear weather; he had done all his duty in keeping the Indiamen under his eye, on their course, and under canvas conformable with the weather. He only wished that the queasiness of his stomach would permit him to be quite confident about it, for the gloomy depression of seasickness filled him with foreboding. If a victim had to be found, it would be he, he felt sure. He gauged the strength of the wind and decided that it would be inadvisable to set more sail in the hope of overtaking the rest of the convoy. And with that, having reached the satisfactory conclusion that he could do nothing to avert blame if blame were coming to him, he felt more cheerful. Life at sea had taught him to accept the inevitable philosophically.

Eight bells sounded, and he heard the call for the watch below. Bush arrived on the quarterdeck to relieve Gerard. Hornblower felt Bush's keen glance directed at him, and ignored it in surly silence. He had made it a rule never to speak unnecessarily, and he had found so much satisfaction in it that he was never going to break it. There was satisfaction to be found now, in paying no attention to Bush, who kept stealing anxious glances at him, ready to respond the moment he was spoken to, like a dog with his master. Then it occurred to Hornblower that he must be cutting a very undignified figure; unshaved and tousled, and probably pale green with seasickness. He went off below in a pet again.

In the cabin where he sat with his head in his hands all the hanging fitments were swaying in the slow time set by the creaking of timbers. But as long as he did not look at them he was not uncontrollably sick. When Ushant had been sighted he would lie down and close his eyes. Then Polwheal came in, balancing a tray like a conjuror.

"Breakfast, sir," said Polwheal in a flood of garrulity. "I didn't know you was up, sir, not till the port watch told me when they came below. Coffee, sir. Soft bread, sir. Galley fire's bright an' I could have it toasted for you in two twos, sir, if 'uld like it that way."

Hornblower looked at Polwheal in a sudden flood of suspicion. Polwheal was making no attempt to offer him any of the fresh food, except for bread, which he had sent on board; not a chop or a steak nor rashers of bacon, nor any other of the other delicacies he had bought so recklessly. Yet Polwheal knew he had eaten no dinner yesterday, and Polwheal was usually insistent that he should eat and overeat. He wondered why, therefore, Polwheal should be offering him a Frenchman's breakfast like this. Polwheal's stony composure wavered a little under Hornblower's stare, confirming Hornblower's suspicions. Polwheal had guessed the secret of his captain's seasickness.

"Put it down," he rasped, quite unable to say more at the moment. Polwheal put the tray on the table and still lingered.

"I'll pass the word when I want you," said Hornblower sternly.

With his head between his hands he reviewed all of what he could remember of yesterday. Not merely Polwheal, he realised now, but Bush and Gerard — the whole ship's company, for that matter — knew that he suffered from seasickness. Subtle hints in their bearing proved it, now that he came to think about it. At first the thought merely depressed him, so that he groaned again. Then it irritated him. And finally his sense of humour asserted itself and he smiled. While he smiled, the pleasant aroma of the coffee reached his nostrils, and he sniffed at it wondering, reacting to the scent in two opposite ways at once, conscious both of the urge

of hunger and thirst and of the revulsion of his stomach. Hunger and thirst won in the end. He poured coffee for himself and sipped it, keeping his eyes rigidly from the swaying of the cabin fitments. With the blessed warmth of the strong sweet coffee inside him he instinctively began to eat the bread, and it was only when he had cleared the tray that he began to feel qualms of doubt as to the wisdom of what he had done. Even then his luck held, for before the waves of seasickness could overcome him a knock on the cabin door heralded the news that land was in sight, and he could forget them in the activity the news demanded of him.

Ushant was not in sight from the deck, but only from the masthead, and Hornblower made no attempt to climb the rigging to see it. But as he stood with the wind whipping round him and the rigging harping over his head he looked over the grey sea eastward to where France lay beyond the horizon. Of all landfalls perhaps this one loomed largest in English naval history. Drake and Blake, Shovell and Rooke, Hawke and Boscawen, Rodney and Jervis and Nelson had all of them stood as he was standing, looking eastward as he was doing. Three-quarters of the British mercantile marine rounded Ushant, outward and homeward. As a lieutenant under Pellew in the *Indefatigable* he had beaten about in sight of Ushant for many weary days during the blockade of Brest. It was in these very waters that the *Indefatigable* and the *Amazon* had driven the *Droits de l'Homme* into the breakers, and a thousand men to their deaths. The details of that wild fight thirteen years ago were as distinct in his memory as those of the battle with the *Natividad* only nine months back; that was a symptom of approaching old age.

Hornblower shook off the meditative gloom which was descending on him, and applied himself to the business of laying a fresh course for Finisterre and directing the Indiamen upon it — the first was a far easier task than the second. It called for an hour of signalling and gunfire before every one of his flock had satisfactorily repeated his signals; it appeared to Hornblower as if the masters of the convoy took pleasure in misunderstanding him, in ignoring him, in repeating incorrectly. The *Lord Mornington* flew the signal for ten minutes at the dip, as if to indicate that it was not understood; it was only when the *Sutherland* had borne down almost within hail of her, with Hornblower boiling with fury, that she was able to clear the jammed signal halliards and hoist the signal properly.

Bush chuckled sardonically at the sight, and began some remark to his captain to the effect that even Indiamen were as inefficient as men of war at the beginning of a commission, but Hornblower stamped away angrily out of earshot, leaving Bush staring after him. The ridiculous incident had annoyed Hornblower on account of his fear lest he himself should appear ridiculous; but it had its effect in prolonging his forgetfulness of his seasickness. It was only after a spell of standing solitary on the starboard side while Bush gave the orders that brought the *Sutherland* up to windward of the convoy again that he calmed down and began to experience internal misgivings once more. He was on the point of retiring below when a sudden cry from Bush recalled him to the quarterdeck.

"*Walmer Castle's* hauled her wind, sir."

Hornblower put his glass to his eye. The *Walmer Castle* was the leading ship of the convoy, and the farthest to port. She was about three miles away, and there was no mistaking the fact that she had spun round on her heel and was now clawing frantically up to windward towards them.

"She's signalling, sir," said Vincent, "but I can't read it. It might be No. 29, but that's 'Discontinue the action' and she can't mean that."

"Masthead!" bellowed Bush. "What can you see on the port bow?"

"Northin', sir."

"She's hauled it down now, sir," went on Vincent. "There goes another one! No. 11, sir. Enemy in sight."

"Here, Savage," said Bush. "Take your glass and up with you." The next ship in the straggling line had come up into the wind, too; Savage was halfway up the rigging, when the masthead lookout hailed.

"I can see 'em now, sir. Two luggers, sir, on the port bow."

Luggers off Ushant could only mean French privateers.

Swift, handy, and full of men, with a length of experience at sea only equalled by that of the British navy, they would court any danger to make a prize of a fat East Indiaman. Such a capture would make their captains wealthy men. Bush, Vincent, everyone on the quarterdeck looked at Hornblower. If he were to lose such a ship entrusted to his charge he would forfeit every bit of credit at the Admiralty that he possessed.

"Turn up the hands, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. In the excitement of instant action he had no thought for the dramatic aspect of affairs, forgot the need to pose, and made no attempt to impress his subordinates with his calm; and the calculations which came flooding up into his mind had so rapidly engrossed him that he betrayed no excitement whatever, as they saw.

The Indiamen all carried guns — the *Lord Mornington* actually had eighteen ports a side — and could beat off any long range attack by a small privateer. The luggers' tactics would be to swoop alongside and board; no boarding nettings manned by an Indiaman's crew would keep out a hundred Frenchmen mad for gold. They would manoeuvre so as to cut off a ship to windward of him — while he was beating up against the wind they could rush her in three minutes and carry her off under his very eyes. He must not allow such a situation to arise, and yet the Indiamen were slow, his crew was undrilled, and French luggers were as quick as lightning in stays — there were two of them, as well, and he would have to parry two thrusts at once.

They were in sight now from the deck, their dark sails lifting above the horizon, two-masted and closehauled. The dark squares of their sails were urgent with menace, and Hornblower's eye could read more than the mere dreams of the silhouettes against the clear horizon. They were small, with not more than twenty guns apiece, and no more than nine pounders at that — the *Sutherland* could sink them with a couple of broadsides if they were ever foolish enough to come within close range. But they were fast; already they were hull-up, and Hornblower could see the white water under their bows. And they were lying at least a point nearer the wind than ever he could induce the *Sutherland* to lie. Each would have at least a hundred and fifty men on board, because French privateers had little thought for the comfort of their crews, nor needed to when they only intended to dash out of port, snap up a prize, and dash back again.

"Shall I clear for action, sir," asked Bush, greatly daring.

"No," snapped Hornblower. "Send the men to quarters and put out the fires."

There was no need to knock down bulwarks and risk spoiling his property and imperil the live-stock on board, because there was no chance of a stand-up fight. But a stray nine-pounder ball into the galley fire might set the whole ship ablaze. The men went to their stations, were pushed there, or led there — some of the men were still confused between port and starboard sides — to the accompaniment of the low-voiced threats and curses of the petty officers.

"I'll have the guns loaded and run out, too, if you please, Mr Bush."

More than half the men had never seen a cannon fired in their lives. This was the first time they had even heard the strange mad music of the gun trucks rumbling over the planking. Hornblower heard it with a catch in his breath — it called up many memories. The privateers gave no sign of flinching when the *Sutherland* showed her teeth, as Hornblower, watching them closely, saw. They held steadily on their course, heading closehauled to meet the convoy. But their appearance, Hornblower was glad to see, had done more to herd the merchantmen together than his orders had done. They were huddled together in a mass, each ship closer aboard its neighbour than any merchant captain could be induced to steer save under the impulse of fear. He could see boarding nettings being run up on board them, and they were running out their guns. The defence they could offer would only be feeble, but the fact that they could defend themselves at all was important in the present state of affairs.

A puff of smoke and a dull report from the leading privateer showed that she had opened fire; where the shot went Hornblower could not see, but the tricolour flag soared up each of the luggers' main masts, and at a word from Hornblower the red ensign rose to the *Sutherland's* peak in reply to this jaunty challenge. Next moment the luggers neared the *Walmer Castle*, the leading ship to port, with the evident intention of running alongside.

"Set the t'gallants, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "Helm a-starboard. Meet her. Steady."

The *Walmer Castle* had sheered off in fright, almost running on board her starboard side neighbour, who had been forced to put her helm over as well. Then, in the nick of time, the *Sutherland* came dashing down. The luggers put up their helms and moved away to avoid the menace of her broadside, and their first clumsy rush had been beaten off.

"Main tops'l aback!" roared Hornblower.

It was of supreme importance to preserve his position of advantage to windward of the convoy, whence he could dash forward to the threatened point of danger. The convoy drew slowly ahead, with the luggers leading

them. Hornblower watched them steadily, the practice of years enabling him to keep them in the focus of his telescope as he stood on the heaving deck. They spun round suddenly on the starboard tack again, moving like clockwork, leaping to meet the *Lord Mornington* on the starboard wing like hounds at the throat of a stag. The *Lord Mornington* sheered out of her course, the *Sutherland* came tearing down upon her, and the luggers went about, instantly, heading for the *Walmer Castle* again.

"Hard a-starboard," rasped Hornblower. The *Walmer Castle*, to his vast relief, managed to throw her topsails aback, and the *Sutherland* reached her just in time. She swept across her stern; Hornblower could see her whiskered captain in his formal blue frockcoat beside her wheel, and half a dozen Lascar sailors leaping hysterically over her deck. The luggers wore away, just out of gunshot of the *Sutherland*. There was smoke eddying round one of the other Indiamen; apparently she had loosed off her broadside straight into the blue. "They're wasting powder there, sir," volunteered Bush, but Hornblower made no reply, being too busy with his mental calculations.

"As long as they have the sense not to scatter —" said Crystal.

That was an important consideration; if the convoy once divided he could not hope to defend every portion of it. There was neither honour nor glory to be won in this contest between a ship of the line and two small privateers — if he beat them off the world would think nothing of it, while if any one of the convoy was lost he could imagine only too well the ensuing public outcry. He had thought of signalling to his charges that they should keep together, but he had rejected the idea. Signalling would only confuse them, and half of them would probably misread the signal. It was better to rely on their natural instinct of self-preservation.

The privateers had come up into the wind again, and were working to windward directly astern of the *Sutherland*. From the very look of them, of their sharp black hulls and far-raked masts, Hornblower could guess that they had concerted some new move. He faced aft, watching them closely. Next moment the plan revealed itself. He saw the bows of the leader swing to starboard, those of the second one to port. They were diverging, and each with the wind on her quarter came racing down, white water foaming at their bows, lying over to the stiff breeze, each of them a picture of malignant efficiency. As soon as they were clear of the *Sutherland* they would converge again attacking opposite wings of the convoy. He would hardly have time to beat off the first one and then return to chase the other away.

He thought wildly for a moment of trying to bring the whole convoy to the wind together, and rejected the plan at once. They would probably spread out in the attempt, if they did not fall foul of each other, and in either case, scattered or crippled, they would fall easy victims to their enemies. All he could do was to attempt to tackle both ships in succession. It might seem hopeless, but there was nothing to be gained in abandoning the only plan possible. He would play it out to the last second.

He dropped his telescope on the deck, and sprang up on to the rail, hanging on by the mizzen rigging. He stared at his enemies, turning his head from side to side, calculating their speeds and, observing their courses, his face set rigid in an intensity of concentration. The lugger to starboard was slightly nearer, and consequently would arrive at the convoy first. He would have a minute or so more in hand to get back to deal with the second if he turned on this one. Another glance confirmed his decision, and he risked his reputation upon it — without a thought now, in the excitement of action, for that reputation of his. "Starboard two points," he called. "Starboard two points," echoed the quartermaster. The *Sutherland* swung round, out of the wake of the convoy and headed to cross the bows of the starboard side lugger. In turn, to avoid the ponderous broadside which was menacing her, the latter edged away, farther and farther as the *Sutherland* moved down upon her. By virtue of her vastly superior speed she was forereaching both upon the convoy and the escort; and the *Sutherland* in her effort to keep between the privateer and the merchantmen was being lured farther and farther away from her proper position to interfere with the designs of the other lugger. Hornblower was aware of that, but it was a risk he was compelled to take, and he knew, despairingly, that if the Frenchmen played the right game he would be beaten. He could never drive the first lugger so far away and to leeward as to render her innocuous and still have time enough to get back and deal with the other. Already he was dangerously astray, but he held on his course, almost abreast now both of the convoy and of the lugger to starboard. Then he saw the other lugger turn to make its dash in upon the convoy.

"Hands to the braces, Mr Bush!" he called. "Hard a-starboard!"

The *Sutherland* came round, heeling over with the wind abeam and a trifle more canvas than was safe. She seemed to tear through the water as she raced for the convoy, which was wheeling in confusion away from the attack. As if through a forest of masts and sails Hornblower could see the dark sails of the lugger swooping down upon the helpless *Walmer Castle*, which must have responded slowly to her helm, or been badly commanded, and was being left astern by the others. A dozen simultaneous calculations raced through Hornblower's mind. He was thinking like a highly complex machine, forecasting the course of the lugger, and of the six Indiamen, and making allowances for the possible variations resulting from their captains' personal traits. He had to bear in mind the speed of the *Sutherland*, and the rate at which she was drifting to leeward under her press of canvas. To circumnavigate the scattering convoy would take too much time and would deprive him of any opportunity of surprise. He called his orders quietly down to the helmsman, steering for the narrowing gap between two ships. The *Lord Mornington* saw the two-decker rushing down upon her, and swerved as Hornblower had anticipated.

"Stand to your guns, there!" he bellowed. "Mr Gerard! Give the lugger a broadside as we pass her!"

The *Lord Mornington* was past and gone in a flash; beyond her was the *Europe* — she had worn round a little and seemed to be heading straight for a collision.

"God blast her!" roared Bush. "God —" The *Sutherland* had shaved across her bows her jib boom almost brushing the *Sutherland's* mizzen rigging. Next moment the *Sutherland* had dashed through the narrowing gap between two more ships. Beyond was the *Walmer Castle*, and alongside her the lugger taken completely by surprise at this unexpected appearance. In the stillness which prevailed on board the *Sutherland* they could hear the pop-popping of small arms — the Frenchmen were scrambling up to the lofty deck of the Indiaman. But as the big two-decker came hurtling down upon him the French captain tried for safety. Hornblower could see the French boarders leaping down again to the lugger and her vast mainsail rose ponderously under the united effort of two hundred frantic arms. She had boomed off from the Indiamen and came round like a top, but she was five seconds too late.

"Back the mizzen tops'l," snapped Hornblower to Bush. "Mr Gerard!"

The *Sutherland* steadied herself for a crashing blow. "Take your aim!" screamed Gerard, mad with excitement. He was by the forward section of guns on the main deck, which would bear first. "Wait till your guns bear! Fire!"

The rolling broadside which followed, as the ship slowly swung round, seemed to Hornblower's tense mind to last for at least five minutes. The intervals between the shots was ragged, and some of the guns were clearly fired before they bore. Elevation was faulty, too, as the splashes both this side of, and far beyond, the lugger bore witness. Nevertheless, some of the shot told. He saw splinters flying in the lugger, a couple of shrouds part. Two sudden swirls in the crowd on her deck showed where cannon balls had ploughed through it. The brisk breeze blew the smoke of the straggling broadside clear instantly, so that his view of the lugger a hundred yards away was uninterrupted. She had still a chance of getting away. Her sails were filled, and she was slipping fast through the water. He gave the orders to the helmsman which would cause the *Sutherland* to yaw again and bring her broadside to bear. As he did so nine puffs of smoke from the lugger's side gave warning that she was firing her nine-pounder popguns.

The Frenchmen were game enough. A musical tone like a brief expiring note on an organ sang in his ear as a shot passed close overhead, and a double crash below told him that the *Sutherland* was hit. Her thick timbers ought to keep out nine-pounder shot at that range.

He heard the rumble of the trucks as the *Sutherland's* guns were run out again, and he leaned over the rail to shout to the men on the maindeck.

"Take your aim well!" he shouted. "Wait till your sights bear!"

The guns went off in ones or twos down the *Sutherland's* side as she yawed. There was only one old hand at each of the *Sutherland's* seventy-four guns, and although the officers in charge of the port side battery had sent over some of their men to help on the starboard side they would naturally keep the trained layers in case the port side guns had to be worked suddenly. And there were not seventy-four good gun layers left over from the *Lydia's* old crew — he remembered the difficulty he had experienced in drawing up the watch bill.

"Stop your vents!" shouted Gerard, and then his voice went up into a scream of excitement. "There it goes! Well done, men!"

The big main mast of the lugger, with the mainsail and topmast and shrouds and all, was leaning over to one side. It seemed to hang there naturally, for a whole breathing space, before it fell with a sudden swoop. Even then a single shot fired from her aftermost gun proclaimed the Frenchman's defiance. Hornblower turned back to the helmsman to give the orders that would take the *Sutherland* within pistol shot and complete the little ship's destruction. He was aflame with excitement. Just in time he remembered his duty; he was granting the other lugger time to get in among the convoy, and every second was of value. He noted his excitement as a curious and interesting phenomenon, while his orders brought the *Sutherland* round on the other tack. As she squared away a long shout of defiance rose from the lugger, lying rolling madly in the heavy sea, her black hull resembling some crippled water-beetle. Someone was waving a tricolour flag from the deck.

"Good-bye, Mongseer Crapaud," said Bush. "You've a long day's work ahead of you before you see Brest again."

The *Sutherland* threshed away on her new course; the convoy had all turned and were beating up towards her, the lugger on their heels like a dog after a flock of sheep. At the sight of the *Sutherland* rushing down upon her she sheered off again. Obstinate, she worked round to make a dash at the *Walmer Castle* — steering wide as usual — but Hornblower swung the *Sutherland* round and the *Walmer Castle* scuttled towards her for protection. It was easy enough, even in a clumsy ship like the *Sutherland*, to fend off the attacks of a single enemy. The Frenchman realised this after a few minutes more, and bore away to the help of her crippled consort.

Hornblower watched the big lugsail come round and fill, and the lugger lying over as she thrashed her way to windward; already the dismayed Frenchman was out of sight from the *Sutherland's* quarterdeck. It was a relief to see the Frenchman go — if he had been in command of her he would have left the other to look after herself and hung on to the convoy until nightfall; it would have been strange if he had not been able to snap up a straggler in the darkness.

"You can secure the guns, Mr Bush," he said, at length. Someone on the main deck started to cheer, and the cheering was taken up by the rest of the crew. They were waving their hands or their hats as if a Trafalgar had just been won.

"Stop that noise," shouted Hornblower, hot with rage. "Mr Bush, send the hands aft here to me."

They came, all of them, grinning with excitement, pushing and playing like schoolboys; even the rawest of them had forgotten his seasickness in the excitement of the battle. Hornblower's blood boiled as he looked down at them, the silly fools.

"No more of that!" he rasped. "What have you done? Frightened off a couple of luggers not much bigger than our long boat! Two broadsides from a seventy-four, and you're pleased with yourselves for knocking away a single spar! God, you ought to have blown the Frenchie out of the water! Two broadsides, you pitiful baby school! You must lay your guns better than that when it comes to real fighting, and I'll see you learn how — me and the cat between us. And how d'you make sail? I've seen it done better by Portuguese niggers!"

There was no denying the fact that words spoken from a full heart carry more weight than all the artifices of rhetoric. Hornblower's genuine rage and sincerity had made a deep impression, so stirred up had he been at the sight of botched and bungling work. The men were hanging their heads now, and shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, as they realised that what they had done had not been so marvellous after all. And to do them justice, half their exhilaration arose from the mad excitement of the *Sutherland's* rush through the convoy, with ships close on either hand. In later years, when they were spinning yarns of past commissions, the story would be embroidered until they began to affirm that Hornblower had steered a two-decker in a howling storm through a fleet of two hundred sail all on opposing courses.

"You can pipe down now, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "And when the hands have had their breakfasts you can exercise them aloft."

In the reaction following his excitement he was yearning to get away to the solitude of the stern gallery again. But here came Walsh the surgeon, trotting up the quarterdeck and touching his hat

"Surgeon's report, sir," he said. "One warrant officer killed. No officers and no seamen wounded."

"Killed?" said Hornblower, his jaw dropping. "Who's killed?"

"John Hart, midshipman," answered Walsh.

Hart had been a promising seaman in the *Lydia*, and it was Hornblower himself who had promoted him to the quarterdeck and obtained his warrant for him.

"Killed?" said Hornblower again.

"I can mark his 'mortally wounded', sir, if you prefer it," said Walsh. "He lost a leg when a nine-pounder ball came in through No. 11 gun port on the lower deck. He was alive when they got him down to the cockpit, but he died the next minute. Popliteal artery."

Walsh was a new appointment, who had not served under Hornblower before. Otherwise he might have known better than to indulge in details of this sort with so much professional relish.

"Get out of my road, blast you," snarled Hornblower.

His prospect of solitude was spoiled now. There would have to be a burial later in the day, with flag half mast and yards a-cockbill. That in itself was irksome. And it was Hart who was dead — a big gangling young man with a wide, pleasant smile. The thought of it robbed him of all pleasure in his achievements this morning. Bush was there on the quarterdeck, smiling happily both at the thought of what had been done today and at the thought of four solid hours' exercise aloft for the hands. He would have liked to talk, and Gerard was there, eager to discuss the working of his beloved guns. Hornblower glared at them, daring them to address one single word to him; but they had served with him for years, and knew better.

He turned and went below; the ships of the convoy were sending up flags — the sort of silly signals of congratulation one might expect of Indiamen, probably half of them mis-spelled. He could rely on Bush to hoist 'Not understood' until the silly fools got it right, and then to make a mere acknowledgment. He wanted nothing to do with them, or with anybody else. The one shred of comfort in a world which he hated was that, with a following wind and the convoy to leeward, he would be private in his stern gallery, concealed even from inquisitive telescopes in the other ships.

Chapter VII

Hornblower took a last pull at his cigar when he heard the drum beating to divisions. He exhaled a lungful of smoke, his head thrown back, looking out from under the cover of the stern gallery up at the blissful blue sky, and then down at the blue water beneath, with the dazzling white foam surging from under the *Sutherland's* counter into her wake. Overhead he heard the measured tramp of the marines as they formed up across the poop deck, and then a brief shuffle of heavy boots as they dressed their line in obedience to the captain's order. The patter of hundreds of pairs of feet acted as a subdued accompaniment as the crew formed up round the decks. When everything had fallen still again Hornblower pitched his cigar overboard, hitched his full dress coat into position, settled his cocked hat on his head, and walked with dignity, his left hand on his swordhilt, forward to the halfdeck and up the companion ladder to the quarterdeck. Bush was there, and Crystal, and the midshipman of the watch. They saluted him, and from farther aft came the snick-snack-snick of the marines presenting arms.

Hornblower stood and looked round him in leisurely fashion; on this Sunday morning it was his duty to inspect the ship, and he could take advantage of the fact to drink in all the beauty and the artistry of the scene.

Overhead the pyramids of white canvas described slow cones against the blue sky with the gentle roll of the ship. The decks were snowy white — Bush had succeeded in that in ten days' labour — and the intense orderliness of a ship of war was still more intense on this morning of Sunday inspection. Hornblower shot a searching glance from under lowered eyelids at the crew ranged in long single lines along the gangways and on the maindeck. They were standing still, smart enough in their duck frocks and trousers. It was their bearing that he wished to study, and that could be done more effectively in a sweeping glance from the quarterdeck than at the close range of the inspection. There could be a certain hint of insolence in the way a restive crew stood to attention, and one could perceive lassitude in a dispirited crew. He could see neither now, for which he was thankful.

Ten days of hard work, of constant drill, of unsleeping supervision, of justice tempered by good humour, had done much to settle the hands to their duty. He had had to order five floggings three days ago, forcing himself

to stand apparently unmoved while the whistle and crack of the cat o' nine tails sickened his stomach. One of those floggings might do a little good to the recipient — an old hand who had apparently forgotten what he had learned and needed a sharp reminder of it. The other four would do none to the men whose backs had been lacerated; they would never make good sailors and were mere brutes whom brutal treatment could at least make no worse. He had sacrificed them to show the wilder spirits what might happen as a result of inattention to orders — it was only by an actual demonstration that one could work on the minds of uneducated men. The dose had to be prescribed with the utmost accuracy, neither too great nor too small. He seemed, so his sweeping glance told him, to have hit it off exactly.

Once more he looked round to enjoy the beauty of it all — the orderly ship, the white sails, the blue sky; the scarlet and pipeclay of the marines, the blue and gold of the officers; and there was consummate artistry in the subtle indications that despite the inspection the real pulsating life of the ship was going on beneath it. Where four hundred and more men stood at attention awaiting his lightest word the quartermaster at the wheel kept his mind on the binnacle and the leach of the main course, the lookouts at the masthead and the officer of the watch with his telescope were living demonstrations of the fact that the ship must still be sailed and the King's service carried on.

Hornblower turned aside to begin his inspection. He walked up and down the quadruple ranks of the marines, but although he ran his eye mechanically over the men he took notice of nothing. Captain Morris and his sergeants could be relied upon to attend to details like the pipeclaying of belts and the polishing of buttons. Marines could be drilled and disciplined into machines in a way sailors could not be; he could take the marines for granted and he was not interested in them. Even now, after ten days, he hardly knew the faces and names of six out of the ninety marines on board.

He passed on to the lines of seamen, the officers of each division standing rigidly in front. This was more interesting. The men were trim and smart in their whites — Hornblower wondered how many of them ever realised that the cost of their clothing was deducted from the meagre pay they received when they were paid off. Some of the new hands were horribly sunburned, as a result of unwise exposure to the sudden blazing sun of yesterday. A blond burly figure here had lost the skin from his forearms as well as from his neck and forehead. Hornblower recognised him as Waites, condemned for sheepstealing at Exeter assizes — that explained the sunburn, for Waites had been blanched by months of imprisonment awaiting trial. The raw areas looked abominably painful.

"See that this man Waites," said Hornblower to the petty officer of the division, "attends the surgeon this afternoon. He is to have goose grease for those burns, and whatever lotions the surgeon prescribes."

"Aye aye, sir," said the petty officer.

Hornblower passed on down the line, scanning each man closely. Faces well remembered, faces it was still an effort to put a name to. Faces that he had studied two years back in the far Pacific on board the *Lydia*, faces he had first seen when Gerard brought back his boat load of bewildered captures from St Ives. Swarthy faces and pale, boys and elderly men, blue eyes, brown eyes, grey eyes. A host of tiny impressions were collecting in Hornblower's mind; they would be digested together later during his solitary walks in the stern gallery, to form the raw material for the plans he would make to further the efficiency of his crew.

"That man Simms ought to be rated captain of the mizzen-top. He's old enough now. What's this man's name? Dawson? No, Dawkins. He's looking sulky. One of Goddard's gang — it looks as if he's still resenting Goddard's flogging. I must remember that."

The sun blazed down upon them, while the ship lifted and swooped over the gentle sea. From the crew he turned his attention to the ship — the breechings of the guns, the way the falls were flemished down, the cleanliness of the decks, the galley and the forecastle. At all this he need only pretend to look — the skies would fall before Bush neglected his duty. But he had to go through with it, with a show of solemnity. Men were oddly influenced — the poor fools would work better for Bush if they thought Hornblower was keeping an eye on him, and they would work better for Hornblower if they thought he inspected the ship thoroughly. This wretched business of capturing men's devotion set Hornblower smiling cynically when he was unobserved.

"A good inspection, Mr Bush," said Hornblower, returning to the quarterdeck. "The ship is in better order than I hoped for. I shall expect the improvement to continue. You may rig the church now."

It was a Godfearing Admiralty who ordered church service every Sunday morning, otherwise Hornblower would have dispensed with it, as befitted a profound student of Gibbon. As it was, he had managed to evade having a chaplain on board — Hornblower hated parsons. He watched the men dragging up mess stools for themselves, and chairs for the officers. They were working diligently and cheerfully, although not with quite that disciplined purposefulness which characterised a fully trained crew. His coxswain Brown covered the compass box on the quarterdeck with a cloth, and laid on it, with due solemnity, Hornblower's Bible and prayer book. Hornblower disliked these services; there was always the chance that some devout member of his compulsory congregation might raise objections to having to attend — Catholic or Nonconformist. Religion was the only power which could ever pit itself against the bonds of discipline; Hornblower remembered a theologically minded master's mate who had once protested against his reading the Benediction, as though he, the King's representative at sea — God's representative, when all was said and done — could not read a Benediction if he chose!

He glowered at the men as they settled down, and began to read. As the thing had to be done, it might as well be done well, and, as ever, while he read he was struck once more by the beauty of Cranmer's prose and the deftness of his adaptation. Cranmer had been burned alive two hundred and fifty years before — did it benefit him at all to have his prayer book read now?

Bush read the lessons in a tuneless bellow as if he were hailing the foretop. Then Hornblower read the opening lines of the hymn, and Sullivan the fiddler played the first bars of the tune. Bush gave the signal for the singing to start — Hornblower could never bring himself to do that; he told himself he was neither a mountebank nor an Italian opera conductor — and the crew opened their throats and roared it out.

But even hymn singing had its advantages. A captain could often discover a good deal about the spirits of his crew by the way they sang their hymns. This morning either the hymn chosen was specially popular or the crew were happy in the new sunshine, for they were singing lustily, with Sullivan sawing away at an ecstatic obbligato on his fiddle. The Cornishmen among the crew apparently knew the hymn well, and fell upon it with a will, singing in parts to add a leavening of harmony to the tuneless bellows of the others. It all meant nothing to Hornblower — one tune was the same as another to his tone-deaf ear, and the most beautiful music was to him no more than comparable with the noise of a cart along a gravel road. As he listened to the unmeaning din, and gazed at the hundreds of gaping mouths, he found himself wondering as usual whether or not there was any basis of fact in this legend of music — whether other people actually heard something more than mere noise, or whether he was the only person on board not guilty of wilful self-deception.

Then he saw a ship's boy in the front row. The hymn meant something to him, at least. He was weeping broken-heartedly, even while he tried to keep his back straight and to conceal his emotions, with the big tears running down his cheeks and his nose all beslobbered. The poor little devil had been touched in one way or another — some chord of memory had been struck. Perhaps the last time he had heard that hymn was in the little church at home, beside his mother and brothers. He was homesick and heartbroken now. Hornblower was glad for his sake as well as for his own when the hymn came to an end; the next ceremony would steady the boy again.

He took up the Articles of War and began to read them as the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty had ordained should be done each Sunday in every one of His Britannic Majesty's Ships. He knew the solemn sentences by heart at this, his five hundredth reading, every cadence, every turn of phrase, and he read them well. This was better than any vague religious service or Thirty Nine Articles. Here was a code in black and white, a stern, unemotional call to duty pure and simple. Some Admiralty clerk or pettifogging lawyer had had a gift of phrasing just as felicitous as Cranmer's. There was no trumpet-call about it, no clap-trap appeal to sentiment; there was merely the cold logic of the code which kept the British Navy at sea, and which had guarded England during seventeen years of a struggle for life. He could tell by the death-like stillness of his audience as he read that their attention had been caught and held, and when he folded the paper away and looked up he could see solemn, set faces. The ship's boy in the front row had forgotten his tears. There was a far away look in his eyes; obviously he was making good resolutions to attend more strictly to his duty in future. Or perhaps he was dreaming wild dreams of the time to come when he would be a captain in a gold-laced coat commanding a seventy-four, or of brave deeds which he would do.

In a sudden revulsion of feeling Hornblower wondered if lofty sentiment would armour the boy against cannon shot — he remembered another ship's boy who had been smashed into a red jam before his eyes by a shot from the *Natividad*.

Chapter VIII

In the afternoon Hornblower was walking his quarterdeck; the problem before him was so difficult that he had quitted his stern gallery — he could not walk fast enough there, owing to his having to bend his head, to set his thoughts going. The people on the quarterdeck saw his mood, and kept warily over to the lee side, leaving the whole weather side, nearly thirty yards of quarterdeck and gangway, to him. Up and down, he walked, up and down, trying to nerve himself to make the decision he hankered after. The *Sutherland* was slipping slowly through the water with a westerly breeze abeam; the convoy was clustered together only a few cables' lengths to leeward.

Gerard shut his telescope with a snap.

"Boat pulling toward us from *Lord Mornington*, sir," he said. He wanted to warn his captain of the approach of visitors, so that if he thought fit he could make himself unapproachable in his cabin; but he knew, as well as Hornblower did, that it might be unwise for a captain to act in too cavalier a fashion towards the notabilities on board the East India convoy.

Hornblower looked across at the boat creeping beetle-like towards him. Ten days of a strong north-easterly wind had not merely hurried the convoy to the latitude of North Africa where he was to leave them to their own devices, but had prevented all intercourse and visiting between ships, until yesterday. Yesterday there had been a good deal of coming and going between the ships of the convoy; it was only natural that today he should receive formal calls, which he could not well refuse. In another two hours they would be parting company — it could not be a prolonged ordeal.

The boat ran alongside, and Hornblower walked forward to receive his own guests — Captain Osborn of the *Lord Mornington*, in his formal frock coat, and someone else, tall and bony, resplendent in civilian full dress with ribbon and star.

"Good afternoon, Captain," said Osborn. "I wish to present you to Lord Eastlake, Governor-designate of Bombay."

Hornblower bowed; so did Lord Eastlake.

"I have come," said Lord Eastlake, clearing his throat, "to beg of you, Captain Hornblower, to receive on behalf of your ship's company this purse of four hundred guineas. It has been subscribed by the passengers of the East India convoy in recognition of the skill and courage displayed by the *Sutherland* in the action with the two French privateers off Ushant."

"In the name of my ship's company I thank your Lordship," said Hornblower.

It was a very handsome gesture, and as he took the purse he felt like Judas, knowing what designs he was cherishing against the East India convoy.

"And I," said Osborn, "am the bearer of a most cordial invitation to you and to your first lieutenant to join us at dinner in the *Lord Mornington*."

At that Hornblower shook his head with apparent regret.

"We part company in two hours," he said. "I was about to hang out a signal to that effect. I am deeply hurt by the necessity of having to refuse."

"We shall all be sorry on board the *Lord Mornington*' said Lord Eastlake. "Ten days of bad weather have deprived us of the pleasure of the company of any of the officers of the navy. Cannot you be persuaded to alter your decision?"

"This has been the quickest passage I have made to these latitudes," said Osborn. "I begin to regret it now that it appears to have prevented our seeing anything of you."

"I am on the King's service, my Lord, and under the most explicit orders from the Admiral."

That was an excuse against which the Governor-designate of Bombay could not argue.

"I understand," said Lord Eastlake. "At least can I have the pleasure of making the acquaintance of your officers?"

Once more that was a handsome gesture; Hornblower called them up and presented them one by one; horny-handed Bush, and Gerard handsome and elegant, Captain Morris of the marines and his two gawky subalterns, the other lieutenants and the master, down to the junior midshipman, all of them delighted and embarrassed at this encounter with a lord. At last Lord Eastlake turned to go.

"Good-bye, Captain," he said, proffering his hand. "A prosperous voyage in the Mediterranean to you."

"Thank you, my lord. And a good passage to Bombay to you. And a successful and historic term of office."

Hornblower stood weighing the purse — an embroidered canvas bag at which someone had laboured hard recently — in his hand. He felt the weight of the gold, and under his fingers he felt the crackle of the banknotes. He would have liked to treat it as prize money, and take his share under prize money rules, but he knew he could not accept that sort of reward from civilians. Still, his crew must show full appreciation.

"Mr Bush," he said, as the boat shoved off. "Man the yards. Have the men give three cheers."

Lord Eastlake and Captain Osborn acknowledged the compliment as they pulled away; Hornblower watched the boat creep back to the *Lord Mornington*. Four hundred guineas. It was a lot of money, but he was not going to be bought off with four hundred guineas. In that very moment he came to his decision after twenty-four hours of vacillation. He would display to the East India convoy the independence of Captain Hornblower.

"Mr Rayner," he said. "Clear away the launch and the long-boat. Have the helm put up and run down to leeward of the convoy. I want those boats in the water by the time we reach them. Mr Bush. Mr Gerard. Your attention please."

Amid the bustle and hurry of wearing the ship, and tailing on at the stay tackles, Hornblower gave his orders briefly. For once in his life Bush ventured to demur when he realised what Hornblower had in mind.

"They're John Company's ships, sir," he said.

"I had myself fancied that such was the case," said Hornblower with elaborate irony. He knew perfectly well the risk he was running in taking men from ships of the East India Company — he would be both offending the most powerful corporation in England and contravening Admiralty orders. But he needed the men, needed them desperately, and the ships from whom he was taking them would sight no land until they reached St Helena. It would be three or four months before any protest could reach England, and six months before any censure could reach him in the Mediterranean. A crime six months old might not be prosecuted with extreme severity, and perhaps in six months' time he would be dead.

"Give the boats' crews pistols and cutlasses," he said, "just to show that I'll stand no nonsense. I want twenty men from each of those ships."

"Twenty!" said Bush, gaping with admiration. This was flouting the law on the grand scale.

"Twenty from each. And mark you, I'll have only white men. No Lascars. And able seamen every one of them, men who can hand, reef, and steer. And find out who their quarter gunners are and bring them. You can use some trained gunners, Gerard?"

"By God I can, sir."

"Very good."

Hornblower turned away. He had reached his decision unaided, and he did not want to discuss it further. The *Sutherland* had run down to the convoy. First the launch and then the cutter dropped into the water and pulled over to the clustered ships while the *Sutherland* dropped farther down to leeward to wait their return, hove to with main topsail to the mast. Through his glass Hornblower saw the flash of steel as Gerard with his boarding party ran up on to the deck of the *Lord Mornington* — he was displaying his armed force early so as to overawe any thought of resistance. Hornblower was in a fever of anxiety which he had to struggle hard to conceal. He shut his glass with a snap and began to pace the deck.

"Boat pulling towards us from *Lord Mornington*, sir," said Rayner, who was as excited as his captain, and far more obviously.

"Very good," said Hornblower with careful unconcern.

That was a comfort. If Osborn had given Gerard a point blank refusal, had called his men to arms and defied him, it might give rise to a nasty situation. A court of law might call it murder if someone got killed in a scuffle while illegal demands were being enforced. But he had counted on Osborn being taken completely by surprise

when the boarding party ran on to his deck. He would be able to offer no real resistance. Now Hornblower's calculations were proving correct; Osborn was sending a protest, and he was prepared to deal with any number of protests — especially as the rest of the convoy would wait on their Commodore's example and could be relieved of their men while the protesting was going on.

It was Osborn himself who came in through the entry port, scarlet with rage and offended dignity.

"Captain Hornblower!" he said, as he set foot on the deck. "This is an outrage! I must protest against it, sir. At this very moment your lieutenant is parading my crew with a view to impressment."

"He is acting by my orders, sir," said Hornblower.

"I could hardly believe it when he told me so. Are you aware, sir, that what you propose to do is contrary to the law? It is a flagrant violation of Admiralty regulations. A perfect outrage, sir. The ships of the Honourable East India Company are exempt from impressment, and I, as Commodore, must protest to the last breath of my body against any contravention of the law."

"I shall be glad to receive your protest when you make it, sir."

"But — but —" spluttered Osborn. "I have delivered it. I have *made* my protest, sir."

"Oh, I understand," said Hornblower. "I thought these were only remarks preliminary to a protest."

"Nothing of the sort," raved Osborn, his portly form almost dancing on the deck. "I have protested, sir, and I shall continue to protest. I shall call the attention of the highest in the land to this outrage. I shall come from the ends of the earth, gladly, sir, to bear witness at your court martial. I shall not rest — I shall leave no stone unturned — I shall exert all my influence to have this crime punished as it deserves. I'll have you cast in damages, sir, as well as broke."

"But, Captain Osborn —" began Hornblower, changing his tune just in time to delay the dramatic departure which Osborn was about to make. From the tail of his eye Hornblower had seen the *Sutherland's* boats pulling towards two more victims, having presumably stripped the first two of all possible recruits. As Hornblower began to hint at a possible change of mind on his part, Osborn rapidly lost his ill temper.

"If you restore the men, sir, I will gladly retract all I have said," said Osborn. "Nothing more will be heard of the incident, I assure you."

"But will you not allow me to ask for volunteers from among your crews, Captain?" pleaded Hornblower.

"There may be a few men who would like to join the King's service."

"Well — yes, I will even agree to that. As you say, sir, you may find a few restless spirits."

That was the height of magnanimity on Osborn's part, although he was safe in assuming that there would be few men in his fleet foolish enough to exchange the comparative comfort of the East India Company's service for the rigours of life in the Royal Navy.

"Your seamanship in that affair with the privateers, sir, was so admirable that I find it hard to refuse you anything," said Osborn, pacifically. The *Sutherland's* boats were alongside the last of the convoy now.

"That is very good of you, sir," said Hornblower, bowing. "Allow me, then, to escort you into your gig. I will recall my boats. Since they will have taken volunteers first, we can rely upon it that they will have all the willing ones on board, and I shall return the unwilling ones. Thank you, Captain Osborn. Thank you."

He saw Captain Osborn over the side and walked back to the quarterdeck. Rayner was eyeing him with amazement on account of his sudden volte-face, which gave him pleasure, for Rayner would be still more amazed soon. The cutter and launch, both of them as full of men as they could be, were running down now to rejoin, passing Osborn's gig as it was making its slow course to windward. Through his glass Hornblower could see Osborn wave his arm as he sat in his gig; presumably he was shouting something to the boats as they went by. Bush and Gerard very properly paid him no attention. In two minutes they were alongside, and the men came pouring on deck, a hundred and twenty men laden with their small possessions, escorted by thirty of the *Sutherland's* hands. They were made welcome by the rest of the crew all with broad grins. It was a peculiarity of the British pressed sailor that he was always glad to see other men pressed — in the same way, thought Hornblower, as the fox who lost his brush wanted all the other foxes to lose theirs.

Bush and Gerard had certainly secured a fine body of men; Hornblower looked them over as they stood in apathy, or bewilderment, or sullen rage, upon the *Sutherland's* main deck. At no warning they had been snatched from the comfort of an Indiaman, with regular pay, ample food, and easy discipline, into the hardships of the King's service, where the pay was problematic, the food bad, and where their backs were

liable to be flogged to the bones at a simple order from their new captain. Even a sailor before the mast could look forward with pleasure to his visit to India, with all its possibilities; but these men were destined instead now to two years of monotony only varied by danger, where disease and the cannon balls of the enemy lay in wait for them.

"I'll have those boats hoisted in, Mr Rayner," said Hornblower.

Rayner's eyelids flickered for a second — he had heard Hornblower's promise to Captain Osborn, and he knew that more than a hundred of the new arrivals would refuse to volunteer. The boats would only have to be hoisted out again to take them back. But if Hornblower's wooden expression indicated anything at all, it was that he meant what he said.

"Aye aye, sir," said Rayner.

Bush was approaching now, paper in hand, having agreed his figures regarding the recruits with Gerard.

"A hundred and twenty, total, sir, as you ordered," said Bush. "One cooper's mate — he was a volunteer, one hundred and nine able seamen — two of 'em volunteered; six quarter gunners; four landsmen, all volunteers."

"Excellent, Mr Bush, Read 'em in. Mr Rayner, square away as soon as those boats are inboard. Mr Vincent! Signal to the convoy. 'All-men-have-volunteered. Thank you. Good-bye.' You'll have to spell out 'volunteered' but it's worth it."

Hornblower's high spirits had lured him into saying an unnecessary sentence. But when he took himself to task for it he could readily excuse himself. He had a hundred and twenty new hands, nearly all of them able seamen — the *Sutherland* had nearly her full complement now. More than that, he had guarded himself against the wrath to come. When the inevitable chiding letter arrived from the Admiralty he would be able to write back and say that he had taken the men with the East India Company's Commodore's permission; with any good fortune he could keep the ball rolling for another six months. That would give him a year altogether in which to convince the new hands that they had volunteered — by that time some of them at least might be sufficiently enamoured of their new life to swear to that; enough of them to befool the issue, and to afford to an Admiralty, prepared of necessity to look with indulgence on breaches of the pressing regulations, a loophole of excuse not to prosecute him too hard.

"*Lord Mornington* replying, sir," said Vincent. "'Do not understand the signal. Await boat!'"

"Signal 'Good-bye' again," said Hornblower.

Down on the maindeck Bush had hardly finished reading through the Articles of War to the new hands — the necessary formality to make them servants of the King, submissive to the hangman and the cat.

Chapter IX

The *Sutherland* had reached her rendezvous off Palamos Point, apparently the first of the squadron, for there was no sign as yet of the flagship or of the *Caligula*. As she beat slowly up under easy sail against the gentle south-easterly wind Gerard was taking advantage of this period of idleness to exercise the crew at the guns. Bush had too long had his way in drilling the crew aloft; it was time for practice with the big guns, as Hornblower had agreed. Under the scorching sun of a Mediterranean midsummer the men, naked to the waist, had sweated rivers running the guns out and in again, training round with handspikes, each man of the crew learning the knack of the flexible rammer — all the mechanical drill which every man at the guns had to learn until he could be trusted to run up, fire, clean, and reload, and to go on doing so for hour after hour, in thick powder smoke and with death all round him. Drill first, marksmanship a long way second, but all the same it was policy to allow the men to fire off the guns a few times — they found compensation in that for the arduous toil at the guns.

A thousand yards to port the quarter boat was bobbing over the glittering sea. There was a splash, and then they could see the black dot of the cask she had thrown overboard before pulling hastily out of the line of fire.

"No. 1 gun!" bellowed Gerard. "Take your aim! Cock your locks! Fire — stop your vents!"

The foremost eighteen-pounder roared out briefly while a dozen glasses looked for the splash.

"Over and to the right!" announced Gerard. "No. 2 gun!"

The maindeck eighteen-pounders, the lower deck twenty-four-pounders, spoke each in turn. Even with experienced gun layers it would have been too much to expect to hit a cask at such a long range in thirty-seven shots; the cask still bobbed unharmed. Every gun of the port battery tried again, and still the cask survived. "We'll shorten the range. Mr Bush, have the helm put up and run the ship past the cask at a cable's length away. Now, Mr Gerard."

Two hundred yards was a short enough range even for carronades; the forecastle and quarterdeck carronades' crews stood to their weapons as the *Sutherland* ran down to the cask. The guns went off nearly simultaneously as they bore, the ship trembling to the concussions, while the thick smoke eddied upwards round the naked men. The water boiled all round the cask, as half a ton of iron tore it up in fountains, and in the midst of the splashes the cask suddenly leaped clear of the water, dissolving into its constituent staves as it did so. All the guns' crews cheered while Hornblower's silver whistle split the din as a signal to cease fire, and the men clapped each other on the shoulder exultantly. They were heartily pleased with themselves. As Hornblower knew, the fun of knocking a cask to pieces was full compensation for two hours' hard work at gun drill.

The quarter boat dropped another cask; the starboard side battery prepared to bombard it, while Hornblower stood blinking gratefully in the sunshine on the quarterdeck, feeling glad to be alive. He had as full a crew as any captain could hope for, and more trained top-men than he could ever have dared to expect. So far everyone was healthy; his landsmen were fast becoming seamen, and he would train them into gunners even quicker than that. This blessed midsummer sunshine, hot and dry, suited his health admirably. He had left off fretting over Lady Barbara, thanks to the intense pleasure which it gave him to see his crew settling down into a single efficient unit. He was glad to be alive, with high spirits bubbling up within him.

"Good shot, there!" said Hornblower. An extraordinary lucky shot from one of the lower deck guns had smashed the second cask to fragments. "Mr Bush, see that every man of that gun's crew gets a tot of rum tonight."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Sail ho!" came from the masthead. "Deck, there. Sail right to wind'ard, an' coming down fast."

"Mr Bush, have the quarter boat recalled. Heave the ship to on the starboard tack, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

Even here, no more than fifty miles from France, and not more than twenty from a corner of Spain under French domination, there was very small chance of any sail being French, especially on the course this one was steering — any French vessel crept along the coast without venturing a mile to sea.

"Masthead! What do you make of the sail?"

"She's a ship, sir, wi' all sail set. I can see her royals an' t'garn stuns'ls."

"Belay!" roared the boatswain's mate to the hands hoisting in the quarter boat.

The fact that the approaching vessel was a full-rigged ship made it more unlikely still that she was French — French commerce was confined to small craft, luggers and brigs and tartanes, now. Probably she was one of the ships the *Sutherland* had come to meet. A moment later the suspicion was confirmed from the masthead.

"Deck, there! Sail looks like *Caligula* to me, sir. I can see her torps'ls now, sir."

So she was; Captain Bolton must have completed his task of escorting the storeships into Port Mahon. Within an hour the *Caligula* was within gunshot.

"*Caligula* signalling, sir," said Vincent. "Captain to Captain. Delighted to see you. Will you dine with me now?"

"Hoist the assent," replied Hornblower.

The pipes of the boatswain's mates twittered into one last weird wail as Hornblower went up the side of the *Caligula*; the sideboys stood at attention; the marines presented arms; and Captain Bolton came forward, his hand held out and his craggy face wreathed in smiles.

"First at the rendezvous!" said Bolton. "Come this way, sir. It does my heart good to see you again. I've twelve dozen sherry here I'll be glad to hear your opinion of. Where are those glasses, steward? Your very good health, sir!"

Captain Bolton's after cabin was furnished with a luxury which contrasted oddly with Hornblower's. There were satin cushions on the lockers; the swinging lamps were of silver, and so were the table appointments on the white linen cloth on the table. Bolton had been lucky in the matter of prize money when in command of a frigate — a single cruise had won him five thousand pounds — and Bolton had started life before the mast.

The momentary jealousy which Hornblower experienced evaporated as he noted the poor taste of the cabin fittings, and remembered how dowdy Mrs Bolton had looked when he saw her last. More than anything else, Bolton's obvious pleasure at seeing him, and the genuine respect he evinced in his attitude towards him, combined to give Hornblower a better opinion of himself.

"From the rapidity with which you reached the rendezvous, it appears that your passage was even quicker than ours," said Bolton, and the conversation lapsed into technicalities, which endured even after dinner was served.

And clearly Bolton had little idea of what kind of dinner to offer in this scorching heat. There was pea soup, excellent, but heavy. Red mullet — a last minute purchase in Port Mahon at the moment of sailing. A saddle of mutton. Boiled cabbage. A Stilton cheese, now a little past its best. A syrupy port which was not to Hornblower's taste. No salad, no fruit, not one of the more desirable products of the *Minorca* Bolton had just left.

"Minorquin mutton, I fear," said Bolton, carvers in hand. "My last English sheep died mysteriously at Gibraltar and provided dinner for the gunroom. But you will take a little more, sir?"

"Thank you, no," said Hornblower. He had eaten manfully through a vast helping, and, gorged with mutton fat, was sitting sweating now in the sweltering cabin. Bolton pushed the wine back to him, and Hornblower poured a few drops into his half empty glass. A lifetime of practice had made him adept at appearing to drink level with his host while actually drinking one glass to three. Bolton emptied his own glass and refilled it.

"And now," said Bolton, "we must await in idleness the arrival of Sir Mucho Pomposo, Rear Admiral of the Red."

Hornblower looked at Bolton quite startled. He himself would never have risked speaking of his superior officer as Mucho Pomposo to anyone. Moreover, it had not occurred to him to think of Sir Percy Leighton in that fashion. Criticism of a superior who had yet to demonstrate to him his capacity one way or the other was not Hornblower's habit; and possibly he was specially slow to criticise a superior who was Lady Barbara's husband.

"Mucho Pomposo, I said," repeated Bolton. He had drunk one glass more of port than was quite wise, and was pouring himself out another one. "We can sit and polish our backsides while he works that old tub of a *Pluto* round from Lisbon. Wind's sou'easterly. So it was yesterday, too. If he didn't pass the Straits two days back it'll be a week or more before he appears. And if he doesn't leave all the navigation to Elliott he'll never arrive at all."

Hornblower looked up anxiously at the skylight. If any report of his conversation were to reach higher quarters it would do Bolton no good. The latter interpreted the gesture correctly.

"Oh, never fear," he said. "I can trust my officers. They don't respect an admiral who's no seaman any more than I do. Well, what have you to say?"

Hornblower proffered the suggestion that one of the two ships might push to the northward and begin the task of harassing the French and Spanish coast while the other stayed on the rendezvous awaiting the admiral.

"That's a worthy suggestion," said Bolton.

Hornblower shook off the lassitude occasioned by the heat and the vast meal inside him. He wanted the *Sutherland* to be despatched on this duty. The prospect of immediate action was stimulating. He could feel his pulse quickening at the thought, and the more he considered it the more anxious he was that the choice should fall on him. Days of dreary beating about on and off the rendezvous made no appeal to him at all. He could bear it if necessary — twenty years in the navy would harden anyone to waiting — but he did not want to have to. He did not want to.

"Who shall it be?" said Bolton. "You or me?" Hornblower took a grip of his eagerness.

"You are the senior officer on the station, sir," he said. "It is for you to say."

"Yes," said Bolton, meditatively. "Yes."

He looked at Hornblower with a considering eye.

"You'd give three fingers to go," he said suddenly, "and you know it. You're the same restless devil that you were in the *Indefatigable*. I remember beating you for it, in '93, or was it '94?"

Hornblower flushed hotly at the reminder. The bitter humiliation of being bent over a gun and beaten by the lieutenant of the midshipman's berth rankled to this day when it was recalled to him. But he swallowed his

resentment; he had no wish to quarrel with Bolton, especially at this juncture, and he knew he was exceptional in regarding a beating as an outrage.

"'93, sir," he said. "I'd just joined."

"And now you're a post captain, and most noteworthy one in the bottom half of the list," said Bolton. "God, how time flies. I'd let you go, Hornblower, for old times' sake, if I didn't want to go myself."

"Oh," said Hornblower. His evident disappointment made his expression ludicrous. Bolton laughed.

"Fair's fair," he said. "I'll spin a coin for it. Agreed?"

"Yes, sir," said Hornblower, eagerly. Better an even chance than no chance at all.

"You'll bear me no malice if I win?"

"No, sir. None."

With maddening slowness Bolton reached into his fob and brought out his purse. He took out a guinea and laid it on the table, and then, with the same deliberation, while Hornblower wrestled with his eagerness, he replaced the purse. Then he took up the guinea, and poised it on his gnarled thumb and forefinger.

"King or spade?" he asked, looking across at Hornblower.

"Spade," said Hornblower, swallowing hard.

The coin rang as Bolton spun it in the air; he caught it, and crashed it on to the table.

"Spade it is," he said, lifting his hand.

Bolton went through all the motions once more of taking out his purse, putting the guinea back, and thrusting the purse into his fob, while Hornblower forced himself to sit still and watch him. He was cool again now, with the immediate prospect of action.

"Damn it, Hornblower," he said. "I'm glad you won. You can speak the Dago lingo, which is more than I can. You've had experience with 'em in the South Sea. It's the sort of duty just made for you. Don't be gone more than three days. I ought to put that in writing, in case his High Mightiness comes back. But I won't trouble. Good luck to you, Hornblower, and fill your glass."

Hornblower filled it two-thirds full — if he left a little in the bottom he would only have drunk half a glass more than he wanted then. He sipped, and leaned back in his chair, restraining his eagerness as long as possible. But it overcame him at last, and he rose.

"God damn it, man, you're not going?" said Bolton. Hornblower's attitude was unmistakable, but he could not believe the evidence of his eyes.

"If you would permit me, sir," said Hornblower. "There's a fair wind —"

Hornblower was actually stammering as he tried to make all his explanations at once. The wind might change; if it was worth while separating it was better to go now than later; if the *Sutherland* were to stand in towards the coast during the dark hours there was a chance that she might snap up a prize at dawn — every sort of explanation except the true one that he could not bear to sit still any longer with immediate action awaiting him just over the horizon.

"Have it your own way, then," grumbled Bolton. "If you must, you must. You're leaving me with a half empty bottle. Does that mean you don't like my port?"

"No, sir," said Hornblower, hastily.

"Another glass, then, while your boat's crew is making ready. Pass the word for Captain Hornblower's gig."

The last sentence was bellowed towards the closed door of the cabin, and was immediately repeated by the sentry outside.

Boatswain's pipes twittered as Hornblower went down the *Caligula's* side, officers stood to attention, side boys held the lines. The gig rowed rapidly over the silver water in the fading evening; Coxswain Brown looked sidelong, anxiously, at his captain, trying to guess what this hurried and early departure meant. In the *Sutherland* there was similar anxiety; Bush and Gerard and Crystal and Rayner were all on the quarterdeck awaiting him — Bush had obviously turned out of bed at the news that the captain was returning.

Hornblower paid no attention to their expectant glances. He had made it a rule to offer no explanation — and there was a pleasurable selfish thrill in keeping his subordinates in ignorance of their future. Even as the gig came leaping up to the tackles he gave the orders which squared the ship away before the wind, heading back to the Spanish coast where adventure awaited them.

"*Caligula's* signalling, sir," said Vincent, "Good, luck."

"Acknowledge," said Hornblower.

The officers on the quarterdeck looked at each other, wondering what the future held in store for them for the commodore to wish them good luck. Hornblower noted the interchange of glances without appearing to see them.

"Ha-h'm," he said, and walked with dignity below, to pore over his charts and plan his campaign. The timbers creaked faintly as the gentle wind urged the ship over the almost placid sea.

Chapter X

"Two bells, sir," said Polwheal, waking Hornblower from an ecstatic dream. "Wind East by South, course Nor' by East, an' all sail set to the royal, sir. An' Mr Gerard says to say land in sight on the larboard beam."

This last sentence jerked Hornblower from his cot without a moment's more meditation. He slipped off his nightshirt and put on the clothes Polwheal held ready for him. Unshaved and uncombed he hurried up to the quarterdeck. It was full daylight now, with the sun half clear of the horizon and looking over the starboard quarter, and just abaft the port beam a grey mountain shape reflecting its light. That was Cape Creux, where a spur of the Pyrenees came jutting down to the Mediterranean, carrying the Spanish coast line out of its farthest easterly point.

"Sail ho!" yelled the lookout at the masthead. "Nearly right ahead. A brig, sir, standing out from the land on the starboard tack."

It was what Hornblower had been hoping for; it was for this reason that he had laid his course so as to be on this spot at this moment. All the seaboard of Catalonia, as far south as Barcelona and beyond, was in the hands of the French, and a tumultuous French army — the 'Account of the Present War in Spain' estimated it at nearly eighty thousand men — was endeavouring to extend its conquests southwards and inland.

But they had Spanish roads to contend against as well as Spanish armies. To supply an army eight thousand strong, and a large civilian population as well, was impossible by land over the Pyrenean passes, even though Gerona had surrendered last December after a heroic defence. Food and siege materials and ammunition had to be sent by sea, in small craft which crept along the coast, from shore battery to shore battery, through the lagoons and the shallows of the coast of the Gulf of Lions, past the rocky capes of Spain, as far as Barcelona. Since Cochrane's recall, this traffic had met with hardly any interference from the British in the Mediterranean. When Hornblower first reached his rendezvous off Palamos Point he had been careful to disappear again over the horizon immediately, so as to give no warning of the approach of a British squadron. He had hoped that the French might grow careless. With the wind nearly in the east, and Cape Creux running out almost directly eastwards, there was a chance that some supply ship or other, compelled to stand far out from the land to weather the point, might be caught at dawn out of range of the shore batteries, having neglected to make this dangerous passage at night. And so it had proved.

"Hoist the colours, Mr Gerard," said Hornblower. "And call all hands."

"The brig has wore, sir," hailed the lookout. "She's running before the wind."

"Head so as to cut her off, Mr Gerard. Set stuns'ls both sides."

Before the wind, and with only the lightest of breezes blowing, was the *Sutherland's* best point of sailing, as might be expected of her shallow build and clumsy beam. In these ideal conditions she might easily have the heels of a deep-laden coasting brig.

"Deck, there!" hailed the lookout. "The brig's come to the wind again, sir. She's on her old course."

That was something very strange. If the chase had been a ship of the line, she might have been challenging battle. But a mere brig, even a brig of war, would be expected to fly to the shelter of the shore batteries.

Possibly she might be an English brig.

"Here, Savage. Take your glass and tell me what you can see."

Savage dashed up the main rigging at the word.

"Quite right, sir. She's closehailed again on the starboard tack. We'll pass her to leeward on this course. She's wearing French national colours, sir. And she's signalling now, sir. Can't read the flags yet, sir, and she's nearly dead to leeward, now."

What the devil was the brig up to? She had settled her own fate by standing to windward again; if she had dashed for the land the moment she had sighted the *Sutherland* she might possibly have escaped. Now she was a certain capture — but why was the French brig signalling to a British ship of the line? Hornblower sprang up on to the rail; from there he could see the brig's topsails over the horizon, as she held her windward course. "I can read the signal now, sir. MV."

"What the devil does MV mean?" snapped Hornblower to Vincent, and then regretted that he had said it. A look would have done as well.

"I don't know, sir," said Vincent, turning the pages of the signal book. "It's not in the code."

"We'll know soon enough," said Bush. "We're coming up to her fast. Hullo! She's wearing round again. She's come before the wind. But it's no use now, Mongseer. You're ours. A handsome bit of prize money there for us, my lads."

The excited chatter of the quarterdeck reached Hornblower's ears to be unheard. This last attempt at flight on the Frenchman's part had explained his previous movements. Bush, Gerard, Vincent, Crystal, were all too careless to have thought about it, too excited at the prospect of prize money. Hornblower could guess now what had happened. At first sight of the *Sutherland*, the brig had turned to fly. Then she had seen the red ensign which the *Sutherland* had hoisted, and misread it as the French colours — both sides had made the same mistake before this, the red fly both of tricolour and of red ensign led easily to confusion.

It was fortunate this time that Leighton had been Rear-Admiral of the Red, so that the *Sutherland* had worn his colours. What was more, the *Sutherland* had the round bow given her by her Dutch builders, the same as nearly every French ship of the line, and unlike every English ship save three or four. So the brig had taken the *Sutherland* to be French, and as soon as she was sure of this had held to the wind again, anxious to make her offing so as to weather Cape Creux. Then the MV signal which she had flown had been the private French recognition signal — that was something well worth knowing. It was only when the *Sutherland* did not make the expected conventional reply that the French captain had realised his mistake, and made one last dash for liberty.

A quite unavailing dash, for the *Sutherland* had cut her off from all chance of escape to leeward. The ships were only two miles apart now, and converging. Once more the brig came round, this time with the very faint hope of clawing away out of range to windward. But the *Sutherland* was hurtling close upon her.

"Fire a shot near him," snapped Hornblower.

At that threat the French captain yielded. The brig hove to, and the tricolour came down from her peak. A cheer went up from the *Sutherland's* main deck.

"Silence, there!" roared Hornblower. "Mr Bush, take a boat and board her. Mr Clarke, you're prize-master. Take six hands with you and navigate her to Port Mahon."

Bush was all smiles on his return.

"Brig *Amelie*, sir. Six days out from Marseilles for Barcelona. General cargo of military stores. Twenty-five tons powder. One hundred and twenty-five tons of biscuit. Beef and pork in casks. Brandy. Admiralty agent at Port Mahon'll buy her, sure as a gun, ship, stores, and all." Bush rubbed his hands. "And we the only ship in sight!" If any other British ship had been in sight she would have shared the prize money. As it was the only shares to be given away were those of the Admiral commanding in the Mediterranean and of Admiral Leighton commanding the squadron. Between them they would have one-third of the value, so that Hornblower's share would be about two-ninths — several hundred pounds at least.

"Bring the ship before the wind," said Hornblower. Not for worlds would he give any sign of his delight at being several hundred pounds richer. "We've no time to lose."

He went below to shave, and as he scraped the lather from his cheeks and contemplated the melancholy face in the glass he meditated once more on the superiority of sea over land. The *Amelie* was a small vessel, almost inconsiderable in size. But she carried between two and three hundred tons of stores; and if the French had tried to send that amount overland to Barcelona it would have called for a first-class military convoy — a hundred or more waggons, hundreds of horses, taking up a mile or more of road and needing a guard of

thousands of troops to protect it from the attacks of the Spanish partisans. Troops and horses would have needed food, too, and that would call for more waggons still, all crawling along at fifteen miles a day at most over the Spanish roads. Small wonder, then, that the French preferred to run the risk of sending their stores by sea. And what a blow it would be for the harassed French army to find a British squadron on their flank, and their best route of communication broken.

Walking forward to take his bath with Polwheal in attendance, a new idea struck him.

"Pass the word for the sailmaker," he said.

Potter the sailmaker came aft and stood at attention while Hornblower rotated himself under the jet of the washdeck pump.

"I want a French ensign, Potter," said Hornblower. "There's not one on board?"

"French ensign, sir? No, sir."

"Then make one. I'll give you twenty minutes, Potter."

Hornblower continued to rotate under the jet of the pump, rejoicing in its refreshing impact on this hot morning. The chances were that no Frenchman had observed the capture of the *Amelie* from Cape Creux, and that was the only land in sight at the time. Even if someone had done so, it would take many hours to warn all the coast line of the presence of a British ship of the line. Having taken the French by surprise, the right game to play was to go on exploiting that surprise to the utmost, making use of every device that would make the blow effective. He went back to his cabin and put on refreshing clean linen, still turning over in his mind the details of his plans which were now losing their nebulousness of the night before and growing more and more clear cut.

"Breakfast, sir?" asked Polwheal, tentatively.

"Bring me some coffee on the quarterdeck," said Hornblower. He could not bear the thought of food — perhaps because of his present excitement, perhaps because of his vast dinner of the night before.

From the quarterdeck could be seen shadowy blue masses on the horizon right ahead — the peaks of the Pyrenees; between them and the sea crawled the road from France to Spain. The sailmaker's mate came running aft with his arms full of a vast bundle.

"Mr Vincent," said Hornblower. "I'll have this flag hoisted instead of our own."

The officers of the quarterdeck eyed the strange tricolour as it rose to the peak, and they looked from the flag to their captain, whispering among themselves. Grouped on the lee side, not one of them dared to try to open a conversation with Hornblower on the weather side. Hornblower exulted both in their excitement and their silence.

"Send the hands to quarters as soon as they have breakfasted, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "Clear for action, but keep the ports shut, I want the long boat and launch ready to be hoisted out at a moment's notice."

The hands came tumbling up from breakfast in a perfect babble of sound — the order to clear for action, the tricolour at the peak, the mountains of Spain ahead, the morning's capture, all combining to work them up into wild excitement.

"Keep those men silent on the maindeck, there!" bellowed Hornblower. "It sounds like Bedlam turned loose." The noise dwindled abruptly, the men creeping about like children in a house with an irascible father. The bulkheads came down, the galley fire was tipped overside. The boys were running up with powder for the guns; the shot garlands between the guns were filled with the black iron spheres ready for instant use.

"Cleared for action, sir," said Bush.

"H-h'm," said Hornblower. "Captain Morris, if I send away the long boat and launch, I want twenty marines in each. Have your men told off ready."

Hornblower took his glass and studied once more the rapidly nearing coast line. There were cliffs there, and the coast road wound at the foot of them, at the water's edge, and the shore was steep-to, according to his charts. But it would be a sensible precaution to start the lead going soon. He was taking a risk in approaching a lee shore guarded by heavy batteries — the *Sutherland* might be badly knocked about before she could beat to windward out of range again. Hornblower was counting not merely on the disguise he had adopted, but on the very fact that the French would not believe that an English ship could take that risk.

To the French in the batteries the presence of a French ship of the line off that coast was susceptible of explanation — she might have ventured forth from Toulon, or have come in from the Atlantic, or she might be

a refugee from some Ionian island attacked by the British, seeking refuge after long wanderings. He could not believe that they would open fire without allowing time for explanation.

At a word from Hornblower the *Sutherland* turned on a course parallel with the shore, heading northward with the wind abeam. She was creeping along now, in the light breeze, only just out of gunshot of the shore. The sun was blazing down upon them, the crew standing silently at their stations, the officers grouped on the quarterdeck, Hornblower with the sweat running down his face, sweeping the coast with his glass in search of an objective. The little wind was calling forth only the faintest piping from the rigging; the rattle of the blocks to the gentle roll of the ship sounded unnaturally loud in the silence as did the monotonous calling of the man at the lead. Suddenly Savage hailed from the foretop.

"There's a lot of small craft, sir, at anchor round the point, there. I can just see 'em from here, sir."

A dark speck danced in the object glass of Hornblower's telescope. He lowered the instrument to rest his aching eye, and then he raised it again. The speck was still there; it was a tricolour flag waving lazily in the wind from a flagstaff on the point. That was what Hornblower had been seeking. A French battery perched on the top of the cliff. Forty-two pounders, probably, sited with a good command, probably with furnaces for heating the shot — no ship that floated could fight them. Clustered underneath, a little coasting fleet, huddling there for shelter at the sight of a strange sail.

"Tell your men to lie down," said Hornblower to Morris. He did not want the red coats of the marines drawn up on the quarterdeck to reveal his ship prematurely for what she was.

The *Sutherland* crept along, the grey cliffs growing more clearly defined as at Hornblower's order she was edged closer in shore. Beyond the cliffs mountain peaks were revealing themselves with startling suddenness whenever Hornblower's rigid concentration on the battery relaxed. He could see the parapets now in his glass, and he almost thought he could see the big guns peeping over them. At any moment now the battery might burst into thunder and flame and smoke, and in that case he would have to turn and fly, baffled. They were well within gunshot now. Perhaps the French had guessed the *Sutherland's* identity, and were merely waiting to have her well within range. Every minute that the *Sutherland* approached meant another minute under fire when she tried to escape. The loss of a mast might mean in the end the loss of the ship.

"Mr Vincent," said Hornblower, without shifting his gaze from the battery. "Hoist MV."

The words sent a stir through the group of officers. They could be certain now of what plan Hornblower had in mind. The trick increased the risk of detection at the same time as, if it were successful, it gave them more opportunity of approaching the battery. If MV were the French recognition signal, and was being correctly employed, well and good. If not — the battery would soon tell them so. Hornblower, his heart thumping in his breast, judged that at any rate it might confuse the issue for the officer in the battery and induce him to delay a little longer. The signal rose up the halliards, and the battery still stayed silent. Now a signal hoist soared up the battery's flagstaff.

"I can't read that, sir," said Vincent. "One of 'em's a swallowtail we don't use."

But the mere fact of the battery's signalling in reply meant that they were at least doubtful of the *Sutherland's* identity — unless it were part of the plan to lure her closer in. Yet if the battery delayed much longer it would be too late.

"Mr Bush, do you see the battery?"

"Yes, sir."

"You will take the long boat. Mr Rayner will take the launch, and you will land and storm the battery."

"Aye aye, sir."

"I will give you the word when to hoist out."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Quarter less eight," droned the leadsman — Hornblower had listened to each cast subconsciously; now that the water was shoaling he was compelled to give half his attention up to the leadsman's cries while still scrutinising the battery. A bare quarter of a mile from it now; it was time to strike.

"Very good, Mr Bush. You can go now."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Back the main tops'l, Mr Gerard."

At Bush's orders the dormant ship sprang to life. The shrilling of the pipes brought the boats' crews to the falls at the run. This was the time when the painful drill would reveal its worth; the more quickly those boats were swung out, manned, and away, the less would be the danger and the greater the chance of success. Long boat and launch dropped to the water, the hands swarming down the falls.

"Throw the guns down the cliff, Mr Bush. Wreck the battery if you can. But don't stay a moment longer than necessary."

"Aye aye, sir."

They were off, the men tugging like maniacs at the oars.

"Helm a-lee! Mr Gerard, put the ship about. And down with that flag, and send up our own. Ah!"

The air was torn with the passage of cannon shot overhead. The whole ship shook as something struck her a tremendous blow forward. Hornblower saw the smoke billow up round the battery — it had opened fire at last. And thank God it was firing at the ship; if one of those shots hit a boat he would be in a pretty scrape. So pleased was he at the thought that it never occurred to him to wonder about his own personal safety.

"Mr Gerard, see if the guns can reach the battery. See that every shot is properly aimed. It is no use unless the embrasures can be swept."

Another salvo from the battery, and too high again, the shot howling overhead. Little Longley, strutting the quarterdeck with his dirk at his hip, checked in his stride to duck, instinctively, and then, with a side glance at his captain, walked on with his neck as stiff as a ramrod. Hornblower grinned.

"Mr Longley, have that main top gallant halliard spliced at once."

It was a kindness to keep the boy busy so that he would have no time to be afraid. Now the *Sutherland's* starboard broadside began to open fire, irregularly, as the gun captains fancied their weapons bore. Flying jets of dust from the face of the cliff showed that most of the shot were hitting thirty feet too low. But if even one or two shots got in through the embrasures and killed someone working the guns it would be a valuable help in unsettling the artillery men. Another salvo. This time they had fired at the boats. The launch almost vanished under the jets of water flung up by the plunging fire, and Hornblower gulped with anxiety. But the next moment the launch reappeared, limping along crabwise — a shot must have smashed some of the oars on one side. But the boats were safe now; close up to the cliffs as they were the guns up above could surely not be depressed sufficiently to hit them. The long boat was in the very surf now, with the launch at her heels. Now the men were tumbling out and splashing up to the beach.

For a moment Hornblower wished that, contrary to etiquette he had taken command of the landing party, fearing lest a disorderly and piecemeal attack should waste all the advantages gained. No, Bush was safe enough. He could see him through his glass, leaping up on to the road and then turning to face the landing party. Hornblower could see Bush's arms wave as he gave his orders. Someone led off a party of seamen to the right — that was Rayner, for Hornblower's straining eyes could perceive his bald head and unmistakable round shouldered gait. Morris was taking the marines — a solid block of scarlet — off to the left. Bush was forming up the remainder in the centre — Bush was clearheaded enough. There were three gullies in the face of the cliff, marked with straggling greenery, and indicating the easiest points of ascent. As the flanking parties reached the bottom of their paths, Hornblower saw Bush's sword flash as he called his men on. They were breasting the cliffs now, all three parties simultaneously. A tiny faint cheer crept out over the water to the ship.

One or two of the main deck guns were making better practice now. Twice Hornblower thought he saw earth flying from the embrasures as shots struck them; so much the better, but the firing must stop now that the men were mounting the cliff. He pealed on his whistle and bellowed the order. In dead silence the ship slid on through the water while every eye watched the landing party. They were pouring over the top now. Sudden gusts of smoke showed that the guns were firing again — canister or grape, probably. Any of those parties caught in a whirlpool of canister from a forty-two pounder might well be wiped out. Weapons were sparkling on the parapet; little pinpricks of smoke indicated small arm fire. Now out on the left the red coats of the marines were on the very top of the parapet, a white clad sailor was waving from the centre. They were pouring over, although red dots and white dots littered the face of the parapet to mark where men had fallen. One anxious minute with nothing to see seemed to last for hours. And then the tricolour flag came slowly

down its staff, and the hands on the main deck burst into a storm of cheering. Hornblower shut his glass with a snap.

"Mr Gerard, put the ship about. Send in the quarter boats to take possession of the craft in the bay."

There were four tantanes, a felucca, and two cutter-rigged boats clustered at anchor in the tiny bay below the battery — a fine haul especially if they were fully laden. Hornblower saw the dinghies pulling madly from them for the shore on the side away from the battery, as the crews fled to escape captivity. Hornblower was glad to see them go; he did not want to be burdened with prisoners, and he had been a prisoner himself for two weary years in Ferrol. Something fell in an avalanche down the cliff, crashing on to the road at its foot in a cloud of dust and debris. It was a forty-two pounder heaved up by brute force over the parapet; Bush had got to work quickly enough at dismantling the battery — if Bush were still alive. Another gun followed at an interval, and another after that.

The small craft, two of them towing the quarter boats, were beating out towards the *Sutherland* where she lay hove-to awaiting them, and the landing party was coming down the cliff face again and forming up on the beach. Lingered groups indicated that the wounded were being brought down. All these necessary delays seemed to stretch the anticlimax into an eternity. A bellowing roar from the battery and a fountain of earth and smoke — momentarily like those volcanoes at whose foot the *Lydia* had anchored last commission — told that the magazine had been fired. Now at last the launch and the long boat were pulling back to the ship, and Hornblower's telescope, trained on the sternsheets of the long boat, revealed Bush sitting there, alive and apparently well. Even then, it was a relief to see him come rolling aft, his big craggy face wreathed in smiles, to make his report.

"The Frogs bolted out of the back door as we came in at the front," he said. "They hardly lost a man. We lost —"

Hornblower had to nerve himself to listen to a pitiful list. Now that the excitement was over he felt weak and ill, and it was only by an effort that he was able to keep his hands from trembling. And it was only by an effort that he could make himself smile and mouth out words of commendation first to the men whom Bush singled out for special mention and then to the whole crew drawn up on the maindeck. For hours he had been walking the quarterdeck pretending to be imperturbable, and now he was in the throes of the reaction. He left it to Bush to deal with the prizes, to allot them skeleton crews and send them off to Port Mahon, while without a word of excuse he escaped below to his cabin. He had even forgotten that the ship had been cleared for action, so that in his search for privacy he had to sit in his hammock chair at the end of the stern gallery, just out of sight from the stern windows, while the men were replacing the bulkheads and securing the guns. He lay back, his arms hanging and his eyes closed, with the water bubbling under the counter below him and the rudder pintles groaning at his side. Each time the ship went about as Bush worked her out to make an offing his head sagged over to the opposite shoulder.

What affected him most was the memory of the risks he had run; at the thought of them little cold waves ran down his back and legs. He had been horribly reckless in his handling of the ship — only by the greatest good fortune was she not now a dismantled wreck, with half her crew killed and wounded, drifting on to a lee shore, with an exultant enemy awaiting her. It was Hornblower's nature to discount his achievements to himself, to make no allowance for the careful precautions he had taken to ensure success, for his ingenuity in making the best of circumstances. He cursed himself for a reckless fool, and for his habit of plunging into danger and only counting the risk afterwards.

A rattle of cutlery and crockery in the cabin recalled him to himself, and he sat up and resumed his unmoved countenance just in time as Polwheal came out into the stern gallery.

"I've got you a mouthful to eat, sir," he said. "You've had nought since yesterday."

Hornblower suddenly knew that he was horribly hungry, and at the same time he realised that he had forgotten the coffee Polwheal had brought him, hours ago, to the quarterdeck. Presumably that had stayed there to grow cold until Polwheal fetched it away. With real pleasure he got up and walked into the cabin; so tempting was the prospect of food and drink that he felt hardly a twinge of irritation at having Polwheal thus fussing over him and trying to mother him and probably getting ready to make overmuch advantage of his position. The cold tongue was delicious, and Polwheal with uncanny intuition had put out a half bottle of claret

— not one day a month did Hornblower drink anything stronger than water when by himself, yet today he drank three glasses of claret, knowing that he wanted them, and enjoying every drop. And as the food and the wine strengthened him, and his fatigue dropped away, his mind began to busy itself with new plans, devising, without his conscious volition, fresh methods of harassing the enemy. As he drank his coffee the ideas began to stir within him, and yet he was not conscious of them. All he knew was the cabin was suddenly stuffy and cramped, and that he was yearning again for the fresh air and fierce sunshine outside. Polwheal, returning to clear the table, saw his captain through the stern windows pacing the gallery, and years of service under Hornblower had taught him to make the correct deductions from Hornblower's bent, thoughtful head, and the hands which, although clasped behind him, yet twisted and turned one within the other as he worked out each prospective development. In consequence of what Polwheal had to tell, the lower deck all knew that another move was imminent, fully two hours before Hornblower appeared on the quarterdeck and gave the orders which precipitated it.

Chapter XI

"They're shooting well, sir," said Bush, as a fountain of water leaped suddenly and mysteriously into brief life a hundred yards from the port beam. "Who couldn't shoot well with their advantages?" answered Gerard.

"Forty-two pounders, on permanent mounts fifty feet above the water, and soldiers to serve 'em ten years in the ranks?"

"I've seen 'em shoot worse, all the same," said Crystal.

"It's a mile an' a half if it's a yard," said Bush.

"More than that," said Crystal.

"A scant mile," said Gerard.

"Nonsense," said Bush.

Hornblower broke into their wrangling.

"Your attention, please, gentlemen. And I shall want Rayner and Hooker — pass the word, there, for Mr Rayner and Mr Hooker. Now, study the place with care."

A dozen telescopes trained on Port Vendres, with the sunset reddening behind. In the background Mount Canigou stood out with a startling illusion of towering height; to the left the spurs of the Pyrenees ran clean down into the sea at Cape Cerbera, marking where Spain had ended and France began. In the centre the white houses of Port Vendres showed pink under the sunset, clustering round the head of the little bay. In front of them a vessel swung at anchor, under the protection of the batteries on either side of the bay which were marked by occasional puffs of smoke as the guns there tried repeatedly, at extremely long range, to hit the insolent ship which was flaunting British colours within sight of the Empire's coasts.

"Mark that battery to the left, Mr Gerard," said Hornblower. "Mr Rayner, you see the battery to the right — there goes a gun. Mark it well. I want no mistake made. Mr Hooker, you see how the bay curves? You must be able to take a boat straight up to the ship there tonight."

"Aye aye, sir," said Hooker, while the other officers exchanged glances.

"Put the ship upon the port tack, Mr Bush. We must stand out to sea, now. These are your orders, gentlemen." Turning from one officer to another, Hornblower ran briefly through their instructions. The ship sheltering in Port Vendres was to be cut and taken that night as a climax to the twenty-four hours which had begun with the capture of the *Amelie* and continued with the storming of the battery at Llanza.

"The moon rises at one o'clock. I shall take care to be back in our present position here at midnight," said Hornblower.

With good fortune, the garrison of Port Vendres might be lured into tranquillity by the sight of the *Sutherland* sailing away now, and she could return unobserved after nightfall. An hour of darkness would suffice to effect a surprise, and the rising moon would give sufficient light for the captured ship to be brought out if successful, and for the attackers to rally and escape if unsuccessful.

"Mr Bush will remain in command of the ship," said Hornblower.

"Sir!" protested Bush. "Please sir —"

"You've won sufficient distinction today, Bush," said Hornblower.

Hornblower was going in with the attack. He knew that he would not be able to bear the anxiety of waiting outside with the firing and the fighting going on inside — he was in a fever already, now that he was allowing his mind to dwell on the prospective action, although he was taking care not to show it.

"Every man in the boarding party must be a seaman," said Hornblower. "Mr Gerard and Mr Rayner can divide the marines between them."

His listeners nodded, understanding. To set sail in a strange ship and get her under way in darkness would call for seamanship.

"You all understand what is expected of you?" asked Hornblower, and they nodded again. "Mr Hooker, repeat your orders."

Hooker repeated them accurately. He was a good officer as Hornblower had known when he had recommended him for promotion to lieutenant on the *Lydia's* return.

"Good," said Hornblower. "Then, gentlemen, you will please set your watches with mine. There will be enough light from the stars to read them. What, no watch, Mr Hooker? Perhaps Mr Bush will be good enough to lend you his."

Hornblower could see, from his officers' expressions, that this synchronisation of the watches had impressed upon them the necessity for accurately conforming to the timetable which he had laid down, in a fashion nothing else could have done. Otherwise they would have paid only casual attention to the intervals of 'five minutes' and 'ten minutes' which he had given, and he could appreciate in a manner they could not, the necessity for exact adherence to schedule in a complex operation carried out in the darkness.

"You are all agreed now? Then perhaps all you gentlemen with the exception of the officer of the watch will give me the pleasure of your company at dinner."

Again the officers interchanged glances; those dinners in Hornblower's cabin on the eve of action were famous. Savage could remember one on board the *Lydia* before the duel with the *Natividad*. The other two present then had been Galbraith the lieutenant of his division, and Clay, his best friend. And Galbraith had died of gangrene in the far Pacific, and Clay's head had been smashed by a cannon ball.

"There'll be no whist tonight, Savage," smiled Hornblower, reading his thoughts. "There will be too much to do before midnight."

Often before Hornblower had insisted on whist before action, and had concealed his own nervousness by criticism of the play of his preoccupied fellow players. Now he was forcing himself to be smiling, genial, and hospitable as he led the way into the cabin. His nervous tension inclined to make him talkative, and this evening, when his guests were more tongue-tied even than usual, he could for once give rein to his inclinations, and chat freely in an attempt to keep conversation going. The others eyed him, wondering as he smiled and gossiped. They never saw him in this mood except on the eve of action, and they had forgotten how human and fascinating he could be when he employed all his wiles to captivate them. For him it was a convenient way to keep his mind off the approaching action, thus to exercise himself in fascination while still drawing the rigid line which divided the captain from his subordinates.

"I am afraid," said Hornblower in the end, crumpling his napkin and tossing it on to the table, "it is time for us to go on deck again, gentlemen. What a mortal pity to break up this gathering!"

They left the lamplit brilliance of the cabin for the darkness of the deck. The stars were glowing in the dark sky, and the *Sutherland* was stealing ghostlike over the sea which reflected them; her pyramids of canvas soared up to invisibility, and the only sounds to be heard were the rattle of the rigging and the periodic music of the water under her forefoot as she rode over the tiny invisible waves. The crew was resting on the gangways and the maindeck, conversing in whispers, and when the subdued voices of their officers called them to duty they mustered silently, each division assembling for its particular duty. Hornblower checked the position of the ship with Bush, and strained his eye through his nightglass towards the invisible shore.

"Longboat crew here!" called Gerard softly.

"Launch crew here!" echoed Rayner, and their allotted parties formed up quietly abreast the main mast.

The cutters' crews were assembling on the quarterdeck; Hornblower was taking two hundred and fifty men altogether — if the expedition were a complete disaster Bush would hardly have sufficient men to navigate the *Sutherland* back to the rendezvous.

"You can heave-to, Mr Bush," he said.

One by one the boats were hoisted out, and lay on their oars a few yards off. Last of all, Hornblower went down the side and seated himself beside Brown and Longley in the stern of the barge; the men at the oars pushed off at a growl from Brown, and the flotilla, with muffled oars, began to pull steadily away from the ship. The darkness was intense, and, by the usual optical illusion, seemed still more intense close to the surface of the sea than up on the deck of the *Sutherland*. Slowly the barge drew ahead, and as the longboat and launch diverged out on each quarter they were rapidly lost to sight. The oars seemed to touch the velvety blackness of the sea without a sound.

Hornblower made himself sit still, his hand resting on the hilt of his fifty-guinea sword. He wanted to crane his neck round and look at the other boats; with every minute's inaction he grew more nervous. Some fool of a marine might fiddle with the lock of his musket, or someone's pistol, carelessly left at full cock, might go off as its owner tugged at his oar. The slightest warning given on shore would ruin the whole attack; might mean the loss of hundreds of lives, and call down upon his head — if he survived — a withering rebuke from his admiral. Grimly he made himself sit still for five more minutes before taking up his nightglass.

Then at last he caught the faintest possible glimpse of grey cliff. With his hand on the tiller he altered course until they were almost in the mouth of the inlet.

"Easy!" he breathed, and the boat glided silently forward under the stars. Close astern two tiny nuclei of greater darkness indicated where the two cutters rested on their oars. Holding his watch under his nose he could just see the time — he must wait three full minutes.

A distant sound reached his ear; there were oars pulling in the harbour. He heard them splashing two hundred yards ahead; he fancied he could see the splashes. The French were, as he expected, rowing a guard round their precious ship. Yet her captain had not realised that a guard boat rowing with muffled oars, creeping very slowly along, would be a far more dangerous obstacle to a cutting-out expedition than any boat merely busily rowing up and down across the entrance. He looked at his watch again.

"Oars," he whispered, and the men braced themselves ready to pull. "There's the guard boat ahead.

Remember, men, cold steel. If any man fires before I do I'll shoot him with my own hand. Give way!"

The barge crept forward again, stealing into the harbour. In a few more seconds she would be at the point where the batteries' fire crossed, the point which sentries would have under constant observation, upon which the guns would be laid at nightfall so that a salvo would blow any approaching boat out of the water. For a horrible second Hornblower wondered whether launch and longboat had gone astray. Then he heard it. A loud challenge on his right, heard clearly across the water, followed by another on his left, and both instantly drowned in a wild rattle of musketry fire. Rayner and Gerard were leading their parties against the batteries, and both of them as their orders had dictated, were making an infernal noise about it so as to distract the gunners at the vital moment.

His eye caught the splashes of the guard boat's oars, more noticeable than ever with the crew pulling wildly as they paid attention to the din on shore instead of to their own business. The barge shot silently and unnoticeable towards it. She was only fifty yards from the guard boat when someone at last caught sight of her.

"Qui va là!" cried someone, sharply, but before any answer could be expected the barge came crashing up against the guard boat's side, as Hornblower dragged the tiller round.

His quick order had got the oars in a second before the collision, while the impact of the barge swept the oars of the guard boat away, tumbling half her crew in a tangle into the bottom of the boat. Hornblower's sword was out, and at the instant of contact he leaped madly from the barge to the guard boat, choking with excitement and nervousness as he did so. He landed with both feet on someone in the stern, trod him down, and miraculously kept his own footing. There was a white face visible down by his knee, and he kicked at it, wildly, felt a jar up his leg as the kick went home, and at the same moment he cut with all his strength at another head before him. He felt the sword bite into bone; the boat rolled frightfully under him as more of the barge's crew came tumbling into the guard boat. Someone was heaving himself upright before him —

someone with a black gash of a moustache across his face in the starlight, and therefore no Englishman. Hornblower lunged fiercely as he reeled in the rocking boat, and he and his opponent came down together upon the men under their feet. When he scrambled up the struggle was over, without a shot being fired. The guard boat's crew was dead, or overboard, or knocked unconscious. Hornblower felt his neck and his wrist wet and sticky — with blood, presumably, but he did not have time to think about that.

"Into the barge, men," he said. "Give way."

The whole fight had hardly taken more than a few seconds. At the batteries the racket of the attack was still continuing, and even as the barge pushed away from the derelict guard boat there came a sudden splutter of musketry fire from higher up the bay. The two cutters had reached the anchored ship without impediment, rowing, as Hornblower's orders had dictated, past the two locked boats straight for her. With his hand on the tiller he set a course for the musket flashes. Apparently the cutters' crews had not succeeded in carrying the ship at the first rush, for the sparkle of the firing stayed steady along the ship's bulwark — she must have had her boarding nettings rigged and her crew fairly wide awake.

The child Longley at his side was leaping about in his seat with excitement.

"Sit still, boy," growled Hornblower.

He put the tiller over and the barge swept under the ship's stern towards the disengaged side of the ship.

"Oars!" hissed Hornblower. "Take hold, there, bowman. Now, all together, men, and give a cheer."

It was a hard scramble up the side of the ship, and her boarding nettings were rigged, sure enough.

Hornblower found foothold on the bulwark through the netting, swaying perilously, leaning far out over the water, for the nettings were rigged from the yardarms and sloped sharply outwards. He struggled in them like a fly in a web. Beside him he saw Longley, writhing similarly. The boy had his dirk between his teeth in the fashion he had heard about in sailors' yarns. He looked so foolish hanging in the netting with that great clumsy weapon in his mouth that Hornblower giggled insanely on his insecure foothold. He snatched his sword from its sheath, clutching with the other hand, and slashed at the tarry cordage. The whole net was heaving and tossing as the barge's crew wrenched at it; he was almost jerked from his hold.

But everyone around him was cheering madly. This surprise attack on the unguarded side must be shaking the nerve of the defenders trying to beat off the cutters' crews. The fifty-guinea sword was of the finest steel and had a razor edge; it was cutting through strand after strand of the netting. Suddenly something parted with a rush. For one horrible second Hornblower lost his footing and nearly fell outwards, but with a convulsive effort he recovered and swung himself forward, falling through the net on his hands and knees, the sword clattering on the deck before him. A Frenchman was rushing at him; his eye caught a glimpse of the steel head of a levelled pike. He snatched hold of the shaft, twisting on to his back, guiding the weapon clear. The Frenchman's knee crashed into the back of his head, and his neck was badly wrenched as the Frenchman tumbled over on top of him. He kicked himself clear, found his sword, miraculously, and stood to face the other dark shapes rushing at him.

A pistol banged off at his ear, half deafening him, and it seemed as if the whole mass of those attacking him melted away into nothing at the finish. Those others crossing the deck now were English; they were cheering.

"Mr Crystal!"

"Sir!"

"Cut the cable. Is Mr Hooker there?"

"Aye aye, sir."

"Get aloft with your boat's crew and set sail."

There was no time for self congratulation yet. Boats might come dashing out from the shore with reinforcements for the ship's crew; and Rayner and Gerard might be repulsed by the garrisons of the batteries so that he would have to run the gauntlet of the guns.

"Brown!"

"Sir!"

"Send up that rocket."

"Aye aye, sir."

The rocket which Brown had brought with him at Hornblower's orders was to be the signal to the landing parties that the ship was taken. And there was a decided breath of air coming off the land which would carry

the ship out of the bay; Hornblower had counted on that — after the scorching heat of the day a land breeze was only to be expected.

"Cable's parted, sir!" hailed Crystal from forward.

Hooker had loosed the main topsail, and the ship was already gathering sternway.

"Hands to the braces, there, barge's crew, first cutter's crew. Benskin! Ledly! Take the wheel. Hard a-starboard."

Brown's flint and steel were clicking and flashing as he crouched on the deck. The rocket rose in an upward torrent of sparks and burst high above into stars. As the fore stay sail was set the ship's head came round, and as she steadied on her course down the bay with the wind abaft the moon cleared the horizon right ahead — a gibbous, waning moon, giving just enough light for Hornblower to be able to con the ship easily out of the bay between the batteries. Hornblower could hear whistles blowing, piercing the sound of the musketry which was still popping round the batteries. Rayner and Gerard were calling off their men now.

Two splashes overside indicated that a couple of the ship's crew were swimming for the shore rather than face captivity. It had been a well-timed and successful operation.

Chapter XII

This Gulf of the Lion was not likely to be a very profitable cruising ground so Hornblower decided as he scanned the French coast through his telescope. It was so deeply embayed that any wind from north to west through south would find his ship with land under her lee; it was shallow, treacherous, and liable to be whipped by storms into a tremendous sea. Navigational risks were worth taking if a suitable prize offered, but, thought Hornblower looking at the coast, there was small chance of any prize. From Port Vendres as far round as Marseille — the limit of the Inshore Squadron's sector — the flat shore was bordered by vast dreary lagoons which were separated from the sea by long spits of sand and even by peninsulas of cultivated land. There were batteries here and there upon the sand spits, and regular forts to support them, and the little towns, Cette, Aigues-Mortes, and so on were encompassed by mediaeval fortifications which could defy any effort he could make against them.

But the main factor was that chain of lagoons, linked together since Roman times by a series of canals. Vessels up to two hundred tons could creep along inside the coast line — he could actually see through his glass, at this very moment, brown sails apparently sailing over the green vineyards. The entrances to the chain were all defended by solid works, and if he were to try to surprise one of these it would involve running all the risk of taking his ship in through the tortuous channels between the sandbanks, under gunfire. Even if he should succeed he could still hardly attack the shipping in the lagoons.

The blue Mediterranean under the glaring blue sky shaded to green and even to yellow as it shoaled here and there in patches, a constant reminder to Hornblower as he walked his deck of the treacherous water he was navigating. Forward the ship was a hive of industry. Bush, watch in hand, had fifty men whom he was drilling aloft — they had set and furled the fore top gallant sail a dozen times in the last hour and a half, which must be puzzling the numerous telescopes trained on the ship from the shore. Harrison the boatswain down on the maindeck was squatting on a stool with two of his mates and twenty landsmen crosslegged in a ring round him — he was teaching the advanced class some of the refinements of knotting and splicing. From the lower gun deck the squeal and rumble of gun trucks told how Gerard was exercising embryo gun layers at the six forward twenty-four pounders — Gerard's ambition was to have six trained gun captains at every gun, and he was a long way yet from achieving it. On the poop Crystal with his sextant was patiently trying to instruct the midshipmen in the elements of navigation — the young devils were fidgety and restless as Crystal droned on. Hornblower was sorry for them. He had delighted in mathematics since his boyhood; logarithms had been playthings to him at little Longley's age, and a problem in spherical trigonometry was to him but a source of pleasure, analogous, he realised, to the pleasure some of those lads found in the music which was so incomprehensible to him.

A monotonous hammering below indicated that the carpenter and his mates were putting the finishing touches to their repair of the big hole which had been made yesterday morning — incredible that it was hardly more than twenty-four hours ago — by the forty-two pounder at Llanza, while the clanking of the pumps showed that the petty criminals of the ship were pumping her out. The *Sutherland*, thanks to her recent docking, leaked extraordinarily little, less than an inch a day in calm weather, and Hornblower was able to deal with this small amount by an hour's pumping every morning, allotting to it the miscreants who had found themselves in Bush's or Harrison's black books by being last up the hatchway, or lashing up their hammocks by fore and aft turns, or by committing any of the numerous crimes of omission or commission which annoy boatswains and first lieutenants. A turn at pumping — the most monotonous and uninviting work in the ship — was a far more economical punishment than the cat, and Hornblower believed it to be more deterrent, rather to Bush's amusement.

Smoke was pouring from the galley chimney, and even on the quarterdeck Hornblower could smell the cooking that was going on. The men were going to have a good dinner today, with duff; yesterday they had eaten and drunk nothing save biscuit and cold water, thanks to the ship having been engaged three times in twenty-four hours. They did not mind that as long as they were successful — it was amazing how beneficial a little success was to discipline. Today, with eleven dead and sixteen wounded, with thirty-four men away in prizes — less two prisoners who had elected to serve the King of England rather than face one of his prisons — the *Sutherland* was more effective as a fighting unit than the day before yesterday with practically a full complement. Hornblower could see, from the quarterdeck, the cheerfulness and high spirits of everyone in sight.

He was cheerful and in high spirits himself. For once his self-depreciation was in abeyance. He had forgotten his fears of yesterday, and three successful actions in a day had re-established his self-confidence. He was at least a thousand pounds the richer by his captures, and that was good to think about. He had never before in his life had a thousand pounds. He remembered how Lady Barbara had tactfully looked away after a single glance at the pinchbeck buckles on his shoes. Next time he dined with Lady Barbara he would be wearing solid gold buckles, with diamonds set in them if he chose, and by some inconspicuous gesture he would call her attention to them. Maria would have bracelets and rings to flaunt his success before the eyes of the world. Hornblower remembered with pride that he had not known a moment's fear last night in Port Vendres, not when he leaped on board the guard boat, not even when he had found himself in the nightmare embrace of the boarding netting. Just as he now had the wealth, for which he had longed, so he had proved to himself to his own surprise that he possessed the brute physical courage which he had envied in his subordinates. Even though, characteristically, he attached no importance to the moral courage and organising ability and ingenuity he had displayed he was on the crest of a wave of optimism and self-confidence. With high spirits bubbling inside him he turned once more to scan the flat repulsive coast on his left hand, applying himself to the problem of how to stir up confusion there. Down below there were the captured French charts with which the Admiralty had supplied him — as they had the *Pluto* and *Caligula* as well, presumably. Hornblower spent the earliest hours of daylight in poring over them. He called up their details before his mind's eye as he looked across the shallows at the green bar of coast, and the brown sails beyond. He was as close in as he dared, and yet that sail was half a mile beyond cannon shot.

Over to the left was Cette, perched up on the top of a little hill prominent above the surrounding flat land. Hornblower was reminded of Rye overlooking Romney Marsh, but Cette was a gloomy little town of a prevailing black colour, unlike Rye's cheerful grey and reds. And Cette, he knew, was a walled town, with a garrison, against which he could attempt nothing. Behind Cette was the big lagoon called the Etang de Thau, which constituted a major link in the chain of inland waterways which offered shelter and protection to French shipping all the way from Marseille and the Rhone Valley to the foot of the Pyrenees. Cette was invulnerable as far as he was concerned, and vessels on the Etang de Thau were safe from him.

Of all the whole inland route he was opposite the most vulnerable part, this short section where the navigable channel from Aigues Mortes to the Etang de Thau was only divided from the sea by a narrow spit of land. If a blow were to be struck, it was here that he must strike it; moreover, at this very moment he could see something at which to strike — that brown sail no more than two miles away. That must be one of the French

coasters, plying between Port Vendres and Marseille with wine and oil. It would be madness to attempt anything against her, and yet — and yet — he felt mad today.

"Pass the word for the captain's coxswain," he said to the midshipman of the watch. He heard the cry echo down the main deck, and in two minutes Brown was scurrying towards him along the gangway, halting breathless for orders.

"Can you swim, Brown?"

"Swim, sir? Yes, sir."

Hornblower looked at Brown's burly shoulders and thick neck. There was a mat of black hair visible through the opening of his shirt.

"How many of the barge's crew can swim!"

Brown looked first one way and then the other before he made the confession which he knew would excite contempt. Yet he dared not lie, not to Hornblower.

"I dunno, sir."

Hornblower refraining from the obvious rejoinder was more scathing than Hornblower saying "You ought to know."

"I want a crew for the barge," said Hornblower. "Everyone a good swimmer, and everyone a volunteer. It's for a dangerous service, and, mark you, Brown, they must be true volunteers — none of your pressgang ways."

"Aye aye, sir," said Brown, and after a moment's hesitation. "Everyone'll volunteer, sir. It'll be hard to pick 'em. Are you going, sir?"

"Yes. A cutlass for every man. And a packet of combustibles for every man."

"Com-combustibles, sir?"

"Yes. Flint and steel. A couple of port-fires, oily rags, and a bit of slowmatch, in a watertight packet for each man. Go to the sail-maker and get oilskin for them. And a lanyard each to carry it if we swim."

"Aye aye, sir."

"And give Mr Bush my compliments. Ask him to step this way, and then get your crew ready."

Bush came rolling aft, his face alight with excitement; and before he had reached the quarterdeck the ship was abuzz with rumours — the wildest tales about what the captain had decided to do next were circulating among the crew, who had spent the morning with one eye on their duties and the other on the coast of France.

"Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "I am going ashore to burn that coaster over there."

"Aye aye, sir. Are you going in person, sir?"

"Yes," snapped Hornblower. He could not explain to Bush that he was constitutionally unable to send men away on a task for which volunteers were necessary and not go himself. He eyed Bush defiantly, and Bush eyed him back, opened his mouth to protest, thought better of it, and changed what he was going to say.

"Longboat and launch, sir?"

"No. They'd take the ground half a mile from the shore." That was obvious; four successive lines of foam showed where the feeble waves were breaking, far out from the water's edge. "I'm taking my barge and a volunteer crew."

Still Hornblower, by his expression, dared Bush to make any protest at all, but this time Bush actually ventured to make one.

"Yes, sir. Can't I go, sir?"

"No."

There was no chance of further dispute in the face of that blank negative. Bush had the queer feeling — he had known it before — as he looked at Hornblower's haughty expression that he was a father dealing with a high-spirited son; he loved his captain as he would have loved a son if ever he had had one.

"And mark this, too, Bush. No rescue parties. If we're lost, we're lost. You understand? Shall I give you that in writing?"

"No need, sir. I understand."

Bush said the words sadly. When it came to the supreme test of practice, Hornblower, however much he respected Bush's qualities and abilities, had no opinion whatever of his first lieutenant's capacity to make

original plans. The thought of Bush blundering about on the mainland of France throwing away valuable lives in a hopeless attempt to rescue his captain frightened him.

"Right. Heave the ship to, Mr Bush. We'll be back in half an hour if all goes well. Stand off and wait for us."

The barge pulled eight oars; as Hornblower gave the word he had high hopes that her launching had passed unobserved from the shore. Bush's morning sail drill must have accustomed the French to seemingly purposeless manoeuvres by the *Sutherland*; her brief backing of her topsails might be unnoticed. He sat at Brown's side while the men went to their oars. The boat danced quickly and lightly over the sea; he set a course so as to reach the shore a little ahead of the brown sail which was showing just over the green strip of coast. Then he looked back at the *Sutherland*, stately under her pyramids of sails, and dwindling with extraordinary rapidity as the barge shot away from her. Even at that moment Hornblower's busy mind set to work scanning her lines and the rake of her masts, debating how he could improve her sailing qualities. They had passed the first line of breakers without taking ground — breakers they could hardly be called, so sluggish was the sea — and darted in towards the golden beach. A moment later the boat baulked as she slid over the sand, moved on a few yards, and grounded once more.

"Over with you, men," said Hornblower.

He threw his legs over the side and dropped thigh deep into the water. The crew were as quick as he, and seizing the gunwales, they ran the lightened boat up until the water was no higher than their ankles. Hornblower's first instinct was to allow excitement to carry him away and head a wild rush inland, but he checked himself.

"Cutlasses?" he asked, sternly. "Fire packets?" Running his eye over his nine men he saw that every one was armed and equipped, and then he started his little expedition steadily up the beach. The distance was too great to expect them to run all the way and swim afterwards. The sandy beach was topped by a low shingle bank where samphire grew. They leaped over this and found themselves among green vines; not twenty yards away an old, bent man and two old women were hoeing along the rows. They looked up in blank surprise at this sudden apparition, standing and staring voiceless at the chattering group of seamen. A quarter of a mile away, across the level vineyard, was the brown spritsail. A small mizzen was visible now behind it. Hornblower picked out a narrow path leading roughly in that direction.

"Come along, men," he said, and broke into a dog trot. The old man shouted something as the seamen tramped the vines; they laughed like children at hearing French spoken for the first time in their lives. To most of them this was their first sight of a vineyard, too — Hornblower could hear them chattering behind him in amazement at the orderly rows of seemingly worthless stumps, and the tiny bunches of immature grapes. They crossed the vineyard; a sharp drop on the further side brought them on to a rough towpath along the canal. Here the lagoon was no more than two hundred yards wide, and the navigable channel was evidently close up to the towpath, for a sparse line of beacons a hundred yards out presumably marked the shallows. Two hundred yards away the coaster was creeping slowly towards them, still unconscious of her danger. The men uttered a wild cheer and began tearing off their jackets.

"Quiet, you fools," growled Hornblower. He unbuckled his sword belt and stripped off his coat.

At the sound of the men's shouting the crew of the coaster came tumbling forward. There were three men, and a moment later they were joined by two sturdy women, looking at them from under their hands. It was one of the women, quicker witted, who guessed what the group of men stripping on the bank implied. Hornblower, tearing off his breeches, heard one of them give a shriek and saw her running aft again. The coaster still crept over the water towards them, but when it was nearly opposite the big spritsail came down with a run and she swung away from the towpath as her helm was put over. It was too late to save her, though. She passed through the line of beacons and grounded with a jerk in the shallows beyond. Hornblower saw the man at the wheel quit his charge and turn and stare at them, with the other men and the women grouped round him. He buckled his sword about his naked body. Brown was naked, too, and was fastening his belt round his waist, and against his bare skin lay a naked cutlass.

"Come along, then," said Hornblower; the quicker the better. He put his hands together and dropped into the lagoon in an ungainly dive; the men followed him, shouting and splashing. The water was as warm as milk, but Hornblower swam as slowly and steadily as he could. He was a poor swimmer, and the coaster a hundred and fifty yards away seemed very distant. The sword dangling from his waist already seemed heavy. Brown came

surging past him, swimming a lusty overarm stroke, with the lanyard of his packet of combustibles between his white teeth, and his thick black hair sleek with water. The other men followed; by the time they neared the coaster Hornblower was a long way last. They all scrambled up before him into the low waist of the vessel, but then discipline reasserted itself and they turned and stooped to haul him on board. He pressed aft, with sword drawn. Women and men were there in a sullen group, and for a moment he was puzzled to know what to do with them. French and English faced each other in the dazzling sunlight, the water streaming from the naked men, but in the tenseness of that meeting no one thought of their nakedness. Hornblower remembered with relief the dinghy towing behind; he pointed to it and tried to remember his French.

"Au bateau," he said. "Dans le bateau."

The French hesitated. There were four middle-aged men and one old one; one old woman and one middle-aged. The English seamen closed up behind their captain, drawing their cutlasses from their belts.

"Entrez dans le bateau," said Hornblower. "Hobson, pull that dinghy up alongside."

The middle-aged woman broke into a storm of invective, screeching, high pitched, her hands gesticulating wildly and her wooden shoes clattering on the deck.

"I'll do it, sir," interposed Brown. "'Ere, you, 'op in there."

He took one of the men by the collar, flourished his cutlass and dragged him across the deck to the side. The man yielded, and lowered himself over the side, and once the example was set, the others followed it. Brown cast off the painter and the crowded dinghy drifted away, the woman still shrieking curses in her Catalan French.

"Set the ship on fire," said Hornblower. "Brown, take three men below and see what you can do there."

The late crew had got out a couple of oars and were paddling cautiously over to the towpath, the dinghy laden down to within an inch of the water's edge. Hornblower watched them as they crawled across, and climbed the bank to the path.

His picked crew did their work quickly and neatly. A mighty crashing from below showed that Brown's party was bursting into the cargo to make a nest for a fire. Smoke emerged almost at once from the cabin skylight; one of the men had piled the furniture there together, soused it in oil from the lamps, and got the whole thing into a blaze at once.

"Cargo is oil in barr'ls and grain in sacks, sir," reported Brown. "We stove in some barr'ls an' ripped some sacks open, sir. That'll burn. Look, sir."

From the main hatchway a thin ghost of black smoke was already rising, and the heat pouring up from the hatch made all the forward part of the ship appear to dance and shimmer in the sunshine. There was a fire in the dry timberwork of the deck just forward of the hatch, too. It was crackling and banging explosively, although this fire was hardly visible thanks to the strong sunlight and the absence of smoke, and there was fire in the forecastle — smoke was billowing out of the bulkhead door and rolling towards them in a sullen wave.

"Get some of the deck planks up," said Hornblower hoarsely.

The splintering crash of the work was followed by a contrasting silence — and yet no silence, for Hornblower's ear caught a muffled, continuous roaring. It was the noise of the flames devouring the cargo, as the increased draught caused by the piercing of the decks set the flames racing through the inflammable stuff.

"God! There's a sight!" exclaimed Brown.

The whole waist of the ship seemed to open as the fire poured up through the deck. The heat was suddenly unbearable.

"We can go back now," said Hornblower. "Come along, men."

He set the example by diving once more into the lagoon, and the little naked band began to swim softly back to the towpath. Slowly, this time; the high spirits of the attack had evaporated. The awful sight of the red fire glowing under the deck had sobered every man. They swam slowly, clustered round their captain, while he set a pace limited by his fatigue and unscientific breaststroke. He was glad when he was able at last to stretch out a hand and grasp the weeds growing on the towpath bank. The others scrambled out before him; Brown offered him a wet hand and helped him up to the top.

"Holy Mary!" said one of the men. "Will ye look at th' old bitch?"

They were thirty yards from where they had left their clothes, and at that spot the coaster's crew had landed. At the moment when the Irishman called their attention to them the old woman who had reviled them cast

one last garment into the lagoon. There was nothing left lying on the bank. One or two derelict shirts still floated in the lagoon, buoyed up by the air they contained, but practically all their clothes were at the bottom. "What did you do that for, damn you?" raved Brown — all the seamen had rushed up to the coaster's crew and were dancing and gesticulating naked round them. The old woman pointed across at the coaster. It was ablaze from end to end, with heavy black smoke pouring from her sides. They saw the rigging of the mainmast whisk away in smouldering fragments, and the mast suddenly sag to one side, barely-visible flames licking along it.

"I'll get your shirt back for you, sir," said one of the men to Hornblower, tearing himself free from the fascination of the sight.

"No. Come along," snapped Hornblower.

"Would you like the old man's trousers, sir?" asked Brown. "I'll take 'em off him and be damned to him, sir. 'Tisn't fit —"

"No!" said Hornblower again.

Naked, they climbed up to the vineyard. One last glance down showed that the two women were weeping, heartbroken, now. Hornblower saw one of the men patting one of the women on the shoulder; the others watched with despairing apathy the burning of their ship — their all. Hornblower led the way over the vines. A horseman was galloping towards them; his blue uniform and cocked hat showed that he was one of Bonaparte's gendarmes. He reined up in front of them, reaching for his sabre, but at the same time, not too sure of himself, he looked to right and to left for the help which was not in sight.

"Ah, would you!" said Brown, dashing to the front waving his cutlass.

The other seamen closed up beside him, their weapons ready, and the gendarme hastily wheeled his horse out of harm's way; a gleam of white teeth showed under his black moustache. They hurried past him; he had dismounted when Hornblower looked back, and was trying, as well as his restless horse would allow, to take his carbine out of the boot beside his saddle. At the top of the beach stood the old man and the two women who had been hoeing; the old man brandished his hoe and threatened them, but the two women stood smiling shamefaced, looking up under lowered eyelids at their nakedness. There lay the barge, just in the water, and far out there was the *Sutherland* — the men cheered at the sight of her.

Lustily they ran the boat out over the sand, paused while Hornblower climbed in, pushed her out farther, and then came tumbling in over the side and took the oars. One man yelped with pain as a splinter in a thwart pricked his bare posterior; Hornblower grinned automatically, but the man was instantly reduced to silence by a shocked Brown.

"'Ere 'e comes, sir," said stroke oar, pointing aft over Hornblower's shoulder.

The gendarme was leaping clumsily down the beach in his long boots, his carbine in his hand. Hornblower, craning round, saw him kneel and take aim; for a second Hornblower wondered, sickly, whether his career was going to be ended by the bullet of a French gendarme, but the puff of smoke from the carbine brought not even the sound of the bullet — a man who had ridden far, and run fast in heavy boots, could hardly be expected to hit a ship's boat at two hundred yards with a single shot.

Over the spit of land between sea and lagoon they could see a vast cloud of smoke. The coaster was destroyed beyond any chance of repair. It had been a wicked waste to destroy a fine ship like that, but war and waste were synonymous terms. It meant misery and poverty for the owners; but at the same time it would mean that the length of England's arm had been demonstrated now to the people of this enemy land whom the war had not affected during these eighteen years save through Bonaparte's conscription. More than that; it meant that the authorities responsible for coast defence would be alarmed about this section of the route from Marseille to Spain, the very section which they had thought safest. That would mean detaching troops and guns to defend it against future raids, stretching the available forces thinner still along the two hundred miles of coast. A thin screen of that sort could easily be pierced at a selected spot by a heavy blow struck without warning — the sort of blow a squadron of ships of the line, appearing and disappearing at will over the horizon, could easily strike. If the game were played properly, the whole coast from Barcelona to Marseille could be kept in a constant state of alarm. That was the way to wear down the strength of the Corsican colossus; and a ship favoured by the weather could travel ten, fifteen times as fast as troops could march, as fast even as a well-mounted messenger could carry a warning. He had struck at the French centre, he had

struck at the French left wing. Now he must hasten and strike at the French right wing on his way back to the rendezvous. He uncrossed and recrossed his knees as he sat in the sternsheets of the barge, his desire for instant action filling him with restlessness while the boat drew closer to the *Sutherland*.

He heard Gerard's voice saying "What the devil — ?" come clearly over the water to him; apparently Gerard had just detected the nakedness of everyone in the approaching boat. The pipes twittered to call the watch's attention to the arrival of the ship's captain. He would have to come in naked through the entry port, receiving the salutes of the officers and marines, but keyed up as he was he gave no thought to his dignity. He ran up to the deck with his sword hanging from his naked waist — it was an ordeal which could not be avoided, and he had learned in twenty years in the Navy to accept the inevitable without lamentation. The faces of the side boys and of the marines were wooden in their effort not to smile, but Hornblower did not care. The black pall of smoke over the land marked an achievement any man might be proud of. He stayed naked on the deck until he had given Bush the order to put the ship about which would take the *Sutherland* southward again in search of fresh adventure. The wind would just serve for a south-westerly course, and he was not going to waste a minute of a favourable wind.

Chapter XIII

The *Sutherland* had seen nothing of the *Caligula* during her long sweep south-westward. Hornblower had not wanted to, and, more, had been anxious not to. For it was just possible that the *Pluto* had reached the rendezvous, and in that case the admiral's orders would override Captain Bolton's, and he would be deprived of this further opportunity before his time limit had elapsed. It was during the hours of darkness that the *Sutherland* had crossed the latitude of Cape Bugar — the Palamos Point of the rendezvous — and morning found the *Sutherland* far to the south-westward, with the mountains of Catalonia a blue streak on the horizon over the starboard bow.

Hornblower had been on deck since dawn, a full hour before the land was sighted; at his orders the ship wore round and stood close-hauled to the north-eastward again, edging in to the shore as she did so until the details of the hilly country were plainly visible. Bush was on deck, standing with a group of other officers; Hornblower, pacing up and down, was conscious of the glances they were darting at him, but he did his best not to notice them, as he kept his telescope steadily directed at the land. He knew that Bush and all the others thought he had come hither with a set purpose in mind, and that they were awaiting the orders which would plunge the ship again into the same kind of adventures which had punctuated the last two days. They credited him with diabolical foresight and ingenuity; he was not going to admit to them how great a part good fortune had played, nor was he going to admit that he had brought the *Sutherland* down here, close in to Barcelona, merely on general principles and in the hope that something might turn up.

It was stifling hot already; the blue sky glared with a brassy tint to the eastward, and the easterly breeze seemed not to have been cooled at all by its passage across four hundred miles of the Mediterranean from Italy. It was like breathing the air of a brick kiln; Hornblower found himself running with sweat within a quarter of an hour of cooling himself off under the washdeck pump. The land slipping by along their larboard beam seemed to be devoid of all life. There were lofty grey-green hills, many of them capped with a flat table-top of stone with precipitous rocky slopes; there were grey cliffs and brown cliffs, and occasional dazzling beaches of golden sand. Between the sea and those hills ran the most important high road in Catalonia, that connecting Barcelona with France. Surely, thought Hornblower, something ought to show up somewhere along here. He knew there was a bad mountain road running parallel ten miles inland, but the French would hardly use it of their own free will. One of the reasons why he had come here was to force them to abandon the high road in favour of the bye road where the Spanish partisans would have a better chance of cutting up their convoys; he might achieve that merely by flaunting the British flag here within gunshot of the beach, but he would rather bring it about by administering a sharp lesson. He did not want this blow of his against the French right flank to be merely a blow in the air.

The hands were skylarking and laughing as they washed the decks; it was comforting to see their high spirits, and peculiarly comforting to allow oneself to think that those high spirits were due to the recent successes. Hornblower felt a glow of achievement as he looked forward, and then, as was typical of him, began to feel doubts as to whether he could continue to keep his men in such good order. A long, dreary cruise on blockade service might soon wear down their spirits. Then he spurned away his doubts with determined optimism. Everything had gone so well at present; it would continue to go well. This very day, even though the chances were a hundred to one against, something was certain to happen. He told himself defiantly that the vein of good fortune was not yet exhausted. A hundred to one against or a thousand to one, something was going to happen again today, some further chance of distinction.

On the shore over there was a little cluster of white cottages above a golden beach. And drawn up on the beach were a few boats — Spanish fishing boats, presumably. There would be no sense in risking a landing party, for there was always the chance that the village would have a French garrison. Those fishing boats would be used to supply fish to the French army, too, but he could do nothing against them, despite that. The poor devils of fishermen had to live; if he were to capture or burn those boats he would set the people against the alliance with England — and it was only in the Peninsula, out of the whole world, that England had any allies.

There were black dots running on the beach now. One of the fishing boats was being run out into the sea. Perhaps this was the beginning of today's adventure; he felt hope, even certainty, springing up with him. He put his glass under his arm and turned away, walking the deck apparently deep in thought, his head bent and his hands clasped behind him.

"Boat putting off from the shore, sir, said Bush, touching his hat.

"Yes," said Hornblower carelessly.

He was endeavouring to show no excitement at all. He hoped that his officers believed that he had not yet seen the boat and was so strong-minded as not to step out of his way to look at her.

"She's pulling for us, sir," added Bush.

"Yes," said Hornblower, still apparently unconcerned. It would be at least ten minutes before the boat could near the ship — and the boat must be intending to approach the *Sutherland*, or else why should she put off so hurriedly as soon as the *Sutherland* came in sight? The other officers could train their glasses on the boat, could chatter in loud speculation as to why she was approaching. Captain Hornblower could walk his deck in lofty indifference, awaiting the inevitable hail. No one save himself knew that his heart was beating faster. Now the hail came, high pitched, across the glittering water.

"Heave to, Mr Bush," said Hornblower, and stepped with elaborate calm to the other side to hail back.

It was Catalan which was being shouted to him; his wide and exact knowledge of Spanish — during his two years as a prisoner on parole when a young man he had learned the language thoroughly to keep himself from fretting into insanity — and his rough and ready French enabled him to understand what was being spoken, but he could not speak Catalan. He hailed back in Spanish.

"Yes," he said. "This is a British ship."

At the sound of his voice someone else stood up in the boat. The men at the oars were Catalans in ragged civilian dress; this man wore a brilliant yellow uniform and a lofty hat with a plume.

"May I be permitted to come on board?" he shouted in Spanish. "I have important news."

"You will be very welcome," said Hornblower, and then, turning to Bush. "A Spanish officer is coming on board, Mr Bush. See that he is received with honours."

The man who stepped on to the deck and looked curiously about him, as the marines saluted and the pipes twittered, was obviously a hussar. He wore a yellow tunic elaborately frogged in black, and yellow breeches with broad stripes of gold braid. Up to his knees he wore shiny riding boots with dangling gold tassels in front and jingling spurs on the heels; a silver grey coat trimmed with black astrakhan, its sleeves empty, was slung across his shoulders. On his head was a hussar busby, of black astrakhan with a silver grey bag hanging out of the top behind an ostrich plume, and gold cords from the back of it round his neck, and he trailed a broad curved sabre along the deck as he advanced to where Hornblower awaited him.

"Good day, sir," he said, smiling. "I am Colonel José Gonzales de Villena y Danvila, of His Most Catholic Majesty's Olivenza Hussars."

"I am delighted to meet you," said Hornblower. "And I am Captain Horatio Hornblower, of His Britannic Majesty's ship *Sutherland*."

"How fluently your Excellency speaks Spanish!"

"Your Excellency is too kind. I am fortunate in my ability to speak Spanish, since it enables me to make you welcome on board my ship."

"Thank you. It was only with difficulty that I was able to reach you. I had to exert all my authority to make those fishermen row me out. They were afraid lest the French should discover that they had been communicating with an English ship. Look! They are rowing home already for dear life."

"There is no French garrison in that village at present, then?"

"No, sir, none."

A peculiar expression played over Villena's face as he said this. He was a youngish man of fair complexion, though much sunburned, with a Hapsburg lip (which seemed to indicate that he might owe his high position in the Spanish army to some indiscretion on the part of his female ancestors) and hazel eyes with drooping lids. Those eyes met Hornblower's with a hint of shiftiness. They merely seemed to be pleading with him not to continue his questioning, but Hornblower ignored the appeal — he was far too anxious for data.

"There are Spanish troops there?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"But your regiment, Colonel?"

"It is not there, Captain," said Villena, and continued hastily. "The news I have to give you is that a French army — Italian, I should say — is marching along the coast road there, three leagues to the north of us."

"Ha!" said Hornblower. That was the news he wanted.

"They were at Malgret last night, on their way to Barcelona. Ten thousand of them — Pino's and Lecchi's divisions of the Italian army."

"How do you know this?"

"It is my duty to know it, as an officer of light cavalry," said Villena with dignity.

Hornblower looked at Villena and pondered. For three years now, he knew, Bonaparte's armies had been marching up and down the length and breadth of Catalonia. They had beaten the Spaniards in innumerable battles, had captured their fortresses after desperate sieges, and yet were no nearer subjecting the country than when they had first treacherously invaded the province. The Catalans had not been able to overcome in the field even the motley hordes Bonaparte had used on this side of Spain — Italians, Germans, Swiss, Poles, all the sweepings of his army — but at the same time they had fought on nobly, raising fresh forces in every unoccupied scrap of territory, and wearing out their opponents by the incessant marches and countermarches they imposed on them. Yet that did not explain how a Spanish colonel of hussars found himself quite alone near the heart of the Barcelona district where the French were supposed to be in full control.

"How did you come to be there?" he demanded, sharply.

"In accordance with my duty, sir," said Villena, with lofty dignity.

"I regret very much that I still do not understand, Don José. Where is your regiment?"

"Captain —"

"Where is it?"

"I do not know, sir."

All the jauntiness was gone from the young hussar now. He looked at Hornblower with big pleading eyes as he was made to confess his shame.

"Where did you see it last?"

"At Tordera. We — we fought Pino there."

"And you were beaten?"

"Yes. Yesterday. They were on the march back from Gerona and we came down from the mountains to cut them off. Their cuirassiers broke us, and we were scattered. My — my horse died at Arens de Mar there."

The pitiful words enabled Hornblower to understand the whole story in a wave of intuition. Hornblower could visualise it all — the undisciplined hordes drawn up on some hillside, the mad charges which dashed them into fragments, and the helter-skelter flight. In every village for miles round there would be lurking fugitives today. Everyone had fled in panic. Villena had ridden his horse until it dropped, and being the best mounted, had

come farther than anyone else — if his horse had not died he might have been riding now. The concentration of the French forces to put ten thousand men in the field had led to their evacuation of the smaller villages, so that Villena had been able to avoid capture, even though he was between the French field army and its base at Barcelona.

Now that he knew what had happened there was no advantage to be gained from dwelling on Villena's misfortunes; indeed it was better to hearten him up, as he would be more useful that way.

"Defeat," said Hornblower, "is a misfortune which every fighting man encounters sooner or later. Let us hope we shall gain our revenge for yesterday today."

"There is more than yesterday to be revenged," said Villena. He put his hand in the breast of his tunic and brought out a folded wad of paper; unfolded it was a printed poster, which he handed over to Hornblower who glanced at it and took in as much of the sense as a brief perusal of the Catalan in which it was printed permitted. It began, 'We, Luciano Gaetano Pino, Knight of the Legion of Honour, Knight of the Order of the Iron Crown of Lombardy, General of Division, commanding the forces of His Imperial and Royal Majesty Napoleon, Emperor of the French and King of Italy in the district of Gerona hereby decree —' There were numbered paragraphs after that, dealing with all the offences anyone could imagine against His Imperial and Royal Majesty. And each paragraph ended — Hornblower ran his eye down them — 'will be shot'; 'penalty of death'; 'will be hanged'; 'will be burned' — it was a momentary relief to discover that this last referred to villages sheltering rebels.

"They have burned every village in the uplands," said Villena.

"The road from Figueras to Gerona — ten leagues long, sir — is lined with gallows, and upon every gallows is a corpse."

"Horrible!" said Hornblower, but he did not encourage the conversation. He fancied that if any Spaniard began to talk about the woes of Spain he would never stop. "And this Pino is marching back along the coast road, you say?"

"Yes."

"Is there deep water close into the shore at any spot?"

The Spaniard raised his eyebrows in protest at that question, and Hornblower realised that it was hardly fair to ask a colonel of hussars about soundings.

"Are there batteries protecting the road from the sea?" he asked, instead.

"Oh yes," said Villena. "Yes, I have heard so."

"Where?"

"I do not know exactly, sir."

Hornblower realised that Villena was probably incapable of giving exact topographical information about anywhere, which was what he would expect of a Spanish colonel of light cavalry.

"Well, we shall go and see," he said.

Chapter XIV

Hornblower had shaken himself free from the company of Colonel Villena, who showed, now that he had told of his defeat, a hysterical loquacity and a pathetic unwillingness to allow him out of his sight. He had established him in a chair by the taffrail out of the way, and escaped below to the security of his cabin, to pore once more over the charts. There were batteries marked there — most of them apparently dated from the time, not so long ago, when Spain had been at war with England, and they had been erected to protect coasting vessels which crept along the shore from battery to battery. In consequence they were established at points where there was not merely deep water close in, but also a bit of shelter given by projecting points of land in which the fugitives could anchor. There had never been any thought in men's minds then that marching columns might in the future be attacked from the sea, and exposed sections of the coast — like this twenty miles between Malgret and Arens de Mar — which offered no anchorage might surely be neglected. Since

Cochrane was here a year ago in the *Imperieuse* no British ship had been spared to harass the French in this quarter.

The French since then had had too many troubles on their hands to have time to think of mere possibilities. The chances were that they had neglected to take precautions — and in any case they could not have enough heavy guns and trained gunners to guard the whole coast. The *Sutherland* was seeking a spot a mile and a half at least from any battery, where the water was deep enough close in for her to sweep the road with her guns. She had already hauled out of range of one battery, and that was marked on his chart and, moreover, was the only one marked along the stretch. It was most unlikely that the French had constructed others since the chart was last brought up to date. If Pino's column had left Malgret at dawn the *Sutherland* must be nearly level with it now. Hornblower marked the spot which his instinct told him would be the most suitable, and ran up on deck to give the orders which would head the *Sutherland* in towards it.

Villena climbed hastily out of his chair at sight of him, and clinked loudly across the deck towards him, but Hornblower contrived to ignore him politely by acting as if his whole attention was taken up by giving instructions to Bush.

"I'll have the guns loaded and run out, too, if you please, Mr Bush," he concluded.

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush.

Bush looked at him pleadingly. This last order, with its hint of immediate action, set the pinnacle on his curiosity. All he knew was that a Dago colonel had come on board. What they were here for, what Hornblower had in mind, he had no means of guessing. Hornblower always kept his projected plans to himself, because then if he should fail his subordinates would not be able to guess the extent of the failure. But Bush felt sometimes that his life was being shortened by his captain's reticence. He was pleasantly surprised this time when Hornblower condescended to make explanations, and he was never to know that Hornblower's unusual loquaciousness was the result of a desire to be saved from having to make polite conversation with Villena. "There's a French column expected along the road over there," he said. "I want to see if we can get in a few shots at them."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Put a good man in the chains with the lead."

"Aye aye, sir."

Now that Hornblower actually wanted to be conversational he found it impossible — for nearly three years he had checked every impulse to say an unnecessary word to his second in command; and Bush's stolid 'Aye aye, sirs', were not much help. Hornblower took refuge from Villena by gluing his eye to his telescope and scanning the nearing shore with the utmost diligence. Here there were bold grey-green hills running almost to the water's edge, and looping along the foot of them, now ten feet up, and now a hundred feet, ran the road. As Hornblower looked at it his glass revealed a dark tiny speck on the road far ahead. He looked away, rested his eye, and looked again. It was a horseman, riding towards them. A moment later he saw a moving smudge behind, which fixed his attention by an occasional sparkle and flash from the midst of it. That was a body of horsemen; presumably the advanced guard of Pino's army. It would not be long before the *Sutherland* was up opposite to them. Hornblower gauged the distance of the ship from the road. Half a mile, or a little more — easy cannon shot, though not as easy as he would like.

"By the deep nine!" chanted the man at the lead. He could edge in a good deal closer at this point if, when he turned the ship about and followed Pino along the shore, they came as far as here. It was worth remembering. As the *Sutherland* proceeded to meet the advancing army, Hornblower's brain was busy noting landmarks on the shore and the corresponding soundings opposite them. The leading squadron of cavalry could be seen distinctly now — men riding cautiously, their sabres drawn, looking searchingly on all sides as they rode; in a war where every rock and hedge might conceal a musketeer determined on killing one enemy at least their caution was understandable.

Some distance behind the leading squadron Hornblower could make out a longer column of cavalry, and beyond that again a long, long line of white dots, which puzzled him for a moment with its odd resemblance to the legs of a caterpillar all moving together. Then he smiled. They were the white breeches of a column of infantry marching in unison; by some trick of optics their blue coats as yet showed up not at all against their grey background. "And a half ten!" called the leadsman.

He could take the *Sutherland* much closer in here when he wanted to. But at present it was better to stay out at half gunshot. His ship would not appear nearly as menacing to the enemy at that distance. Hornblower's mind was hard at work analysing the reactions of the enemy to the appearance of the *Sutherland* — friendly hat-waving by the cavalry of the advanced guard, now opposite him, gave him valuable additional data. Pino and his men had never yet been cannonaded from the sea, and had had no experience so far of the destructive effect of a ship's heavy broadside against a suitable target. The graceful two-decker, with her pyramids of white sails, would be something outside their experience. Put an army in the field against them, and they could estimate its potentialities, but they had never encountered ships before. His reading told him that Bonaparte's generals tended to be careless of the lives of their men; and any steps taken to avoid the *Sutherland's* fire would involve grave inconvenience — marching back to Malgret to take the inland road, or crossing the pathless hills to it direct. Hornblower guessed that Pino, somewhere back in that long column and studying the *Sutherland* through his glass, would make up his mind to chance the *Sutherland's* fire and would march on hoping to get through without serious loss. Pino would be disappointed, thought Hornblower. The cavalry at the head of the main column were opposite them. The second regiment twinkled and sparkled in the flaming sunlight like a river of fire.

"Those are the cuirassiers!" said Villena, gesticulating wildly at Hornblower's elbow. "Why do you not fire, Captain?"

Hornblower realised that Villena had probably been gabbling Spanish to him for the last quarter of an hour, and he had not heard a word he had said. He was not going to waste his surprise attack on cavalry who could gallop away out of range. This opening broadside must be reserved for slow-moving infantry.

"Send the men to the guns, Mr Bush," he said, forgetting all about Villena again in a flash, and to the man at the wheel "Starboard a point."

"And a half nine," called the leadsman.

The *Sutherland* headed closer into shore.

"Mr Gerard!" hailed Hornblower. "Train the guns on the road, and only fire when I give you the signal."

A horse artillery battery had followed the cavalry — popgun six-pounders whose jolting and lurching showed well how bad was the surface of the road, one of the great highways of Spain. Then men perched on the limbers waved their hands in friendly fashion to the beautiful ship close in upon them.

"By the mark six!" from the leadsman.

He dared not stand closer in.

"Port a point. Steady!"

The ship crept on through the water; not a sound from the crew, standing tense at their guns — only the faint sweet music of the breeze in the rigging, and the lapping of the water overside. Now they were level with the infantry column, a long dense mass of blue-coated and white-breeched soldiers, stepping out manfully, a little unreal in the haze of dust. Above the blue coats could be seen the white lines of their faces — every face was turned towards the pretty white-sailed ship creeping over the blue-enamel water. It was a welcome diversion in a weary march, during a war when every day demanded its march. Gerard was giving no orders for change of elevation at the moment — here the road ran level for half a mile, fifty feet above the sea. Hornblower put his silver whistle to his lips. Gerard had seen the gesture. Before Hornblower could blow, the centre maindeck gun had exploded, and a moment later the whole broadside followed with a hideous crash. The *Sutherland* heeled to the recoil, and the white, bitter-tasting smoke came billowing up.

"God, look at that!" exclaimed Bush.

The forty-one balls from the *Sutherland's* broadside and carronades had swept the road from side to side. Fifty yards of the column had been cut to fragments. Whole files had been swept away; the survivors stood dazed and stupid. The guntrucks roared as the guns were run out again, and the *Sutherland* lurched once more at the second broadside. There was another gap in the column now, just behind the first.

"Give it 'em again, boys!" yelled Gerard.

The whole column was standing stock still and silly to receive the third broadside; the smoke from the firing had drifted to the shore now, and was scattering over the rocks in thin wreaths.

"Quarter less nine!" called the leadsman.

In the deepening water Hornblower could close nearer in. The next section of the column, seeing the terrible ship moving down upon them implacably, about to blast them into death, was seized with panic and bolted wildly down the road.

"Grape, Mr Gerard!" shouted Hornblower. "Starboard a point!"

Farther down the road the column had not fled. Those who stood firm and those who ran jammed the road with a struggling mass of men, and the *Sutherland*, under the orders of her captain, closed in upon them pitilessly, like a machine, steadied again, brought her guns to bear upon the crowd, and then swept the road clear with her tempest of grapeshot as though with a broom.

"God blast me!" raved Bush. "That'll show 'em."

Villena was snapping his fingers and dancing about the deck like a clown, dolman flying, plume nodding, spurs jangling.

"By the deep seven!" chanted the leadsman. But Hornblower's eye had caught sight of the little point jutting out from the shore close ahead, and its hint of jagged rock at its foot.

"Stand by to go about!" he rasped.

His mind was working at a feverish pace — there was water enough here, but that point indicated a reef — a ridge of harder rock which had not been ground away like the rest of the shore, and remained as a trap below the surface on which the *Sutherland* might run without warning between two casts of the lead. The *Sutherland* came up to the wind, and stood out from the shore. Looking aft, they could see the stretch of road which she had swept with her fire. There were dead and wounded in heaps along it. One or two men stood among the wreck; a few were bending over the wounded, but most of the survivors were on the hillside above the road, scattered on the steep slopes, their white breeches silhouetted against the grey background.

Hornblower scanned the shore. Beyond the little point there would be deep water close in again, as there had been on the other side of it.

"We will wear ship again, Mr Bush," he said.

At the sight of the *Sutherland* heading for them the infantry on the road scattered wildly upon the hillside, but the battery of artillery beyond had no such means of escape open to it. Hornblower saw drivers and gunners sitting helplessly for an instant; then saw the officer in command, his plume tossing, gallop along the line, calling the men to action with urgent gesticulations. The drivers wheeled their horses on the road, swinging their guns across it, the gunners leaning down from the limbers, unhooking the gun trails, and bending over their guns as they worked frantically to bring them into action. Could a battery of nine-pounder field pieces effect anything against the *Sutherland's* broadside?

"Reserve your fire for the battery, Mr Gerard," shouted Hornblower.

Gerard waved his hat in acknowledgment. The *Sutherland* swung slowly and ponderously round. One gun went off prematurely — Hornblower was glad to see Gerard noting the fact so as to punish the gun's crew later — and then the whole broadside was delivered with a crash, at the moment when the Italian artillerymen were still at work with the rammers loading the guns. The rush of smoke obscured the view from the quarterdeck; it did not clear until already one or two well-served guns were rumbling up into firing position again. By that time the wind had rolled it away in a solid bank, and they could see the hard hit battery. One gun had had a wheel smashed, and was leaning drunkenly over to one side; another, apparently hit full on the muzzle, had been flung back from its carriage and was pointing up to the sky. There were dead men lying around the guns, and the living were standing dazed by the torrent of shot which had delayed them. The mounted officer had just flung himself from his saddle and let his horse go free while he ran to the nearest gun. Hornblower could see him calling the men about him, determined on firing one shot at least in defiance of the thundering tormentor.

"Give 'em another, men!" shouted Gerard, and the *Sutherland* heeled once more to the broadside.

By the time the smoke cleared away the *Sutherland* had passed on, leaving the battery behind. Hornblower could see it wrecked and ruined, another of its guns dismounted, and not a soul visible on his feet near the guns. Now the *Sutherland* was opposite more infantry — the second division of the column, presumably — which shredded away in a panic up the hillside section by section as the *Sutherland* neared them. Hornblower saw them scattering. He knew that it was as damaging to an army to be scattered and broken up like this as for it to be decimated by fire; he would as soon not kill the poor devils, except that his own men would be more

delighted at casualties among the enemy than at a mere demoralisation whose importance they could not appreciate.

There was a group of horsemen on the hillside above the road. Through his telescope he could see that they were all splendidly mounted, and dressed in a variety of uniforms flashing with gold and diversified with plumes. Hornblower guessed them to be the staff of the army; they would serve well as a target in the absence of larger bodies of formed troops. He attracted Gerard's notice and pointed. Gerard waved back. His two midshipmen-messengers went running below to point out the new target to the officers on the lower gun deck; Gerard himself bent over the nearest gun and squinted along it, while the gun captains set the tangent sights in accordance with the orders he bellowed through his speaking trumpet. Gerard stood aside and jerked the lanyard, and the whole broadside followed the shot he fired.

The blast of shot reached the group of horsemen. Men and horses went down together; there was hardly a rider left in his saddle. So universal was the destruction that Hornblower guessed that close under the surface soil must be rock, flying chips of which had scattered like grapeshot. He wondered if Pino were among those hit, and found himself to his surprise hoping that Pino had had both legs shot off. He told himself that until that morning he had not even heard Pino's name, and he felt a momentary scorn for himself, for feeling a blind animosity towards a man merely because he was his opponent.

Some officer a little farther down the road had kept his men together, drawn up stubbornly in a mass along the road, refusing to allow them to scatter. It was small advantage that this stern discipline brought his men. Hornblower brought his ship steadily round until the guns bore, and then tore the steady regiment to fragments with a fresh broadside. As the smoke eddied around him a sharp rap on the rail at his side made him look down. There was a musket ball stuck there — someone had fired at long range, two hundred yards or more, and succeeded in hitting the ship. The ball must have been nearly spent when it arrived, for it was embedded to half its depth and had retained its shape. It was just too hot to touch; he picked it out with his handkerchief over his fingers, and juggled with it idly, as he had done, he told himself, with hot chestnuts when he was a boy.

The clearing smoke revealed the new destruction he had wrought, the slaughtered files and heaped up dead; he fancied that he could hear even the screaming of the wounded. He was glad that the troops were scattering up the hillside and presented no target, for he was sick of slaughter although Bush was still blaspheming with excitement and Villena still capering at his side. Surely he must reach the rear of the column soon — from advanced guard to rearguard the army could not occupy more than eight or nine miles of road. As the thought came into his head he saw the road here was full of stationary waggons — the baggage train of the army. Those squat vehicles with four horses apiece must be ammunition caissons; beyond was a string of country carts, each with its half-dozen patient oxen, duncoloured, with sheepskins hanging over their foreheads. Filling the rest of the road beside the carts were packmules, hundreds of them, looking grotesquely malformed with their ungainly burdens on their backs. There was no sign of a human being — the drivers were mere dots, climbing the hillside having abandoned their charges.

The 'Account of the Present War in the Peninsula' which Hornblower had so attentively studied had laid great stress on the difficulties of transport in Spain. A mule or horse was as valuable — several times as valuable, for that matter — as any soldier. Hornblower set his expression hard.

"Mr Gerard!" he shouted. "Load with grape. I want those baggage animals killed."

A little wail went up from the men at the guns who heard the words. It was just like those sentimental fools to cheer when they killed men and yet to object to killing animals. Half of them would deliberately miss if they had the chance.

"Target practice. Single guns only," bellowed Hornblower to Gerard. The patient brutes would stand to be shot at, unlike their masters, and the gun layers would have no opportunity to waste ammunition. As the *Sutherland* drifted slowly along the shore her guns spoke out one by one, each one in turn hurling a hatful of grape, at extreme grapeshot range, on to the road. Hornblower watched horses and mules go down, kicking and plunging. One or two of the packmules, maddened with fear, managed to leap the bank out of the road and scrambled up the hill, scattering their burdens as they did so. Six oxen attached to a cart all went down together, dead simultaneously. Held together by their yokes they stayed, two by two, on their knees and

bellies, their heads stretched forward, as if in prayer. The main deck murmured again in pity as the men saw the result of the good shot

"Silence there!" roared Gerard, who could guess at the importance of the work in hand.

Bush plucked at his captain's sleeve, daring greatly in thus breaking in on his preoccupation with a suggestion.

"If you please, sir. If I took a boat's crew ashore I could burn all those waggons, destroy everything there."

Hornblower shook his head. It was like Bush not see the objections to such a plan. The enemy might fly before guns to which they had no chance of replying, but if a landing party were put within their reach they would fall upon it fiercely enough — more fiercely than ever as a result of their recent losses. It was one thing to land a small party to attack fifty artillery men in a battery taken completely by surprise, but it was quite another to land in the face of a disciplined army ten thousand strong. The words with which Hornblower tried to soften his refusal were blown into inaudibility by the explosion of the quarterdeck carronade beside them, and when Hornblower again opened his mouth to speak there was a fresh distraction on the shore to interrupt him. Someone was standing up in the next cart destined to receive fire, waving a white handkerchief frantically. Hornblower looked through his glass; the man appeared to be an officer of some sort, in his blue uniform with red epaulettes. But if he were trying to surrender he must know that his surrender could not be accepted in that it could not be put into effect. He must take his chance of the next shot. The officer suddenly seemed to realise it. He stooped down in the cart and rose again still waving his handkerchief and supporting someone who had been lying at his feet. Hornblower could see that the man hung limp in his arms; there was a white bandage round his head and another round his arm, and Hornblower suddenly realised that these carts were the ambulance vehicles of the army, full of the sick and of the wounded from yesterday's skirmish. The officer with the handkerchief must be a surgeon.

"Cease fire!" bellowed Hornblower, shrilling on his whistle. He was too late to prevent the next shot being fired, but luckily it was badly sighted and merely raised a cloud of dust from the cliff face below the road. It was illogical to spare draught animals which might be invaluable to the French for fear of hitting wounded men who might recover and again be active enemies, but it was the convention of war, deriving its absurdity from war itself.

Beyond the waggon train was the rearguard, but that was scattered over the hillside sparsely enough not to be worth powder and shot. It was time to go back and harass the main body once more.

"Put the ship about, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "I want to retrace our course."

It was not so easy on a course diametrically opposite to the previous one. The wind had been on the *Sutherland's* quarter before; now it was on her bow and she could only keep parallel to the shore by lying as close-hauled as she would sail. To make any offing at all when they reached the little capes which ran out from the shore the ship would have to go about, and the leeway she made might drift her into danger unless the situation were carefully watched. But the utmost must be done to harass the Italians and to demonstrate to them that they could never use the coast road again; Bush was delighted — as Hornblower could see from the fierce light in his eyes — that his captain was going to stick to his task and not sail tamely off after defiling once along the column, and the men at the starboard side guns rubbed their hands with pleasure at the prospect of action as they bent over the weapons that had stood unused so far.

It took time for the *Sutherland* to go about and work into position again for her guns to command the road; Hornblower was pleased to see the regiments which had re-formed break up again as their tormentor neared them and take to the hillside once more. But close-hauled the *Sutherland* could hardly make three knots past the land, allowing for the vagaries of the coast line and the wind; troops stepping out as hard as they could go along the road could keep their distance from her if necessary, and perhaps the Italian officers might realise this soon enough. He must do what damage he could now.

"Mr Gerard!" he called, and Gerard came running to his beckoning, standing with face uplifted to hear his orders from the quarterdeck. "You may fire single shots at any group large enough to be worth it. See that every shot is well aimed."

"Aye aye, sir."

There was a body of a hundred men or so massed on the hillside opposite them now. Gerard himself laid the gun and estimated the range, squatting on his heels to look along the dispart sights with the gun at full elevation. The ball struck the rock in front of them and ricocheted into the group; Hornblower saw a sudden

swirl in the crowd, which scattered abruptly leaving two or three white-breeched figures stretched on the ground behind them. The crew cheered at the sight of it. Marsh the gunner had been hurriedly sent for by Gerard to take part in this accurate shooting; the gun he was training killed more men in another group, over which flashed something on a pole which Hornblower, straining his eye through his telescope, decided must be one of the imperial eagles which Bonaparte's bulletins so often mentioned, and at which British cartoonists so often jeered.

Shot after shot crashed out from the *Sutherland's* starboard battery as she made her slow way along the coast. Sometimes the crew cheered when some of the scrambling midgets on the hillside were knocked over; sometimes the shot was received in chill silence when no effect could be noted. It was a valuable demonstration to the gunners on the importance of being able to lay their guns truly, to estimate range and deflection, even though it was traditional in a ship of the line that all the gunners had to do was to serve their guns as fast as possible with no necessity for taking aim with their ship laid close alongside the enemy. Now that the ear was not deafened by the thunder of a full broadside, it could detect after each shot the flattened echo thrown back by the hills, returning from the land with its quality oddly altered in the heated air. For it was frightfully hot. Hornblower, watching the men drinking eagerly at the scuttle butt as their petty officers released them in turns for the purpose, wondered if those poor devils scrambling over the rocky hillsides in the glaring sun were suffering from thirst. He feared they were. He had no inclination to drink himself — he was too preoccupied listening to the chant of the man at the lead, with watching the effect of the firing and with seeing that the *Sutherland* was running into no danger.

Whoever was in command of the shattered field artillery battery farther along the road was a man who knew his duty. Midshipman Savage in the foretop attracted Hornblower's attention to it with a hail. The three serviceable guns had been slewed round to point diagonally across the road straight at the ship, and they fired the moment Hornblower trained his glass on them. Wirra-wirra-wirra; one of the balls passed high over Hornblower's head, and a hole appeared in the *Sutherland's* main topsail. At the same time a crash forward told where another shot had struck home. It would be ten minutes before the *Sutherland's* broadside could bear on the battery.

"Mr Marsh," said Hornblower. "Turn the starboard bowchasers on that battery."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Carry on with your target practice, Mr Gerard."

"Aye aye, sir."

As part of the programme for training his men into fighting machines it would be invaluable to give them firing practice while actually under fire from the enemy — no one knew better than Hornblower the difference between being fired at and not being fired at. He found himself in the act of thinking that one or two unimportant casualties might be worth receiving in these circumstances as part of the crew's necessary experience, and then he drew back in horror from the thought that he was casually condemning some of his own men to mutilation or death — and he might himself be one of those casualties. It was intolerably easy to separate mentally the academic theories of war from the human side of it, even when one was engaged in it oneself. To his men down below the little uniformed figures scrambling over the hillside were not human beings suffering agonies from heat and thirst and fatigue; and the still figures which littered the road here were not disembowelled corpses, lately fathers or lovers. They might as well be tin soldiers for all his men thought about them. It was mad that at that moment, irrelevantly in the heat, and the din of firing, he should start thinking about Lady Barbara and her pendant of sapphires, and Maria, who must now be growing ungainly with her child within her. He shook himself free from such thoughts — while they had filled his mind the battery had fired another salvo whose effect he actually had not noticed.

The bow-chasers were banging away at the battery; their fire might unsteady the men at the field guns. Meanwhile the broadside guns were finding few targets offered them, for the Italian division opposite them had scattered widely all over the hillside in groups of no more than half a dozen at the most — some of them were right up on the skyline. Their officers would have a difficult time reassembling them, and any who wished to desert — the 'Account of the Present War in the Peninsula' had laid stress on the tendency of the Italians to desert — would have ample opportunity today.

A crash and a cry below told that a shot from the battery had caused one at least of the casualties Hornblower had been thinking about — from the high-pitched scream of agony it must have been one of the ship's boys who had been hit; he set his lips firm as he measured the distance the ship still had to sail before bringing her broadside to bear. He would have to receive two more salvos; it was the tiniest bit difficult to wait for them. Here came one — it passed close overhead with a sound like an infinity of bees on an urgent mission; apparently the gunners had made inadequate allowance for the rapidly decreasing range. The main top gallant backstay parted with a crack, and a gesture from Bush sent a party to splice it. The *Sutherland* would have to swing out now in readiness to weather the point and reef ahead.

"Mr Gerard! I am going to put the ship about. Be ready to open fire on the battery when the guns bear."

"Aye aye, sir."

Bush sent the hands to the braces. Hooker was forward in charge of the headsail sheets. The *Sutherland* came beautifully up into the wind as her helm was put down, and Hornblower watched the field guns, now less than a quarter of a mile away, through his glass. The gunners saw the *Sutherland* swinging round — they had seen that before, and knew the tempest of shot that would follow. Hornblower saw one man run from the guns, and saw others follow him, clawing their way desperately up the bank on to the hillside. Others flung themselves flat on their faces — only one man was left standing, raving and gesticulating beside the guns. Then the *Sutherland* heaved to the recoil of her guns once more, the acrid smoke came billowing up, and the battery was blotted out of sight. Even when the smoke cleared the battery could not be seen. There were only fragments — shattered wheels, an axle tree pointing upwards, the guns themselves lying tumbled on the ground. That had been a well-aimed broadside; the men must have behaved as steadily as veterans. Hornblower took his ship out round the reef and stood in again for the shore. On the road just ahead was the rear of an infantry column; the leading division must have been formed up again on the road while the *Sutherland* was dealing with the second one. Now it was marching off down the road at a great pace, embanked in a low, heavy cloud of dust.

"Mr Bush! We must try and catch their column."

"Aye aye, sir."

But the *Sutherland* was a poor sailor close-hauled, and time and again when she was on the point of overtaking the rear of the column she had to go about and head out from the shore in order to weather a projecting point of land. Sometimes she was so close to the hurrying infantry that Hornblower could see through his glass the white faces above the blue tunics of the men looking back over their shoulders. And here and there along the road in the track of the division he saw men who had fallen out — men sitting by the roadside with their heads in their hands, men leaning exhausted on their muskets staring at the ship gliding by, sometimes men lying motionless and unconscious on their faces where they had fallen, overwhelmed by fatigue and heat.

Bush was fretting and fuming as he hastened about the ship trying to coax a little more speed out of her, setting every spare man to work carrying hammocks laden with shot from the lee side to the weather side, trimming the sails to the nicest possible degree of accuracy, blaspheming wildly whenever the gap between the ship and men showed signs of lengthening.

But Hornblower was well content. An infantry division which had been knocked about as badly as this one, and then sent flying helter skelter in panic for miles, dropping stragglers by the score, and pursued by a relentless enemy, would have such a blow to its self-respect as to be vastly weakened as a fighting force for weeks. Before he came into range of the big coastal battery on the farther side of Arens de Mar he gave over the pursuit — he did not want the flying enemy to recover any of its lost spirit by seeing the *Sutherland* driven off by the fire of the heavy guns there, and to circle round out of range would consume so much time that night would be upon them before they could be back on the coast again.

"Very good, Mr Bush. You can put the ship on the starboard tack and secure the guns."

The *Sutherland* steadied to an even keel, and then heeled over again as she paid off on the other tack.

"Three cheers for the cap'n," yelled someone on the maindeck — Hornblower could not be sure who it was, or he would have punished him. The storm of cheering that instantly followed drowned his voice and prevented him from checking the men, who shouted until they were tired, all grinning with enthusiasm for the captain who had led them to victory five times in three days. Bush was grinning, too, and Gerard, beside him on the

quarterdeck. Little Longley was dancing and yelling with an utter disregard for an officer's dignity, while Hornblower stood sullenly glowering down at the men below. Later he might be delighted at the recollection of this spontaneous proof of the men's affection and devotion, but at present it merely irritated and embarrassed him.

As the cheering died away the voice of the leadsman made itself heard again.

"No bottom! No bottom with this line!"

He was still doing the duty to which he had been assigned, and would continue to do it until he received orders to rest — a most vivid example of the discipline of the navy.

"Have that man taken out of the chains at once, Mr Bush!" snapped Hornblower, annoyed at the omission to relieve the man.

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush, chagrined at having been for once remiss in his work.

The sun was dipping in purple and red into the mountains of Spain, in a wild debauch of colour that made Hornblower catch his breath as he looked at the extravagant beauty of it. He was mazed and stupid now, in reaction from his exalted quickness of thought of the preceding hours; too stupid as yet even to be conscious of any fatigue. Yet he must still wait to receive the surgeon's report. Someone had been killed or wounded today — he remembered vividly the crash and the cry when the shot from the field guns hit the ship.

The gunroom steward had come up on the quarterdeck and touched his forehead to Gerard.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he said. "But Tom Cribb's been killed."

"What?"

"Yes indeed, sir. Knocked 'is 'ead clean off. Dretful, 'e looks, laying there, sir."

"What's this you say?" interrupted Hornblower. He could remember no man on board of the name of Tom Cribb — which was the name of the heavyweight champion of England — nor any reason why the gunroom steward should report a casualty to a lieutenant.

"Tom Cribb's been killed, sir," explained the steward. "And Mrs Siddons, she's got a splinter in 'er — in 'er backside, begging your pardon, sir. You could 'ave 'eard 'er squeak from 'ere, sir."

"I did," said Hornblower.

Tom Cribb and Mrs Siddons must be a pig and a sow belonging to the gunroom mess. It was a comfort to realise that.

"She's all right now, sir. The butcher clapped a 'andful o' tar on the place."

Here came Walsh the surgeon with his report that there had been no casualties in the action.

"Excepting among the pigs in the manger, sir," added Walsh, with the deprecating deference of one who proffers a joke with his superior officer.

"I've just heard about them," said Hornblower.

Gerard was addressing the gunroom steward.

"Right!" he was saying. "We'll have his chitterlings fried. And you can roast the loin. See that you get the crackling crisp. If it's leathery like the last time we killed a pig, I'll have your grog stopped. There's onions and there's sage — yes, and there's a few apples left. Sage and onions and apple sauce — and mark you this, Loughton, don't put any cloves in that sauce. No matter what the other officers say. I won't have 'em. In an apple pie, yes, but not with roast pork. Get started on that at once. You can take a leg to the bos'n's mess with my compliments, and roast the other one — it'll serve cold for breakfast."

Gerard was striking the fingers of one hand into the palm of the other to accentuate his points; the light of appetite was in his face — Hornblower fancied that when there were no women available Gerard gave all the thought he could spare from his guns to his belly. A man whose eyes could go moist with appetite at the thought of fried chitterlings and roast pork for dinner on a scorching July afternoon in the Mediterranean, and who could look forward with pleasure to cold leg of pork for breakfast next day should by right have been fat like a pig himself. But Gerard was lean and handsome and elegant. Hornblower thought of the developing paunch within his own waistband with momentary jealousy.

But Colonel Villena was wandering about the quarterdeck like a lost soul. Clearly he was simply living for the moment when he would be able to start talking again — and Hornblower was the only soul on board with enough Spanish to maintain a conversation. Moreover, as a colonel he ranked with a post captain, and could

expect to share the hospitality of the captain's cabin. Hornblower decided that he would rather be overfed with hot roast pork than have to endure Villena's conversation.

"You seemed to have planned a feast for tonight, Mr Gerard," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Would my presence be unwelcome in the gunroom to share it?"

"Oh no, sir. Of course not, sir. We would be delighted if you would honour us, sir."

Gerard's face lit with genuine pleasure at the prospect of acting as host to his captain. It was such a sincere tribute that Hornblower's heart was warmed, even while his conscience pricked him at the memory of why he had invited himself.

"Thank you, Mr Gerard. Then Colonel Villena and myself will be guests of the gunroom tonight."

With any luck, Villena would be seated far enough from him to save him from the necessity for Spanish conversation.

The marine sergeant drummer had brought out all that the ship could boast of a band — the four marine fifers and the four drummers. They were marching up and down the gangway to the thunder and the rumble of the drums while the fifes squealed away bravely at the illimitable horizon.

"Hearts of oak are our ships

Jolly tars are our men —"

The bald words and the trite sentiments seemed to please the crew, although every man-jack of it would have been infuriated if he had been called a 'jolly tar'.

Up and down went the smart red coats, and the jaunty beat of the drums thrilled so that the crushing heat was forgotten. In the west the marvellous sky still flamed in glory, even while in the east the night was creeping up over the purple sea.

Chapter XV

"Eight bells, sir," said Polwheal.

Hornblower woke with a start. It seemed to him as if he could not have been asleep more than five minutes, while actually it had been well over an hour. He lay on his cot in his nightshirt, for he had thrown off his coverings during the sweltering heat of the night; his head ached and his mouth had a foul taste. He had retired to bed at midnight, but — thanks to roast pork for supper — he had tossed and turned in the frightful heat for two or three hours before going to sleep, and now here he was awakened at four o'clock in the morning, simply because he had to prepare his report to Captain Bolton or to the admiral (if the latter had arrived) for delivery that morning at the rendezvous. He groaned miserably with fatigue, and his joints ached as he put his feet to the deck and sat up. His eyes were gummy and hard to open, and they felt sore when he rubbed them.

He would have groaned again except for the need to appear in Polwheal's eyes superior to human weaknesses — at the thought of that he stood up abruptly and posed as somebody feeling perfectly wide awake. A bath under the washdeck pump, and a shave made the pose almost a reality, and then, with dawn creeping up over the misty horizon, he sat down at his desk and cut himself a new pen, licked its point meditatively before dipping it into ink, and began to write.

'I have the honour to report that in accordance with the orders of Captain Bolton, on the 20th inst., I proceeded —'

Polwheal came in with his breakfast, and Hornblower turned to the steaming hot coffee for a spur to his already flagging energies. He flipped the pages of the ship's log to refresh his memory — so much had happened latterly that he was actually vague already about the details of the capture of the *Amelie*. The report had to be written badly, avoiding Gibbous antitheses or high-flying sentiment, yet at the same time Hornblower disliked the use of the kind of phrasing which was customary in captains' reports. When listing the prizes taken from beside the battery at Llama he was careful to write 'as named in the margin' instead of the irritating phrase 'as per margin' which had become stereotyped in the Navy since its classic use by an

unlettered captain nearly a hundred years before in the War of Jenkins' Ear. He was compelled to use the word 'proceed' even though he hated it — in official reports the Navy never set sail, nor went, nor put to sea, nor journeyed, but always proceeded, just as in the same way captains never suggested or advised or recommended, but always respectfully submitted. Hornblower had respectfully to submit that until the French battery was re-established at Llanza the coastal route from France to Spain was now most vulnerable between Port Vendres and Rosas Bay.

While he struggled with the wording of his description of the raid on the Etang de Thau near Cette he was interrupted by a knock on his door. Longley entered in response to his call.

"Mr Gerard sent me, sir. The squadron's in sight on the starboard bow."

"The flagship's there, is she?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right. My compliments to Mr Gerard, and will he please alter course to close her."

"Aye aye, sir."

His report would have to be addressed to the admiral, then, and not to Captain Bolton, and it would have to be finished within the next half hour. He dashed his pen into the ink and began to scribble feverishly, describing the harassing of the divisions of Pino and Lecchi on the coast road between Malgret and Arens de Mar. It came as a shock to him when he computed the casualties inflicted on the Italians — they must have numbered five or six hundred, exclusive of stragglers. He had to word that carefully, otherwise he would probably be suspected of gross exaggeration, a serious crime in the eyes of authority. Yesterday five or six hundred men were killed or mutilated who today would have been alive and well if he had not been an active and enterprising officer. The mental eyes with which Hornblower viewed his exploit saw a double image — on the one hand he saw corpses, widows and orphans, misery and pain, while on the other he saw white breeched figurines motionless on a hillside, tin soldiers knocked over, arithmetical digits recorded on paper. He cursed his analytical mind at the same time as he cursed the heat and the need for writing the report. He was even vaguely conscious of his own cross-grainedness, which always plunged him into depression after a success. He dashed off his signature to the document, and shouted for Polwheal to bring a candle to melt the sealing wax while he peppered sand over the wet ink. Thanks to the heat his hands stuck clammily to the limp paper. When he came to address the report — 'Rear Admiral Sir P. G. Leighton, K.B.' — the ink spread and ran on the smeared surface as though on blotting paper. But at any rate the thing was done; he went on deck, where already the sunshine was oppressive. The brassiness of the sky, noticeable yesterday, was far more marked today, and Hornblower had noticed that the barometer in his cabin indicated a steady fall which had begun three days ago. There was a storm coming, without a doubt, and moreover a storm which had so long been foretold would be all the more violent when it did come. He turned to Gerard with orders to keep a sharp eye on the weather and to be ready to shorten sail at the first hint of trouble.

"Aye aye, sir," said Gerard.

Over there rolled the two other ships of the squadron, the *Pluto* with her three tiers of ports, and the red ensign at the mizzen masthead indicating the presence on board of a rear-admiral of the red, and the *Caligula* astern of her.

"Pass the word to Mr Marsh to salute the Admiral's flag," said Hornblower.

While the salute was being returned a hoist of flags ran up the *Pluto's* rigging.

"*Sutherland's* pendant," read off Vincent, "Take station astern."

"Acknowledge."

The hoist was succeeded by another.

"*Sutherland's* pendant," said Vincent again. "Flag to captain. Come on board and report."

"Acknowledge. Mr Gerard, clear away my barge. Where's Colonel Villena?"

"Not seen him yet this morning, sir."

"Here, Mr Savage, Mr Longley. Run down and get Colonel Villena out of bed. I want him ready as soon as my barge is cleared away."

"Aye aye, sir."

It took two and a half minutes before the captain's barge was in the water with Hornblower seated in the stern, and at the very last second Villena made his appearance at the ship's side. He looked as disagreeable as

might be expected, at having been routed out of bed by two brusque midshipmen who could speak no word of his language and dressed with their clumsy and hurried aid. His busby was awry and his coat incorrectly hooked, and his sabre and pelisse still hung over his arm. He was hauled down into the boat by the impatient boat's crew, who did not want to imperil their ship's reputation for smartness by waiting for him after the admiral had signalled for them.

Villena lurched miserably to his thwart beside Hornblower. He was unshaven and bedraggled, and his eyes were as gummy as Hornblower's had been on his awakening. He sat down, muttering and grumbling, still half asleep, trying in dazed fashion to complete his dressing, while the men bent to their oars and sent the barge skimming over the water. It was only as they neared the flagship that Villena was able to open his eyes fully and begin to talk, and for the short remaining period Hornblower felt no need for elaborate politeness. He was full of hope that the admiral would invite Villena to be his guest for the sake of any information he could give regarding conditions ashore.

Captain Elliott was at the ship's side to greet him as they came on board.

"Glad to see you, Hornblower," he said, and then in response to Hornblower's introduction he mumbled incoherently to Villena eyeing the latter's gaudy uniform and unshaven chin in blank astonishment. He was obviously relieved when the formality was over and he could address himself to Hornblower again. "The admiral's in his cabin. This way, gentlemen please."

The flag lieutenant in the admiral's cabin along with the admiral was young Sylvester, whom Hornblower had heard of as a capable young officer even though he was — as might have been expected — a sprig of the nobility. Leighton himself was ponderous and slow of speech this morning; in the stifling heat the sweat was visible in little rivers running down the sides of his heavy chin. He and Sylvester made a brave attempt to welcome Villena. They both of them spoke French fairly well and Italian badly, and by amalgamating what they knew of those two languages with what remained of their schoolboy Latin they were able to make themselves understood, but it was heavy going. Obviously with relief Leighton turned to Hornblower.

"I want to hear your report, Hornblower," he said.

"I have it here in writing, sir."

"Thank you. But let us hear a little about your doings verbally. Captain Bolton tells me he spoke a prize you had taken. Where did you go?"

Hornblower began his account — he was glad that events had moved so fast that he was able to omit all reference to the circumstances in which he had parted company from the East India convoy. He told of his capture of the *Amelie* and of the little fleet of small vessels at Llanza. The admiral's heavy face showed a gleam of extra animation when he heard that he was a thousand pounds the richer as a result of Hornblower's activity, and he nodded sympathetically when Hornblower explained the necessity of burning the last prize he had taken — the coaster near Cette. Cautiously Hornblower put forward the suggestion that the squadron might be most profitably employed in watching between Port Vendres and Rosas, on which stretch, thanks to the destruction of the battery at Llanza, there was now no refuge for French shipping. A hint of a groove appeared between the admiral's eyebrows at that, and Hornblower swerved away from the subject. Clearly Leighton was not the sort of admiral to welcome suggestions from his inferiors.

Hornblower hurriedly began to deal with the next day's action to the south-westward.

"One moment, Captain," said Leighton. "You mean you went southward the night before last?"

"Yes, sir."

"You must have passed close to this rendezvous during the darkness?"

"Yes, sir."

"You made no attempt to ascertain whether the flagship had arrived?"

"I gave orders for a specially good lookout to be kept, sir."

The groove between Leighton's eyebrows was very noticeable now. Admirals were always plagued by the tendency of their captains, when on blockade service, to make excuses to get away and act independently — if only because it increased their share of prize-money — and obviously Leighton was not merely determined to deal drastically with any such tendency but also he guessed that Hornblower had been careful to arrange his cruise so as to pass the rendezvous at night.

"I am extremely annoyed, Captain Hornblower, that you should have acted in such a fashion. I have already admonished Captain Bolton for allowing you to go, and now that I find you were within ten miles of here two nights ago I find it difficult to express my displeasure. I reached the rendezvous that very morning, as it happened, and as a result of your behaviour two of His Majesty's ships of the line have been kept idle here for nearly forty-eight hours until you should see fit to rejoin. Please understand, Captain Hornblower, that I am very annoyed indeed, and I shall have to report my annoyance to the admiral commanding in the Mediterranean, for him to take any action he thinks necessary."

"Yes, sir," said Hornblower. He tried to look as contrite as he could, but his judgment told him that it was not a court martial matter — he was covered by Bolton's orders — and it was doubtful if Leighton would really carry out his threat of reporting to higher authority.

"Please continue," said Leighton.

Hornblower began to describe the action against the Italian divisions. He could see by Leighton's expression that he attached little importance to the moral effect achieved, and that his imagination was not powerful enough to allow him to gauge the effect on the Italians of an ignominious retreat before an invulnerable enemy. At Hornblower's suggestion that they had lost five hundred men at least Leighton moved restlessly and exchanged glances with Sylvester — he clearly did not believe him. Hornblower decided discreetly not to put forward his estimate that the Italians had lost at least another five hundred men through straggling and desertion.

"Very interesting," said Leighton, a trifle insincerely.

A knock at the cabin door and the entrance of Elliott eased the situation.

"The weather's looking very nasty, sir," he said. "I was thinking that if Captain Hornblower wishes to rejoin his ship —"

"Yes, of course," said Leighton, rising.

From the deck they could see black clouds to leeward, rising rapidly against the wind.

"You'll only just have time," said Elliott, looking at the sky as Hornblower prepared to go down into his barge.

"Yes indeed," said Hornblower. His main anxiety was to get away from the *Pluto* before anyone noticed that he was leaving Villena behind — the latter, with no understanding of the English conversation, was hanging back on the quarterdeck, and Hornblower was able to scramble down into the boat without anyone thinking of him.

"Give way," said Hornblower, before he was fairly seated, and the barge shot away from the *Pluto's* side.

With an admiral and his staff on board the accommodation, three-decker though she was, must already be strained. The presence of a Spanish colonel would mean that some unfortunate lieutenant would be rendered extremely uncomfortable. But Hornblower could harden his heart to the troubles of the unknown lieutenant.

Chapter XVI

The thunder was already rolling on the horizon when Hornblower set foot on the *Sutherland's* deck again, although the heat showed no signs of diminishing at present and the wind had dropped away almost to nothing. The black clouds had stretched over the sky nearly overhead, and what blue was left was of a hard metallic tint.

"It'll be coming soon, sir," said Bush. He looked complacently upwards; the *Sutherland's* sail had already been reduced by his orders to topsails only, and now the crew were busy taking a reef in them. "But where it'll come from, God only knows."

He mopped his sweating forehead; the heat was frightful, and the ship, with no wind to steady her, was heaving painfully on the uneasy sea. The blocks were chattering loudly as she rolled.

"Oh, come *on*, blast you," grumbled Bush.

A breath of air, hot as though from a brick kiln, stole upon them, and the *Sutherland* steadied for a moment. Then came another, hotter and stronger.

"There it comes!" said Bush pointing.

The black sky was suddenly split by dazzling lightning, followed almost instantaneously by a tremendous crash of thunder, and the squall came racing down upon them; they could see its hard, metallic line on the surface of the grey sea. Almost taken aback, the *Sutherland* shuddered and plunged. Hornblower bellowed orders to the helmsman, and she paid off before it, steadying again. The shrieking wind brought hail with it — hailstones as big as cherries, which bit and blinded and stung, rattling with an infernal din on the decks, and whipping the sea into a yeasty foam whose hiss was audible even through the other noises. Bush held the big collar of his tarpaulin coat up round his face, and tried to shield his eyes with the brim of his sou'wester, but Hornblower found the keen wind so delicious that he was unconscious of the pain the hailstones caused him. Polwheal, who came running up on deck with his tarpaulin and sou'wester, had positively to jog his elbow to attract his attention and get him to put them on.

The *Pluto*, hove to, came drifting down two cables' lengths clear of the *Sutherland's* starboard bow; the big three-decker was even more unhandy and made more leeway than the *Sutherland* herself. Hornblower watched her and wondered how Villena was feeling now, battered down below with the timbers groaning round him. He was commending himself to the saints, presumably. The *Caligula* was still up to windward under reefer topsails, her man o' war pendant blown out stiff and as straight as a pole. She was the most weatherly of the three ships, for her British designers had had in mind as principal object the building of a ship to contend with storms — not, as in the case of the *Pluto*, of cramming the utmost artillery into a given length and beam, nor, as the Dutch designers had been compelled to do in the case of the *Sutherland*, to give the minimum of draught compatible with a minimum of sea-worthiness. Almost without warning the wind whipped round four whole points, and the *Sutherland* lurched and plunged, her storm canvas slatting like a discharge of guns, before she paid off again. The hail had given place to torrential rain now, driven along almost horizontally by the howling wind, and the sudden change in the wind called up a short, lumpy sea over which the *Sutherland* bucked and plunged in ungainly fashion. He looked over to the *Pluto* — she had been caught nearly aback, but Elliott was handling her well and she had paid off in time. Hornblower felt that he would rather command the flat-bottomed old *Sutherland* than a clumsy three-decker ninety-eight guns and thirty-two pounders and first-rate's pay notwithstanding.

The wind shrieked at him again, nearly tearing his tarpaulin from his back. The *Sutherland* trying to lie over on her side in a gale like this was like a cow trying to waltz. Bush was yelling something at him. Hornblower caught the words "relieving tackles" and nodded, and Bush vanished below. Four men at the wheel, aided by the powerful leverage of the barrel of the wheel, might possibly manage to control it despite the *Sutherland's* frantic behaviour, but the strain thrown on the tiller ropes would be enormous, and as precautionary measure it would be better to place six or eight men at relieving tackles in the gunroom, to share the strain both on the men at the wheel and on the tipper ropes. A petty officer would have to be posted at the grating nearest the wheel to shout down instructions to the men at the relieving tackles — all highly skilled work, the thought of which made Hornblower bless his own resolution in stripping the East India convoy of seamen.

To windward the horizon was concealed in a pearly mistiness of rare beauty, but to leeward it was clearer, and reaching up to the sky in that direction there was a bar of blue — the mountains of Spain. In that direction there was Rosas Bay, poor shelter with the present south-easterly gale blowing, and closed to British ships in any case because of the French guns mounted there; Rosas was a fortress whose siege and capture by the French had provided Cochrane with opportunities for distinguishing himself a year ago. The northern extremity of Rosas Bay was Cape Creux — the *Sutherland* had captured the *Amelie* while the latter was endeavouring to weather this point. Beyond Cape Creux the coast trended away again northwesterly, giving them ample sea room in which to ride out the gale, for these summer storms in the Mediterranean never lasted long, violent though they were.

"Flagship's signalling, sir," yelled the midshipman of the watch. "No. 35, make all sail conformable with the weather."

The *Pluto* was showing storm-staysails as well as her close reefed topsails; apparently the admiral had decided that Cape Creux was dangerously near, and wished to claw out a little farther to windward in case of emergencies. It was a sensible precaution; Hornblower gave the necessary orders to set the *Sutherland* on the same course, although it was all that the men at the wheel and relieving tackles could do to keep her from coming up into the wind. The guns' crews were busy double-breeching the guns lest the heavings of the ship

should cause any to break loose, and there was already a party of men at work on the two chain pumps. The working of the ship was not causing her to take in much water as yet, but Hornblower believed in keeping the well as clear as possible in case the time should come when pumping would be urgently necessary. The *Caligula* was far to windward already — Bolton was making the fullest use of the weatherly qualities of his ship and was keeping, very properly, as far as possible out of harm's way. But the *Sutherland* and the *Pluto* were safe enough, always excepting accidents. The loss of a spar, a gun breaking loose, a sudden leak developing, and the situation might be dramatically changed, but at present they were safe enough.

Overhead the thunder was rolling so unceasingly that Hornblower noticed it no longer. The play of the lightning among the black clouds was dazzling and beautiful. At this rate the storm could not last much longer; equilibrium was restoring itself fast. But there would be some flurries yet, and the wind had already kicked up a heavy sea, here in this shallow corner of the Mediterranean; there was plenty of water washing over the maindeck as the *Sutherland* rolled. The air, even the deluges of rain and spray, were exhilarating after the stifling heat of the past few days, and the wind screaming in the rigging made a music which even Hornblower's tone-deaf ear could appreciate. He was surprised that so much time had passed when Polwheal came to tell him his dinner was ready — what dinner there was, with the galley fire extinguished.

When he came on deck again the wind had sensibly diminished, and over to the windward there were patches of clear sky to be seen, of a steely green-blue, and the rain had ceased, although the sea was wilder than ever. "It's blown itself out quick enough, sir," said Bush.

"Yes," answered Hornblower, but with mental reservation. That steely sky was not the blue of returning calm, and he never yet had known one of these Mediterranean storms die away without at least one expiring effort. And he was still very conscious of Cape Creux on the horizon to leeward. He looked keenly round him, at the *Pluto* to leeward, veiled in spray, and the *Caligula* far to windward and her canvas only rarely visible across the tossing grey water.

Then it happened — a sudden howling squall, which laid the *Sutherland* over and then veered round with astonishing quickness. Hornblower clung to the mizzen weather rigging, bellowing orders. It was wild while it lasted; for a moment it felt as if the *Sutherland* would never rise again, and then as if she might be driven under stern-foremost as the wind took her aback. It howled and shrieked round them with a violence which it had not yet displayed. Only after a long struggle was the ship brought to the wind again and hove to; the shift in the wind had made the sea lumpier and more erratic than ever, so that she was bucking and plunging in a senseless fashion which made it hard even for those who had spent a lifetime at sea to keep their footing. But not a spar had carried away, and not a rope had parted — clear proof of the efficient work of Plymouth Dockyard and of the seamanship of Bush and Harrison.

Bush was shouting something now, and pointing away over the quarter, and Hornblower followed the gesture with his eyes. The *Pluto* had vanished, and for a moment Hornblower thought she must have sunk with all hands. Then a breaking wave revealed her, right over on her beam ends, the grey waves breaking clean over her exposed bottom, her yards pointing to the sky, sails and rigging showing momentarily black through the white foam in the lee of her.

"Jesus Christ!" yelled Bush. "The poor devils have gone!"

"Set the main topmast stays! again!" yelled Hornblower back.

She had not sunk yet; there might possibly be some survivors, who might live long enough in the wild sea to grab a rope's end from the *Sutherland's* deck and who might be hauled on board without being beaten to death; it had to be tried even though it was a hundred to one against one of the thousand men on board being saved. Hornblower worked the *Sutherland* slowly over towards the *Pluto*. Still the latter lived, with the waves breaking over her as if she were a half tide rock. Hornblower's imagination pictured what was happening on board — the decks nearly vertical, with everything carrying away and smashing which could. On the weather side the guns would be hanging by their breechings; the least unsoundness there and they would fall straight down the decks, to smash holes on the opposite side which would sink her in a flash. Men would be crawling about in the darkness below decks; on the main deck the men who had not been washed away would be clinging on like flies on a windowpane, soused under as the waves broke.

Through his levelled glass he caught sight of a speck on the exposed upper side of the *Pluto*, a speck that moved, a speck which survived the breach of a wave over it. There were other specks, too, and there was a

gleam of something in swift regular movement. Some gallant soul had got a party together to hack at the weather shrouds of the mainmast, and as the *Sutherland* closed he saw the shrouds part, and the foremast shrouds as well. With a shuddering roll the *Pluto* heaved herself out of the water like a whale, water cascading from her scuppers, and as she rolled towards the *Sutherland* her mizzen-mast went as well, on the opposite side. Freed from the overpowering leverage of her top hamper she had managed to recover — naval discipline and courage had won her a further chance of life during the few seconds which had been granted her while she lay on her beam ends. Hornblower could see men still hard at work, hacking madly at the uncut shrouds to free the ship from the wreckage thrashing alongside.

But she was in poor case. Her mast had gone, a few feet from the deck; even her bowsprit had disappeared. And with the loss of their steadying weight the bare hull was rolling insanely, heaving right over until her bottom copper was exposed on one side, and then rolling equally far back again taking only a few seconds to accomplish a roll which extended through far more than a right angle. The wonder was that she did not roll over and over, as a wooden ninepin might do, floating on one side. Inside the ship it must be like an inferno, like a madman's nightmare; and yet she lived, she floated, with some at least of her crew alive on her decks. Overhead the thunder pealed a final roll. Even westward, to leeward, there was a gap visible through the clouds, and the Spanish sun was trying to break through. The wind was no more now than a strong gale. It was the last hurricane effort of the storm which had done the damage.

And yet that last effort must have endured longer than Hornblower could have guessed. He was suddenly conscious of Cape Creux large upon the horizon, and the wind was driving nearly straight from the ship towards it. It would only be a matter of an hour or two before the dismantled hulk was in the shallows at the foot of the cape where certain destruction awaited her — and to make it doubly certain there were French guns on Cape Creux ready to pound a helpless target.

"Mr Vincent," said Hornblower. "Make this signal. '*Sutherland* to flagship. Am about to give assistance'."

That made Bush jump. In that boiling sea, on a lee shore, the *Sutherland* would find it difficult to give assistance to a mastless hulk twice her size. Hornblower turned upon him.

"Mr Bush, I want the bower cable got out through a stern port. As quickly as you can, if you please. I am going to tow the flagship off."

Bush could only look his expostulations — he knew his captain too well to demur openly. But anyone could see that for the *Sutherland* to attempt the task was to take her into danger probably uselessly. The scheme would be practically impossible from the start, owing to the difficulty of getting the cable to the *Pluto* as she rolled and lunged, wildly and aimlessly, in the trough. Nevertheless, Bush was gone before Hornblower could do more than read his expression. With that wind steadily thrusting them towards the land every second was of value.

With her flat bottom and with all her top hamper exposed to the wind the *Sutherland* was going off to leeward a good deal faster than the *Pluto*. Hornblower had to work his ship with the utmost care, fighting his way to windward close-hauled before heaving-to and allowing her to drop back again; there was only the smallest margin to spare. The gale was still blowing strongly, and the least clumsiness in handling, the slightest accident to sail, or spar, meant danger. Despite the chill of the wind and the steady rain the *Sutherland's* topmen were sweating freely soon, thanks to the constant active exertion demanded of them by their captain, as he backed and filled, worked up to windward and went about, keeping his ship hovering round the dismasted *Pluto* like a seagull round a bit of wreckage. And Cape Creux was growing nearer and nearer. From below came a steady tramp and thumps and dragging noises as Bush's party slaved away to haul the ponderous twenty-inch cable aft along the lower gun deck.

Now Hornblower was measuring distances with his eye, and gauging the direction of the wind with the utmost care. He could not hope to haul the *Pluto* bodily out to sea — it was as much as the *Sutherland* could do to work herself to windward — and all he intended was to tow her aside a trifle to gain advantage of the respite, the additional sea room which would be afforded by avoiding the cape. Postponement of disaster was always a gain. The wind might drop — probably would — or change, and given time the *Pluto's* crew would be able to set up jury masts and get their ship under some sort of control. Cape Creux was nearly due west, and the wind was a little north of east, the tiniest trifle north. It would be best from that point of view to drag the *Pluto* away southerly; in that case they stood a better chance of weathering the cape. But southwards from Cape

Creux stretched Rosas Bay, limited southward by Cape Bagur, and such a course might drift them under the guns of Rosas, expose them to the annoyance of the gunboats which were probably stationed there, and end in worse disaster than before. Northwards there would be no such danger, the guns at Llanza could not be remounted yet, and there were twenty miles of clear water from the tip of the cape to Llanza anyway. Northwards was safer — if only he could be sure of weathering the cape. Hornblower's imagination was hard at work trying to calculate, on quite insufficient data, the rate of drift he could expect and the possible distance the *Sutherland* would be able to tow the dismayed three-decker in the time granted. With the data insufficient, imagination was all he had to go upon. He had decided on a northward course when a young seaman came running breathless up to the quarterdeck.

"Mr Bush says the cable'll be ready in five minutes, sir," he said.

"Right," answered Hornblower. "Mr Vincent, signal to the flagship 'Stand by to receive a line.' Mr Morkell, pass the word for my coxswain."

A line! The quarterdeck officers stared at each other. The *Pluto* was plunging and lunging quite irrationally in the trough of the sea. She was still heeling over so as to show her copper before rolling back to bury the white streaks between her gunports, but in addition, in the irregular sea, she was lunging now forward, now aft, as incalculable whim took her. She was as dangerous to approach as a gun loose on a rolling deck. Any sort of collision between the ships might well, in that sea, send them both incontinently to the bottom.

Hornblower ran his eyes over Brown's bulging muscles as he stood before him.

"Brown," he said, "I've selected you to heave a line to the flagship as we go down past her. D'you know anyone in the ship who could do it better? Frankly, now."

"No, sir. I can't say as I do, sir."

Brown's cheerful self confidence was like a tonic.

"What are you going to use, then?"

"One o' them belayin' pins, sir, an' a lead line, if I can have one, sir."

Brown was a man of instant decision — Hornblower's heart warmed to him, not for the first time.

"Make ready, then. I shall lay our stern as close to the flagship's bows as is safe."

At the moment the *Sutherland* was forging slowly ahead under storm jib and close reefed topsails, two hundred yards to windward of the *Pluto*. Hornblower's mind became a calculating machine again, estimating the *Sutherland's* relative drift down upon the *Pluto*, the latter's drunken reelings and plungings, the *Sutherland's* present headway, the send of the waves and the chances of a cross-wave intervening. He had to wait for two long minutes before the moment for which he was waiting should arrive, his eyes glued upon the *Pluto* until their relative positions should be exactly what he wanted.

"Mr Gerard," said Hornblower — his mind was too busy for him to be afraid. "Back the main tops'l."

The *Sutherland's* way was checked. At once the gap between the two ships began to narrow, as the *Sutherland* drifted down upon the *Pluto* — a gap of grey angry water with bearded waves. Fortunately the *Pluto* was lying fairly constantly in the trough without yawing, only surging forward or back as some unexpected sea struck her. Brown was standing statuesquely on the taffrail, balancing superbly. The lead line was coiled on the deck at his side, attached to the belaying pin which he swung pendulum fashion, idly, from his fist. He made a magnificent picture there against the sky, with no hint of nervousness as he watched the distance dwindle. Even at that moment Hornblower felt a hint of envy of Brown's physique and robust self-confidence. The *Sutherland* was coming down fast upon the *Pluto* — upon the latter's wave-swept forecastle Hornblower could see a group of men waiting anxiously to catch the line. He looked to make sure that Brown's assistants were ready with the stouter line to bend on the lead line.

"We'll do it, by God!" said Gerard to Crystal.

Gerard was wrong — at the present relative rate of drift the ships would pass at least ten yards farther apart than Brown could be expected to throw the belaying pin and its hampering trailer of line.

"Mr Gerard," said Hornblower coldly. "Back the mizzen tops'l."

The hands were ready at the braces; the order was hardly given before it was executed. The *Sutherland* was making a tiny trifle of sternway now, and the gap was closing farther still. The *Pluto's* towering bow, lifting to a wave, seemed right upon them. Gerard and Crystal were swearing softly in unison, without the slightest idea of what they were saying, as they watched, fascinated. Hornblower felt the wind blowing cold about his

shoulders. He wanted to call to Brown to throw, and with difficulty checked himself. Brown was the better judge of what he could do. Then he threw, with the *Sutherland's* stern lifting to a wave. The belaying pin flew with the line wavering behind it in the wind. It just reached the *Pluto's* beak-head bows and caught round a remnant of the standing rigging of the bowsprit, where a ragged sailor astride the spar seized it with a wave of his arm. Next moment a wave broke clean over him, but he held on, and they saw him pass the end of the line up to the waiting group on the forecastle.

"Done it!" shrieked Gerard. "Done it, done it, done it!"

"Mr Gerard," said Hornblower. "Brace the mizzen tops'l sharp up."

The line was uncoiling fast from the deck as the *Pluto* hauled it in; soon the heavier line was on its way out to the dismasted ship. But they had not long to spare; with their different rates of drift it was impossible for Hornblower in that gale to keep the two ships that same distance apart — impossible and dangerous. The *Sutherland* hove-to went to leeward faster than the *Pluto*; closehailed she forged ahead, and it was Hornblower's task to combine these two factors so that the increasing distance between the ships was kept down to a minimum — a nice algebraic problem in convergent series which Hornblower had to convert into mental arithmetic and solve in his head.

When suddenly the *Pluto* decided irrationally to rush forward upon the *Sutherland* he found himself recasting his estimates at the very moment when everyone else was holding their breath and waiting for the collision. Gerard had a couple of parties standing by with spars to try to bear the *Pluto* off — not that they could have achieved much against her three thousand tons deadweight — and the bight of an old sail filled with hammocks as a fend-off, and there was wild activity on the forecastle of the *Pluto* as well, but at the very last moment, with blasphemy crackling all round, the dismasted ship suddenly sheered off and everyone breathed again more freely, except Hornblower. If the *Pluto* could surge in that fashion towards the *Sutherland*, she could surge away from her also, and if she were to do so while the line was hauling in the twenty-three inch cable she would part the line for certain and leave the whole business to be done again — and Cape Creux was looming very near now.

"*Caligula* signalling, sir," said Vincent. "How can I help?"

"Reply 'Wait'," said Hornblower over his shoulder to him; he had actually forgotten the *Caligula's* existence. Bolton would be a fool if he came down unnecessarily to leeward, towards a hostile lee shore.

A mighty splash over the stern indicated that Bush down below was paying out some of the hawser through the after-port so as to provide some slack if the *Pluto* surged away, but the process might be overdone — it was a hemp cable, which sank in water, and to have out too much would imperil the line which was drawing it in. Hornblower leaned over the heaving stern.

"Mr Bush!" he bellowed.

"Sir!" said Bush's voice from below through the open port.

"Avast there, now!"

"Aye aye, sir."

The line was taking the strain now, and the cable was creeping slowly out towards the *Pluto* like some sea worm. Hornblower watched as it straightened — this was a business demanding calculation as close as any so far. He had to shout his orders for Bush to pay out more cable, or to wait, his eyes on the ships, on the sea, on the wind. The cable was two hundred yards long, but fifty of these lay in the *Sutherland* herself — the job had to be completed before the ships were a hundred and fifty yards apart. Hornblower only began to feel relieved when he saw the end of the cable curve up out of the sea on to the *Pluto's* bows, and the waving of flags told him that the end had been taken inboard and made fast.

Hornblower looked at the nearing land, felt the wind on his cheek. His earlier calculations were proving correct, and if they held on this tack they would be drifted into Rosas Bay even if they cleared the land.

"Mr Vincent," he said. "Signal to the Flagship 'I am preparing to go about on the other tack'."

Gerard looked his amazement. It appeared to him that Hornblower was going to unnecessary trouble and imperilling both ships by this manoeuvre — he could see no farther than Cape Creux, only the friendly sea and the dangerous land. With a seamen's instinct he wanted to get both ships comfortably under control with sea room under their lee, and he did not stop to consider beyond that. He could see the land and feel the wind, and his reaction to those circumstances was instinctive.

"Mr Gerard," said Hornblower. "Go to the wheel. When the strain comes on the hawser —"

Gerard did not need to be told about that. With three thousand tons trailing on her stern the *Sutherland* would behave unlike any ship the quartermasters had ever steered, and extraordinary and unexpected measures would have to be taken to keep her from flying up into the wind. The hawser was tightening already. The bight of it rose slowly out of the sea, straightening like a bar, the water spouting out of it in fountains, while a thunderous creaking below told how the bins were feeling the strain. Then the cable slackened a trifle, the creaking diminished, and the *Sutherland* had got the *Pluto* under way. With every yard they went, and every bit of way the *Pluto* received, the latter sagged less and less to leeward. As soon as she could answer the helm the strain on the *Sutherland's* quartermasters would be eased.

Bush came up on the quarterdeck again, his task below completed.

"I want you to work the ship, Mr Bush, when we go about."

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush. He looked at the land, and felt the wind, and his thoughts followed an exact parallel to Gerard's, but Bush by now never dreamed of doubting his captain's judgment in a matter of seamanship. His mental state was now that if Hornblower thought it right, it must be so, and there was no need to wonder about it.

"Send the hands to the braces. It must be like lightning when I give the word."

"Aye aye, sir."

The *Pluto* was gathering way, and every yard after this that they made in a southerly direction would be a dead loss when they turned northerly.

"Back the mizzen tops'l," said Hornblower.

The *Sutherland* lost way, and the *Pluto* came steadily forging down upon her. Hornblower could actually see Captain Elliott come running forward to see for himself what was happening. He could not guess what Hornblower was intending.

"Have the signal 'Tack' bent and ready to send up, Mr Vincent."

The *Pluto* was very near now.

"Brace the mizzen tops'l up, Mr Bush."

The *Sutherland* gathered speed again — she had just the distance allowed by the slackening of the hawser in which to gather way and go about before the two began to interfere. Hornblower watched the cable and estimated the speed of the ship through the water.

"Now, Mr Bush! That signal, Mr Vincent!"

The helm was put down, the yards braced up, with Rayner forward attending to the fore topmast staysail. She was coming round, her canvas volleying as she came into the wind; on board the *Pluto* as they read the signal they had the sense to put their own helm down too, and with steerage way upon her she began to come round a little and allow Hornblower a little more room for his manoeuvres. Now the *Sutherland* was over on the opposite tack, and gathering way, but the *Pluto* was only half way round. There would be a terrific jerk in a moment. Hornblower watched the tightening cable rising from the sea.

"Standby, Mr Gerard!"

The jerk came, and the *Sutherland* shuddered. The drag of the cable across her stern was doing the most fantastic things to her — Hornblower could hear Gerard volleying orders to the quartermasters at the wheel and down the grating to the men at the relieving tackles below. For one palpitating second it seemed as if she must be dragged back and thrown in irons, but Gerard at the wheel and Bush at the braces and Rayner forward fought her tooth and nail. Shuddering, she paid off again, and the *Pluto* followed her round. They were over on the other tack at least heading northwards towards the comparative safety of the Gulf of the Lion.

Hornblower looked at the green-topped Cape Creux, close in now, and a little forward of the port beam. It was going to be a very near-run thing, for besides her own natural leeway the *Sutherland* was being dragged to leeward by the dead weight of the *Pluto*, and her speed through the water towards safety was diminished by the same dead weight. It was going to be a very near thing indeed. Hornblower stood with the wind howling round him, his busy mind plunged into calculations of drift and distance again. He looked back at the *Pluto*, not rolling so badly now that she had way on her. The towrope was at an angle to the length of the *Sutherland*, and the *Pluto* was at a further angle to the towrope. He could rely on Elliott to make the most economical use

of his helm, but the drag on the *Sutherland* must be tremendous. He ought to try to get a little more speed out of the *Sutherland*, but with a full gale blowing it was dangerous to spread any more canvas. If a sail were to split or a spar carry away they would be on the shore in no time.

He looked towards the land again, to measure the diminishing distance, and as he looked a warning rose out of the sea a cable's length away like a ghost. It was a pillar of water six feet high, which rose from the breast of a wave and vanished as quickly and as mysteriously as it had risen. Hornblower could hardly believe he had seen it, but a glance at Crystal's and Bush's faces, intentionally immobile, assured him that he had. A cannon ball had plunged into the water there, calling up that splash, although in the high wind he had neither heard the shot nor seen the smoke from the land. The battery on Cape Creux was firing at him, and he was nearly in range. Soon there would be forty-two-pounder balls coming about his ears.

"Flagship's signalling, sir," said Vincent.

On board the *Pluto* they had managed to attach a block to the top of the stump of the foremast and sent up a signal; the fluttering flags could be seen clearly from the *Sutherland's* quarterdeck.

"Flag to *Sutherland*," read Vincent. "'Cast off — two — if necessary'."

"Reply 'Submit not necessary'."

They must make more speed through the water, there was no doubt about that. It was an interesting problem in chances, but more of the sort to appeal to a player of hazard than a whist player. To set more sail increased the danger to both ships at the same time as it gave them a greater chance of reaching safety. Yet if he set more sail and lost a spar he still might possibly struggle with the *Sutherland* out of danger, and the *Pluto* would be no more lost than she would be if he cast her off ignominiously now.

"Mr Bush, I'll have the reefs shaken out of the fore tops'l."

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush. He had anticipated the necessity for it, and he had guessed that his captain would choose the bolder course — he was learning fast, even at his age, was Bush.

The topmen went running up the rigging and out along the fore topsail yard; standing on the swaying foot ropes with the gale howling round them, holding on by their elbows over the yard, they struggled with the reef points. The sail shook itself out with a loud flap, and the *Sutherland* heeled sharply over under the increased pressure. Hornblower noticed the flat catenary curve of the heavy cable astern flatten itself a trifle more, but the rope gave no sign of breaking under the strain. Despite the increased heel of the ship the men at the wheel were actually finding their task a little easier, for the leverage of the big fore topsail forward tended to balance the ternal drag of the tow aft.

He glanced at the land just in time to see a puff of smoke from the summit of Cape Creux, blown instantly into invisibility by the gale. Where the shots fell he could not tell at all, for he neither saw nor heard them; the sea was too rough for the splashes to be easily seen. But the fact that the battery was firing showed that they must at least be almost in range — they were circling on the very edge of ruin. Nevertheless, the *Sutherland* was making better speed through the water, and looking aft he could see preparations advancing on the *Pluto's* deck for setting up a jury main mast. Any fragment of sail which the *Pluto* could carry would ease the *Sutherland's* task enormously, and in an hour they might have the work completed. Yet in an hour darkness would have come to shield them from the fire of the battery; in an hour their fate would be decided one way or another. Everything depended on the occurrences of the next hour.

The sun had broken through the westerly clouds now, changing the hills and mountains of Spain from grey to gold. Hornblower nerved himself to endure the waiting during the next hour, and the *Sutherland* and the *Pluto* came through that hour successfully. At the end of that time they had weathered Cape Creux, and had drawn so far to the northward that the land under their lee had dropped away abruptly from a mile and a half distant to fifteen miles. Night found them safe, and Hornblower very weary.

Chapter XVII

"Captain Hornblower will command the landing party," said Admiral Leighton, finally.

Elliott and Bolton both nodded in entire agreement as they sat round the council table in the *Pluto's* cabin. A landing party six hundred strong, contributed by three ships of the line, was certainly a captain's command, and Hornblower was equally certainly the best captain to command it. They had been expecting some such move as this ever since the *Pluto* had returned refitted from Port Mahon, and Leighton had shifted his flag back into her from the *Caligula*. The coming and going of Colonel Villena from the shore had heralded it, too. For three weeks the *Caligula* and the *Sutherland* had ranged along the coast of Catalonia, and the *Pluto* returning had brought back welcome fresh provisions, the *Sutherland's* prize crews, and even a dozen new hands for each ship. With the crews at full strength they might well strike a heavy blow, and the capture of Rosas, if it could be effected, would undoubtedly throw the whole of the French arrangements for the subjection of Catalonia into confusion.

"Now, are there any comments?" asked the admiral. "Captain Hornblower?"

Hornblower looked round the big cabin, the cushioned lockers, the silver on the table, Elliott and Bolton gorged with the vast dinner they had consumed, Sylvester with paper and ink before him, Villena in his gaudy yellow uniform staring idly about him while the English conversation which he did not understand went on round him. On the bulkhead opposite him hung a portrait of Lady Barbara, a likeness so good as to be startling — Hornblower felt as if he might hear her voice at any moment. He caught himself wondering what they did with it when they cleared for action, tore his thoughts away from Lady Barbara with an effort, and tried as tactfully as he could to show his distaste for the whole scheme.

"I think," he said at length, "that it might be unwise to trust so entirely to the co-operation of the Spanish army."

"There are seven thousand men ready to march," said Leighton. "From Olot to Rosas is no more than thirty miles."

"But Gerona lies between."

"Colonel Villena assures me that there are bye roads round the town passable to an army without cannon. He himself, as you know, has made the journey four times."

"Yes," said Hornblower. Sending a single horseman was a different proposition entirely from marching seven thousand men by mountain paths. "But can we be certain of seven thousand men? And can we be sure that they will come?"

"Four thousand men would suffice for the siege," said Leighton. "And I have General Rovira's definite promise to march."

"Still they might not come," said Hornblower. He realised it was hopeless to try and argue with a man who had not had personal experience of Spanish promises, and who had not imagination enough to visualise the difficulties of arranging combined action between forces separated by thirty miles of mountainous country. The tell-tale groove had appeared between Leighton's eyebrows.

"What alternative do you suggest then, Captain Hornblower?" he asked, impatience evident at having thus to reopen the whole question.

"I should suggest that the squadron confines itself to actions within its own strength, without having to depend on Spanish help. The coast battery at Llanza has been re-established. Why not try that? Six hundred men ought to be able to storm it."

"My instructions," said Leighton ponderously, "are to the effect that I must act in the closest co-operation with the Spanish forces. Rosas has a garrison of no more than two thousand men, and Rovira has seven thousand only thirty miles away. The main body of the French Seventh Corps is to the southward of Barcelona — we have a week at least in which to effect something against Rosas. From the squadron we can supply heavy guns, men to work them, and more men to head a storming column when we have effected a breach. It appears to me to be an eminently suitable opportunity for combined action, and I quite fail to understand your objections, Captain Hornblower. But perhaps they are not so cogent, now?"

"I did no more than to state them at your request, sir."

"I did not ask for objections, but for comments, or helpful suggestions. I looked for more loyalty from you, Captain Hornblower."

That made the whole argument pointless. If Leighton only wanted servile agreement there was no sense in continuing. He had clearly made up his mind, and on the face of it he had a very strong case. Hornblower knew

that his objections were more instinctive than reasoned, and a captain could not very well put forward a plea of greater experience to an admiral.

"I can assure you of my loyalty, sir."

"Very well. Captain Bolton? Captain Elliott? No comments? Then we can start work at once. Mr Sylvester will let you have your orders in writing. I trust that we are on the eve of the most resounding success the east coast of Spain has seen since this Spanish war began."

The fall of Rosas would indeed be a resounding success if it could be achieved. As a town with practicable communication with the sea it could hardly be retaken by the French now that there was a strong English squadron on the spot to sustain it. It would be a constant threat to the French communications, a base where Spanish armies from anywhere in the Peninsula could be thrown on shore, of such importance that the Seventh Corps would be bound to cease their attempts at the conquest of Catalonia and concentrate all their strength on the task of retaking it or observing it. But it was Spanish information that there was no French field army within reach. It was a Spanish promise to bring Rovira down from Olot to effect a siege, and a Spanish promise to have transport animals ready to drag the siege train from the landing point.

But with Leighton set upon it, there was nothing for it but to go through with the affair wholeheartedly. If everything went right, they would win a great success, and although Hornblower had never yet heard of a combined operation of war in which everything went right, he could still hope for one, and draft his arrangements for the landing of the siege train from the fleet in accordance with that hope.

Two nights later the squadron came gliding in the early darkness, with the hills and cliffs of the Cape Creux peninsula looming faintly in the distance, to drop anchor together off the sand cove beside Selva de Mar which had been agreed upon as the best place for landing. Four miles to the westward was the battery at Llanza; five miles to the east was the battery on the end of Cape Creux, and six miles due southward, across the root of the long peninsula of which Cape Creux forms the tip, lay the town of Rosas.

"Good luck, sir," said Bush, looming up in the darkness of the quarterdeck as Hornblower made ready to go down into his barge.

"Thank you, Bush," answered Hornblower. The punctilious 'Mr' could be dropped occasionally in unofficial speeches of this sort. But the fact that he found his hand sought and gripped by Bush's large horny one was an indication that Bush took the most serious view of the impending operation.

The barge took him quickly over the placid water which reflected the numberless stars overhead; soon the noise of the gentle waves breaking on the sandy beach was louder than the subdued rumbling of the landing force in process of embarkation. A sharp challenge came from the beach to the approaching boat; it was pleasant to hear that it was worded in Spanish, which made it appear much less likely that it was a French force posted there to oppose a landing, and probable that it was the party of guerilleros who had been promised. Hornblower stepped ashore, and a group of cloaked figures, just visible in the starlight, came down the beach towards them.

"The English captain?" asked one of them in Spanish.

"Captain Horatio Hornblower, at your service."

"I am Colonel Juan Claros, of the third tercio of Catalan migueletes. I bid you welcome in the name of Colonel Rovira."

"Thank you. How many men have you here?"

"My tercio. That is to say a thousand men."

"How many animals?"

"Fifty horses and a hundred mules."

Villena had promised that all northern Catalonia would be swept for draught animals for the siege train. There were four miles of hill paths and a mile of flat plain to be covered between here and Rosas — it would take fifty horses to drag one of the two and a half ton twenty-four pounders over rough country. Had there been fewer animals than this Hornblower would have refused to move, but the Spaniards had provided the barest minimum necessary.

"Take the barge back," said Hornblower to Longley. "The landing can proceed."

Then he turned again to Claros.

"Where is Colonel Rovira?"

"He is over beyond Castellon, closing in on Rosas."

"What is his force?"

"He has every Spaniard able to carry arms in northern Catalonia, Captain, except for my tercio. Seven thousand men at least."

"H'm."

That was exactly according to plan. The army was to be under the walls at dawn, and to be joined as quickly as possible by the siege train, so that the battering could start without delay immediately upon the alarm being given. There was only the barest minimum of time available to reduce Rosas before the main French army could come up from Barcelona. Hornblower felt that he must make every effort to carry out his part of the programme, since the Spaniards were adhering so closely to theirs.

"Have you any patrol watching Rosas?" asked Hornblower.

"A squadron of regular cavalry. They will give the alarm if any sortie comes from the fortress."

"Excellent."

He would not be able to get the guns far from the beach before dawn, and by that time Rovira would have hemmed Rosas in, while any hitch would be reported by the cavalry. It was a good piece of organisation. Hornblower felt he had misjudged the Spaniards, or perhaps these Catalan irregulars were better soldiers than the ordinary Spanish army — which was not unlikely.

The steady splash of oars heralded the approach of the boats of the squadron; the leading ones were up to the beach and the men in them came tumbling out, stirring up a faint phosphorescence in the water. The white crossbelts of the marines showed up in startling contrast with their red coats, which appeared black in the faint light.

"Major Laird!"

"Sir!"

"Take a party to the top of the cliff. Post your pickets where you think best, but remember your orders. Allow nobody out of earshot."

Hornblower wanted to have a solid disciplined force out as a screen in front of him, not trusting Spanish precautions against surprise, but in darkness, and with three languages — Spanish, Catalan, and English — in use, he did not want to risk any muddle or misunderstanding. It was the sort of minor technical difficulty which could not be appreciated by an admiral without experience. The long boats with the guns were grounding far out in the shallows. Men were already hauling into position the rough landing pontoon of spars lashed into rafts, the outer sections buoyed up by casks, which Hornblower had had prepared. Cavendish, the first lieutenant of the *Pluto*, was doing this part of the work thoroughly well and without troubling Hornblower for orders.

"Where are the horses and mules, Colonel?"

"Up above."

"I shall want them down here shortly."

It was only a matter of minutes for most of the material to be brought ashore, even though a thousand rounds of shot for the twenty-four pounders — a hundred rounds per gun, one day's consumption — weighed over ten tons. Three hundred seamen and three hundred marines, working under naval discipline, could land ten tons of shot, and the necessary powder barrels, and the beef and bread for one day's rations, in no time worth mentioning. It was the guns which presented the greatest difficulty. The first of the ten twenty-four pounders was only now being coaxed on to the pontoon, for it was a desperate business to run it up the brief ramp from the platform built on the thwarts, where it had been precariously perched during its passage from the ship, over the boat's gunwale. The pontoon sank under its ponderous weight until its surface was awash. Two hundred men, thigh deep in water, toiled on the dragropes which were attached to the gun, and floundering and splashing, their feet seeking foothold in the soft sand below and finding none, they gradually hauled the thing towards the beach.

Like all guns Hornblower had ever seen, it behaved with a pigheaded obstinacy that might have been instigated by infernal powers with a perverted sense of humour. Although it had been fitted, by Hornblower's orders, with specially large trucks to make it more easy to surmount inequalities of surface, it caught and stuck, over and over again, in its passage over the spars. Handspikes and crowbars were handled diligently in

the dark by Cavendish and his men to coax it over the inequalities. And then it would slew round, with Cavendish bellowing to the men to avast, for fear lest the maddening thing should run clean off the platform in the water alongside; only when it had been pushed and heaved straight again could the men tail on to the dragropes once more. There were ten of these guns; Hornblower reflected, and four miles of paths, uphill and down, over which they had to be dragged.

He had had the base of the pier prolonged over the sand by further rafts of timber laid out there, right up to where the sand gave place to the rock bottom of the steep combe which seamed the cliff here and led to the summit. The horses and mules, each with a man at its head whose rags were obvious in the darkness, were waiting here in a great herd, but of course the Spaniards, although they knew they had come to drag guns, had provided no sort of harness for the operation.

"Here, you men," said Hornblower, turning to a waiting group of sailors. "There's plenty of line over there. Harness up these horses to the gun. You can find some spare canvas if you look for it."

"Aye aye, sir."

It was quite fantastic to see what seamen could turn their hands to. They fell to work with a will, knotting and tying. The English words they used may have sounded strange to the Spanish horses' ears as they wheeled the animals into position, but they seemed to be effective enough. Even the horse-holders, gabbling Catalan, pushed and shoved until they were more help than hindrance. Whinnying and clattering in the darkness — barely relieved by the light of a dozen lanterns — the puzzled brutes were got into line. Rope collars padded with canvas were slipped over their heads, rope traces were passed back to the eyebolts in the gun carriage. "Avast!" roared one of the sailors just as the strain was beginning to come on. "This beggar's got his starboard leg over the line."

By the time the second gun had reached the water's edge they were ready to start hauling up the first. Whips cracked and sailors shouted. The horses plunged as they sought foothold in the sand, but the gun began to move, with a vast creaking and cracking of timber under the trucks. The movement was spasmodic and jerky, and when they began to breast the steep slope of the combe it died away altogether. Twenty Spanish horses, underfed and undersized, could not haul that gun up the slope.

"Mr Moore," said Hornblower, irritably. "See that that gun is hauled up."

"Aye aye, sir."

A hundred men on dragropes as well as twenty horses managed it, aided by a party behind with crowbars to help over the worst inequalities and to sprag the wheels with rocks at moments when neither men nor horses could pull for another second. Hornblower felt he had really accomplished a great deal when he stood on the summit, with dawn creeping out of the sea, and looked at the line of ten guns, and the mountain of stores, which had been all dragged up in the course of the night.

The gradual coming of the light enabled him to look about him. Down below was the golden beach, dotted with details of the landing party, and beyond that the blue sea, with the ships of the squadron rolling to their anchors. On his own level the summit of the peninsula stretched in a rocky, uneven expanse before him. Over to his right the rock broke completely through in a vast table-topped hill, but southward, in the direction of Rosas which he would have to follow, a narrow goat path wound through the low scrub of arbutus bushes. Claros beside him was revealed as a lean man, sunburnt to the colour of tobacco, with a long black moustache above an excellent set of white teeth, which he displayed in a smile.

"I have a horse for you, Captain."

"Thank you, Colonel. That is very kind of you."

There were a few brown figures creeping dispiritedly about the rocks; in the dips between the low crests there were brown masses which were just beginning to disintegrate in the sunlight from huddles of sleeping men into sleepy groups, who, still clutching their blankets about them, moved aimlessly here and there.

Hornblower regarded his allies with a disfavour which was not diminished by the fact that it was exactly what he had anticipated, and which was intensified by his sleepless night.

"Would you be so kind," he said, "as to send a message to Colonel Rovira, telling him that we are about to march on Rosas, and that I hope to reach there with at least some of the guns at noon?"

"Certainly, Captain."

"And I must ask you for the help of your men in the transport of my guns and stores."

Claros looked more dubious at that, and more dubious still when he was told that of his men four hundred would be needed to help with the guns while another four hundred would have to carry a twenty-four pound cannon ball each all the way to Rosas. Hornblower overrode his objections a little crossly.

"And after that, Colonel," he said, "they will have to return here for more. I was promised a sufficiency of pack animals; if you do not supply me with four-legged ones, I must use those with two. Now, if you please, I want to get the column started."

Ten horses or mules to every gun, with a hundred men at the drag-ropes. A hundred men ahead to labour on the task of improving the path, rolling rocks out of the way and filling up holes. Four hundred men carrying cannonballs, some of them leading the packmules with gunpowder kegs slung over their backs. Claros looked still more askance when it became apparent that every man of his tercio would be at work, while Hornblower proposed to leave two hundred of his marines free of any labouring duty.

"That is how I wish it arranged, Colonel. If you do not like it, you can try to find a Spanish battering train."

Hornblower was determined upon keeping a substantial portion of his disciplined force closed up and ready for an emergency, and his determination was obvious enough to silence Claros' protests.

There was already an outcry behind them where the mules were being loaded up. Hornblower strode over with Claros at his heels, to find a Spanish officer threatening Gray with a drawn sword, his ragged guerilleros behind him handling their muskets.

"What's all this? What is happening here?" demanded Hornblower, first in English and then in Spanish.

Everybody turned to him all speaking at once, like schoolboys in a playground dispute. The officer's explosive Catalan was almost incomprehensible to him, and he turned to listen to Gray.

"It's like this, sir," said the master's mate, displaying a lighted cigar in his hand. "This Dago lieutenant here, sir, he was a-smoking this while we was loading up the mules. I says to him, very respectful, sir, 'No smoking in the magazine, sir,' but he didn't take no notice, not understanding, maybe. So I says to him, I says, 'No smokingo, magazine, señor,' an' he just blew out a puff of smoke and turned his back on me. So I took away his cigar, an' he drew his sword, sir."

Claros had at the same time heard his officer's explanation, and Claros and Hornblower faced each other.

"Your sailor has insulted my officer," said Claros.

"Your officer has been very foolish," said Hornblower.

It seemed like an impasse.

"Look, sir," said Gray, suddenly. He pointed to one of the barrels swinging against the ribs of the patient mule who bore it. It was slightly stove, and a thin black trickle of powder had run from it. There was powder on the mule's flank, powder on the ground. The danger of fire was obvious, must be obvious even to a Catalan. Claros could not suppress a half smile as he looked.

"My sailor acted hastily," said Hornblower, "but I think you will admit, Colonel, that he was in part justified. He will tender a profound apology, and then, perhaps, you will issue strict orders against smoking near the powder."

"Very well," said Claros.

Hornblower turned to Gray.

"Say to the officer 'God save our gracious king, señor.' Say it humbly."

Gray looked startled.

"Go on, man," said Hornblower testily. "Do what I say."

"God save our gracious king, señor," said Gray, in a tone that was at least unnatural, if not humble.

"The man wishes to express to you his profound regret for his rudeness," explained Hornblower to the officer, and Claros nodded approvingly, spat out a couple of brief orders, and turned away. The crisis was over, and no feelings hurt on either side. The sailors were grinning and cheerful, while the Catalans looked proudly down upon the lighthearted barbarians.

Chapter XVIII

Captain Hornblower checked his horse on the top of the last of the hitherto interminable rocky undulations. The August sun was blazing overhead, and innumerable flies plagued him and his horse and his companions. At his side rode Claros, behind them Longley and Brown sat uneasily their rawboned Rosinantes along with the three Spanish staff officers. Far back along the path was a solid block of scarlet. Major Laird had his marines formed up as an advance guard, while here and there on the grey-green hills scarlet dots showed where he had posted pickets as a precaution against surprise. Farther back still could be seen a caterpillar of men, naked to the waist, labouring at their task of improving the path for the guns, and beyond that a sort of multiple caterpillar with a black dot at the end showed where the first gun had reached. In five hours it had travelled little more than three miles. Hornblower, looking up at the sun, saw that he had an hour and a half left in which to keep his appointment — in which to haul his guns over a mile of rock and over a mile of the plain which lay below him. He felt a twinge of conscience at the thought that he would probably be a little late with the first of the guns, and he certainly would not be able to open fire against the walls before five or six o'clock in the evening.

There below him, a mile away but seemingly much nearer in the clear air, lay the town of Rosas. Hornblower could recognise all the features of the place which his map indicated. To the right was the citadel — from his elevated position Hornblower could see the pentagonal outline of its grey ramparts, with the blue sea behind. In the centre was the town itself, a single long street lying close to the shore, with a line of earthworks guarding it on the landward side. To the left was the high tower of Fort Trinidad on the other flank. The weakest point was undoubtedly the centre, but it would be of little use assailing that, as the citadel and the Trinidad could hold out independently. The best course would be to take the bull by the horns and breach and storm the citadel by an attack delivered from close by the water's edge. The town could not be held if the citadel fell, although the Trinidad might cause further trouble.

Hornblower had allowed his thoughts to run away with him. He had been so busy planning the reduction of Rosas that he had not even noticed the general peacefulness of the scene. The tricoloured flags flapped idly from the flagstaffs in the citadel and the Trinidad, and they were the most warlike things in sight. There was no sign on the bare plain of any besieging army. Meanwhile it could only be a question of hours before the garrison discovered how near to them lay a valuable convoy, and how weak was the force guarding it.

"Where is the army of Catalonia?" Hornblower demanded angrily, of Claros. He received a deprecatory shrug of the shoulders.

"I do not know, Captain."

To Hornblower it meant that his precious convoy, and his far more precious landing party, were strung out over three miles of country within easy reach of any column which the governor of Rosas might send out.

"You told me Colonel Rovira was marching on Rosas last night!"

"He seems to have been delayed."

"The messenger — the one you said you would send at dawn — has he returned?"

Claros, by a raising of his eyebrows and a jerk of the head, passed this question on to the chief of staff.

"He did not go," said this officer.

"*What?*" said Hornblower in English. He had to fight down his bewilderment and struggle with his dazed senses in order to speak Spanish again. "Why not?"

"It would have put the officer to unnecessary trouble," said the chief of staff. "If Colonel Rovira comes, he comes. If he cannot, no message of ours will bring him."

Hornblower pointed over to the right. In a fold of the hills a line of some fifty picketed horses and a few groups of seated men indicated the position of the squadron of cavalry which had been watching the town since yesterday.

"Why did they not report that Colonel Rovira had not arrived?" he demanded.

"The officer commanding had my orders to report when he *did* arrive," answered Claros.

He was showing no signs of indignation at the barely concealed contempt in Hornblower's expression, but Hornblower kept his rage in hand for a little longer in his endeavour to keep the enterprise alive.

"We are in a very considerable danger here," he said.

Claros shrugged his shoulders again at the Englishman's timidity.

"My men are used to the mountains. If the garrison comes out to attack us we can get away by goat paths over there," he answered, pointing away to the precipitous sides of the mesa in the distance. "They will never dare to follow us there, and if they did they would never catch us."

"But my guns? My men?"

"In war there is always danger," said Claros loftily.

Hornblower's answer was to turn to Longley.

"Ride back at once," he said to the boy. "Halt the guns. Halt the convoy. Halt every man on the path. Nothing is to move a yard farther without orders from me."

"Aye aye, sir."

Longley wheeled his horse round and clattered off; the boy had somewhere learned to ride well before coming to sea. Claros and his staff, Hornblower and Brown, all watched him go, and then turned back to face each other. The Spaniards could guess what were the orders that had been given him.

"Not a gun or a man of mine will stir," said Hornblower, "until I see Colonel Rovira's army on the plain there. Will you be good enough to send a message to him now?"

Claros tugged at his long moustache and then gave the order to his staff; his junior officers argued sulkily with each other before one of them took the note written by the chief of staff and set off with it. Clearly no one relished the prospect of a ride of perhaps twenty miles under a hot sun in search of Rovira's column.

"It is nearly the hour for dinner," said Claros. "Will you have my men's food served out to them, Captain?"

Hornblower's jaw dropped at that. He had thought nothing more could surprise him, and he was proved wrong. Claros' tobacco-brown face gave no indication that he thought there was anything other than what was strictly ordinary in his assumption that his thousand men were to feed on the stores laboriously landed from the squadron. It was on the tip of Hornblower's tongue to refuse pointblank, but he stopped to consider. He guessed that if they were not fed, Claros' men would simply melt away in search of food, and there was still a faint chance that Rovira might arrive and the siege be taken in hand. For the sake of that chance, it was as well to make this concession and make the most of the few hours granted them before their presence should be discovered.

"I will give orders for it," he said, and the dignified colonel's expression showed no change at either demanding or receiving favours from the Englishman with whom he had just been on the verge of quarrelling.

Soon sailors and Catalans were all of them eating heartily. Even the squadron of cavalry smelt food from afar, like vultures, and rode hastily back to job in the feast, leaving only an unhappy half dozen to continue the watch over Rosas. Claros and his staff seated themselves in a group ministered to by orderlies. And as was to be expected, comida was followed by siesta — after a vast meal every Spaniard stretched himself in the shade which the shrub afforded, and snored, flat on his back, with a Peninsula disregard for the flies which buzzed over his open mouth.

Hornblower neither ate nor slept. He dismounted and gave his horse over into Brown's charge, and then hobbled up and down on his hill top looking down at Rosas, with his heart full of bitterness. He had written carefully to the admiral to explain the reason of his halt — carefully, because he did not want to belong to the type of officer who sees difficulties at every turn — and the answer had simply enraged him. Was it not possible, Leighton had asked in his reply, to attempt something against the fortress with the fifteen hundred men he had in hand? Where was Colonel Rovira? The tone of that question indicated that Hornblower was somehow at fault regarding Rovira's non-arrival. Captain Hornblower must remember the need to work in the closest and most cordial co-operation with England's allies. The squadron could not possibly continue to supply Rovira's force with food for long; Hornblower must tactfully call Colonel Rovira's attention to the need of drawing upon his own sources of supplies. It was highly important that the arrival of the British squadron should be signalled by a great success, but on no account was any operation to be undertaken which might imperil the safety of the landing party. Leighton's letter was a completely futile piece of writing, having regard for the present facts, but a Court of Inquiry who knew nothing of them would consider it eminently sane and sensible.

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Brown, suddenly. "The Froggies down there is on the move."

Startled, Hornblower looked down at Rosas. There were three serpents issuing out of the fortress — three long narrow columns of troops creeping out on to the plain, one each from the citadel, the village, and the Trinidad. A hoarse shout from the Spanish cavalry picket proclaimed that they had seen the same phenomenon; the little party left their post and rode headlong back to the scattered Spanish army.

Hornblower went on staring for two more minutes; the columns showed no sign of ending, but wound on interminably out of the fortifications. Two were heading towards him, while the one from the citadel was taking a different route, off to his right, with the dear intention of cutting off the Spanish retreat to the mainland. Hornblower's eye caught the flash of musket barrels in the sunlight; still the columns were winding out — there must be a thousand men at least in each. The Spanish information which had estimated the garrison's strength at two thousand as a maximum must be as faulty as all the rest.

Claros came clattering up with his staff to gaze out over the plain. He paused only for an instant to take in the significance of what he saw — every man with him pointed simultaneously to the outflanking column — and then he wheeled about and spurred back again. As he wheeled his eyes met Hornblower's; they were expressionless as ever, but Hornblower knew what he intended. If he abandoned the convoy and marched his men with all haste for the mesa, he could just get away in time, and he was set upon it. Hornblower knew in that instant that there was not the least use appealing to him to cover the retreat of the convoy, even if the Catalans were steady enough to fight a rearguard action against greatly superior numbers.

The safety of the landing party was dependent solely on its own exertions, and there was not a moment to be lost. Hornblower scrambled on to his horse — the heads of the French columns were well out on to the plain now, and some would be soon ascending the steep escarpment of the plateau — and dashed back after Claros. Then, as he neared the place where Major Laird had his marines already drawn up into line, he checked the pace of his weary horse to a sober trot. It would never do to display too much haste or anxiety. That would only unsteady the men.

And he had a difficult problem to decide, too. The obvious best course was to abandon everything, guns, stores, and all, and march his men back to the ship headlong. The lives of trained seamen were too valuable to be lightly thrown away, and if he did as common sense directed he would have every man safely on board before the French column caught them up; in any matter-of-fact scale of relative values even a few seamen were worth more than ten twenty-four pounders, and their ammunition and whatever food stuffs had been landed. Yet in war the matter-of-fact frequently held only second place. A headlong flight to the ships, and abandonment of guns and stores, would depress the spirits of the men inordinately; a fighting retreat with next to no loss would raise them. He made up his mind as he halted his horse beside Major Laird.

"We'll have three thousand French on us in an hour, Laird," he said quietly. "You'll have to hold them back while we get the stores on board again."

Laird nodded. He was a tall red-faced Scot, red-haired and inclined to stoutness; his cocked hat was tilted back off his forehead and he mopped his face with a lilac-coloured silk handkerchief which clashed dreadfully in the sunlight with his red coat and sash.

"Aye," he said. "We'll do that."

Hornblower spared a second to glance down the double line of marines, the homely brown faces under the shakos, and the white cross belts in Euclidean line. The disciplined composure the marines displayed was comforting and reassuring. He kicked his heels into the shaggy sides of his horse and trotted down the path. Here came Longley, tearing back on his pony.

"Ride to the beach, Longley. Tell the admiral it is necessary to re-embark the men and stores, and ask that all the boats of the squadron should be ready to take us off."

A column of Spaniards was already hurrying off in disorderly fashion up a cross path towards the mainland. A Spanish petty officer was collecting the remainder of his men; a British petty officer was looking on in puzzled fashion as they unhitched a team of horses from one of the guns and began to lead them away.

"Stop!" shouted Hornblower, riding up in the nick of time and delving hurriedly into his mind for adequate Spanish. "We shall keep those horses. Here, Sheldon, Drake, bring those horses back. Brown, ride on. Tell every officer that the Spaniards can go, but they're not to take a mule or horse with them."

There were sullen looks among the Spaniards. In a country in whose every corner war had raged bitterly for two years draught and pack animals were of the utmost imaginable value. The meanest Spanish peasant in the

ranks knew it, knew that the loss of those animals would mean an empty belly for him in some new campaign a month off. But the British sailors were equally determined. They handled their pistols and cutlasses with every intention of using them if necessary, and the Spaniards remembered the French column which was marching to cut off their retreat. All down the path they abandoned the animals and drew off, sulkily, while Hornblower kicked his weary horse into renewed activity, as he rode along, turning back towards the beach all the guns and material which had been dragged so far with such exertion. He reached the head of the steep gully and rode down it to the beach. On that tranquil afternoon the sea was blue and smooth like enamel; far out the squadron rode peacefully at anchor, and below him lay the golden sand of the beach, while over the enamelled surface plied the boats of the squadron like huge beetles. All round him grasshoppers were singing deafeningly. The beach party was already hard at work re-embarking the beef barrels and bread bags piled there. He could safely leave this part of the work to Cavendish, and he turned back again and rode up the gully. At the top a party of seamen arrived with the first of the mule train. He left orders for the animals to be brought back to the guns as soon as their loads were taken off, and rode on.

The nearest gun was within half a mile of the gully, men and horses labouring to drag it up the path — for this half mile the land sloped away fairly steeply inland from the top of the cliffs. The men gave him a cheer, and he waved his hand and tried to sit his horse as if he were an accomplished rider; it was comforting to think that Brown behind him was an even worse horseman, so that the contrast might help. Then a distant pop-pop-popping, its tone unnatural in the heated air, told him that Laird's rearguard was in action.

He rode hastily along the path, Brown and Longley at his heels, past the other gun teams labouring on the steep hillsides, towards the firing. At one point along the path there was a long line of cannon-balls, lying where the Spanish carrying party had dropped them when the alarm came. Those would have to be lost — there was no chance at all of getting them back to the ship. He arrived unexpectedly at the scene of the firing. Here the country was a succession of short steep ups and downs, the rocky soil covered with a dense undergrowth, amid which grasshoppers were still singing loudly through the musketry. Laird had his men strung out along the summit of one of the major ridges; Hornblower came upon him standing on a lump of rock overlooking the path, the lilac handkerchief still in one hand and his sword in the other, and muskets banging away all along the ridge on either side of him. He had the air of a man completely enjoying himself, and he looked down at Hornblower with the irritation of a man disturbed while composing a work of art.

"All well?" said Hornblower.

"Aye," said Laird, and then, grudgingly, "come up and see for yourself."

Hornblower got off his horse and scrambled up the rock, balancing precariously on its slippery summit beside the major.

"Ye'll observe," said Laird, academically, and rolling his r's, "the formed troops must keep to the paths in this terrain. Moreover, detached skirmishers lose their sense of direction rapidly, and this thorny vegetation is admirably adapted to hinder free movement."

From the rock Hornblower looked down upon a sea of green — the nearly impenetrable maquis which clothes the stony hillsides of Mediterranean Spain — through which the red coats of the marines, shoulder deep in the scrub, were hardly visible. Here and there puffs of white smoke, drifting over the surface, marked where recently there had been firing. On the opposite hillside there were other puffs of smoke and faint stirrings among the undergrowth. Hornblower saw white faces, and blue coats, and sometimes even white breeches over there where the French struggled through the thorny scrub. Much farther back he could see part of a column of troops waiting on a section of the path. Two or three musket bullets came whizzing through the air close over his head.

"We are quite safe here," said Laird, "until the enemy turns our flank. If ye look over there to the right, ye'll observe a French regiment advancing along a path roughly parallel to this one. As soon as it reaches that thorn tree there, we shall have to retreat and take up a fresh position and leave them all their work to do again. Fortunately that path is only a sheep track of uncertain direction. It may never reach that thorn tree."

Hornblower could see a long line of French shakos bobbing along above the maquis as he followed Laird's pointing finger; its loops and winds showed that the path must be, as Laird had suggested, a mere chance sheep track. Another bullet buzzed past them.

"The French standard of musketry," said Laird, "is lower now even than it was at Maida, where I had the honour of being engaged as an officer on Sir John Stuart's staff. Those fellows have been firing at me for half an hour now without hitting me, nor even the remotest chance of hitting me. But with two of us up here the possibility is doubled. I would recommend you sir, to descend and devote your attention to accelerating the march of the convoy."

They looked at each other keenly. Hornblower knew quite well that the command of the rearguard was Laird's duty, in which he should not interfere as long as it was properly performed. It was the fear of being thought afraid which made him hesitate to descend. As he stood, he felt his cocked hat struck a violent blow which twisted it on his head so that it toppled off; with an instinctive grab he caught it as it fell.

"That outflanking column," said Laird, steadily, "is about to reach that thorn tree. I must ask you officially, sir" — he dragged out the long word into 'offeeciially' — "to go back before I call on my men to retreat. Our retirement will necessarily be hurried."

"Very well, major," said Hornblower, grinning despite himself, and slipping down from the rock with all the dignity he could muster. He got on his horse and trotted down the path again; he examined his hat with a little thrill of pride to see that the bullet had hit the gold loop at the front, passing within two inches of his head, and he had felt no fear. Where the path crossed the summit of the next ridge he drew rein again; the musketry in the rear had suddenly become more intense. He waited, and then a detachment of marines came running along the path with Captain Morris at their head. They had no attention to spare for him as they turned aside and plunged into the undergrowth on either side of the path seeking points of vantage from which their fire would cover the retreat of their comrades. The musketry fire spluttered out abruptly, and then up the path they came, Laird at their head, half a dozen men under a young lieutenant bringing up the rear and turning to keep back the nearest enemy with warning shots.

Confident that the rearguard was under efficient direction, Hornblower was able to ride on to where the rearmost gun was standing stubbornly at the foot of a slope. The weary horses were plunging and slipping on the rocky surface as they strove to drag the thing up under the urgings of the sailors, but now there were only half a dozen seamen in place of the fifty Spaniards who had helped to drag it from the beach. They were reduced to heaving the gun up the slope foot by foot with crowbars; their naked ribs — most of them had thrown off their shirts — were glistening with sweat. Hornblower racked his brains for the appropriate thing to say.

"Heave away, my lads. Boney hasn't any guns as good as these. Don't let the Dagoes give him a birthday present."

The column of Spaniards could now be seen like a long worm ascending the precipitous sides of the mesa. They had made their escape. Hornblower, looking after them felt a sudden feeling of hatred for them and the race they represented. They were a proud nation, yet never so proud as to disdain favours from others, hating foreigners only a little more than they hated each other, ignorant, misgoverned, misusing the wealth with which nature had endowed their country; Spain was a natural prey to any stronger nation. France had made this attempt at conquest, and it was only England's jealousy which was defeating it. Some time in the future the country would be torn to pieces in the strife between Liberals and Conservatives, and at some period in that struggle the European powers would find sufficient accord to seize upon the fragments. Civil war and foreign aggression, centuries of them, perhaps constituted the future of Spain unless the Spaniards set their house in order.

He brought back his mind with an effort from profitless speculation on the future to deal with the petty problems in hand — detailing the returning mule teams to assist in dragging the guns, portioning out the failing strength of his men so as to make the best speed with the mass of material yet remaining; the spluttering musketry to the rear told how men were suffering wounds and death for the sake of preserving it from the enemy. He sternly cast out the doubt which assailed him as to whether the gesture were worth the price, and kicked his exhausted horse into a last effort as he clattered along the path.

Half the guns were on the beach at last — for the final run down the steep gully to the sand little exertion was needed — and the remainder were fast nearing the head of the gully. The beach was cleared of all the stores that had been landed, and the first gun was even now being dragged along the landing pier for transfer to the ships. Cavendish, in command at the beach, came up to Hornblower.

"What about the horses and mules, sir?"

Shipping a hundred and fifty animals would be as difficult a task as shipping the guns, and they would be an intolerable nuisance on board. Certainly they must not be allowed to fall into the hands of the French; in Spain at the present time they were the most valuable form of booty. The sensible thing to do would be to cut the brutes' throats on the beach. Yet they were enormously valuable. If only they could be got away, and kept alive on board for a few days, they might be landed again and handed back to the Spaniards. To slaughter the wretched beasts would have as bad a moral effect on the men as losing the guns. Crushed biscuit would feed them on board — from the look of them it would be better fare than they had experienced for some time — and the fresh water problem was hardly insurmountable. In the rear Laird was still fighting his successful rearguard action, and the sun was fast setting over the mesa.

"Send them on board with the other stores," said Hornblower, at last

"Aye aye, sir," said Cavendish, allowing no shade of expression in his face to hint at his conviction that mules were far more trouble than guns to coax into small boats and to heave up into ships.

The work went on. One of the guns, with the malicious ingenuity of all its tribe, fell over and dismounted itself during its passage down the gully, but the men did not allow the accident to delay them long. With crowbars they heaved the huge mass of iron down the slope and over the sand, rolling it, like a barrel, along the pier and into the long boat awaiting it. The ships had tackle which would make light of its weight and would remount it in no time. Hornblower gave up his horse to be led to the water's edge and to be coaxed into a boat, while he walked away along the summit of the cliff to take his stand on a high point from which he could overlook both the beach and the head of the gully where Laird would make his final stand.

"Run to Major Laird," he said to Brown. "Tell him everything is on the beach now."

Ten minutes later events suddenly moved with a rush. Brown must have met the marines in their final movement of retreat, for the scarlet uniforms came pouring back up the path, to take up their position along the summit of the cliff, their line reaching nearly to where Hornblower was standing. The French were hard on their heels; Hornblower could see their uniforms moving through the scrub, and the musketry popped furiously along the line.

"Look out, sir!" called Longley, suddenly. He pushed his captain violently in the ribs, jostled him off the flat rock on which he was standing. Hornblower heard two or three bullets pass over his head as he struggled to keep his footing, and at the same moment a group of French infantry, fifty or more, came bursting out of the bush, running hard for them. They were between Hornblower and the nearest marines; the only way of escape was down the steep face of the cliff, and he had no more than a second in which to make up his mind to take it.

"This way, sir!" squeaked Longley. "Down here!"

Longley dropped like a monkey to narrow ledge below, beckoning him down with waving arms. Two blue-coated infantry men were close upon him, their bayonets levelled; one of them was shouting something which Hornblower could not understand. He turned and jumped after Longley, his feet just reaching the ledge a dozen feet below; and he swayed there with a vertical drop of over a hundred feet below him. Longley caught his arm, and, leaning outwards, scanned the descent keenly and yet with a nightmare coolness.

"That is the best way, sir. You see that bush? If we can reach that, we ought to get over there. There's a bit of a gully there joining the big one. Shall I go first, sir?"

"Yes," said Hornblower.

A musket banged over his head and he felt the wind of the bullet — the French were leaning over the top of the cliff firing down at them. Longley braced himself, and then leaped wildly along the face of the cliff, slid down it in a cloud of dust and fragments, and caught the stout bush he had pointed out to Hornblower. Then, moving cautiously away from it, he found an inequality on which to rest, and from there beckoned again to his captain. Hornblower tried to nerve himself for the leap, and then drew back. Another bullet — it actually struck the ledge close to his feet. Hornblower plunged heavily from the end of the ledge, turning his face to the cliff. He felt the rock tearing at his clothes as he slid. Then he crashed into the bush and grasped it madly, his feet seeking foothold.

"Now, over here, sir. Catch hold of that lump with your hands. Put your foot into that crack, sir. No! Not that foot! T'other one!"

Longley's voice went up into a squeak like a bat's in the excitement as he edged himself along the cliff and at the same time instructed his captain where to put his hands and feet Hornblower clung to the cliff face like a fly on a window pane. His hands and arms were aching already — the activities of two days and a night had already drained his strength. A bullet whacked into the rock between him and the midshipman, a chip which it displaced struck his knee a sharp tap. He looked down, and his head swam at the sight of the drop below him. In his exhausted state he felt he would gladly loose his hold and drop down to the quick death awaiting him. "Come on, sir!" said Longley. "Not much more now, sir. Don't look down!"

He recalled himself to sanity. Changing foothold and handhold inch by inch, he shuffled along in accordance with Longley's instructions.

"Just a minute," said Longley. "Are you all right, sir? Wait here while I go and have a look."

Hornblower clung on with aching arms and legs. He kept his face against the cliff, stupid with fatigue and fear. Then he heard Longley beside him again.

"It's all right, sir. There's only one nasty bit. Get your feet down on to that knob, there. Where that bit of grass is."

They had to get past a projecting boss in the face of the cliff; there was one awful second when Hornblower had no foothold, and with his legs dangling had to stretch to a new handhold.

"They can't see us here, sir. You can rest a bit, if you'd like to," said Longley solicitously.

Hornblower lay on his face in the shallow depression which grooved the cliff, conscious for a space of nothing save the cessation of strain. Then with a rush he remembered everything — his dignity, the work on the beach, the fighting on the summit. He sat up and looked down; with a solid lump of the cliff under him his head would stand that. The beach was clear of guns now, in the darkening evening, and only a few animals stood waiting their turn to be coaxed into the boats. Up above the firing seemed to have died down for a space; either the French had begun to despair of achieving anything further or they were gathering for a last effort.

"Come on," said Hornblower, abruptly.

The rest of the descent was easy; they could slide and scramble all the way until he felt the welcome sand under his feet. A worried-looking Brown materialised here, his face clearing as he caught sight of his captain. Cavendish was standing supervising the despatch of the last cutter.

"Very good, Mr Cavendish. The seamen can go next. Are the armed boats ready?"

"Yes, sir."

It was nearly dark now, and the sky gave only a faint light when the marines began to pour down the gully and over the sand. The last shots in the long retreat were fired by the four-pounders mounted in the bows of the two longboats which lay nosing the sand while the final section of marines splashed out into the water to them. The long red tongues of flame lit up the dark masses of Frenchmen swarming down on to the beach, and the blast of grape which they had hurled was followed by a gratifying chorus of screams and cries from the stricken masses.

"A very handsome operation indeed," said Major Laird from his seat in the stern of the longboat beside Hornblower.

Hornblower drooping in weariness was inclined to agree with him, although he was shivering with the chill of his soaked breeches, and his hands smarted from cuts and abrasions, and other parts of him pained him with saddlesoreness as if they were being held before a fierce fire. They rowed out over the silent sea to a ship strange with the whinnying of horses and smelling stable-like already.

Hornblower staggered on board; he saw the boatswain's mate who held the lantern for him glance curiously at his ragged clothes and white face. He walked blindly past the dark line of horses and mules, picketed head and heel to the deck ringbolts, to the security of his cabin. He ought to make his report to the admiral — surely he could leave that until daylight. The deck seemed to be heaving under him rhythmically. Polwheal was there, and food was laid on the candle-lighted table, but Hornblower later could never remember eating any. Faintly he could remember Polwheal helping him into bed, and a vivid, clearcut memory always abode with him of hearing Polwheal, through the closed cabin door, arguing with the sentry outside.

"Twarn't Horny's fault," said Polwheal, didactically.

Then sleep swooped down upon Hornblower, sleep which held him fast, even though he was conscious through it of the aches and pains which assailed him, of the perils he had encountered that day, of the fear which had tortured him on the cliff.

Chapter XIX

The *Sutherland* was wallowing through the stormy waters of the Gulf of the Lion, under a grey sky, with flecked wave tops all round her, while her captain stood on his heaving quarterdeck enjoying the cold blast of the mistral round his ears. The nightmare adventure on the Spanish mainland was three weeks past now, for over a fortnight the ship had been clear of horses and mules, and the stable-smell had nearly disappeared, and the decks were white once again. Much more important, the *Sutherland* had been sent away on detached duty with orders to examine the French coast line all the way along to Toulon; he was free from the clogging authority of the admiral again, and he breathed the keen air with the delight of someone released from slavery. Barbara's husband was not a man whom it was a pleasure to serve.

The whole ship seemed to be infected with this feeling of freedom — unless it was the pleasure in the contrast between the present weather and the tranquil skies and calm seas which had prevailed so long. Here came Bush, rubbing his hands and grinning like a gargoyle.

"Blowing a little, sir," said Bush, "and it'll blow harder than this before it's over."

"Very likely," said Hornblower.

He grinned back, light heartedly, with a bubbling of high spirits within him. It was quite fantastic how stimulating it was to be thrashing to windward again against a stiff breeze, especially with the nearest admiral a hundred miles away. In Southern France that same wind would be causing grumbling and complaints, and the French would be going about hugging their cloaks to them, but here at sea it was perfectly delightful.

"You can put the hands to any work you please, Mr Bush," said Hornblower magnanimously, as discretion returned to him and he evaded the tempting snares of falling into idle conversation.

"Aye aye, sir."

Young Longley came aft with the sand glass to attend to the hourly heaving of the log, and Hornblower watched him from the corner of his eye. The boy was carrying himself with assurance now, and gave his orders easily. He was the only one of all the midshipmen whose calculations of the day's work made any pretence at accuracy, and the incident on the cliff had shown him to be a lad of quick decision. Towards the end of this commission, and at a suitable opportunity, Hornblower decided, he would appoint him acting lieutenant; he watched him bending over the traverse board marking up the hour's run with a queer wonder as to whether he was observing a future Nelson, an admiral who would some day rule forty ships of the line.

He was an ugly little fellow, with this stubby hair and monkey face, yet it was hard not to feel a surge of affection for him. If little Horatio, the child whom smallpox had killed on the third day in those Southsea lodgings, had grown up in this fashion Hornblower would have been proud of him. Perhaps he might have done — but it was not a good thing to think himself into gloom on a fresh morning like this about the little boy he had loved. There would be another child by the time he reached home. Hornblower hoped it might be a boy; and he was nearly sure that Maria hoped the same. Not that any little boy could quite take the place of Horatio — Hornblower felt a new flood of depression when he remembered how Horatio had said "Papa! Want papa!" and had rested his face against his shoulder that evening when the first malaise of the illness was creeping over him. He shook his depression off; if his return to England was at the earliest moment he could hope for the child would be crawling about the floor with all a baby's misdirected zeal. He might even be talking a little, and would hang his head in shyness when his strange papa arrived, so that Hornblower would have the task of winning his confidence and affection. It would be a pleasant task.

Maria was going to ask Lady Barbara to be godmother to the child — it would be delightful if Lady Barbara agreed. Any child with the influence of the Wellesley family behind it could contemplate a secure future. Without a doubt it was the Wellesley influence which had put Leighton in command of the squadron he was mismanaging. And by this time Hornblower was sure that it was the Wellesley influence which had put him in

command of one of the ships of that squadron and retained him in employment without a single day of half pay. He was still in doubt about what had been Lady Barbara's motive, but on a stimulating morning like this he could almost venture to believe that it was because she loved him; he would far rather it were that than it should merely be because she admired his professional ability. Or it might be just an amused and tolerant kindness towards an inferior whom she knew to love her.

That thought called up a surge of revolt. She had been his for the asking, once. He had kissed her, clasped her. No matter that he had been afraid to take her — he slurred that memory over in his present indignation — she had offered, and he had declined. As a suppliant once, she had no right to pose to herself now as his patroness. He stamped his feet with mortification as he paced the deck.

But his clairvoyance was instantly blurred by his idealism. His memory of a cool and self collected Lady Barbara, the perfect hostess, the dignified wife of an admiral, was overlaid by mental pictures of a tender Lady Barbara, a loving Lady Barbara, with a beauty which would take a man's breath away. His heart was torn with longing for her; he felt sick and sad and lonely in his rush of desire for her, for the angel of goodness and sweetness and kindness he thought her to be. His pulse beat faster as he remembered her white bosom with the sapphire pendant resting on it, and animal desire came to reinforce the boyish affection he bore her.

"Sail ho!" bellowed the masthead lookout, and Hornblower's dreaminess was stripped from him in a flash, like the straw wrapping from a bottle.

"Where away?"

"Right in the wind's eye, sir, an' comin' up fast."

A brisk nor'easterly wind like the present meant ideal weather conditions for French ships which wished to escape from the blockade of Marseille and Toulon. It was a fair wind for the escaping ship, enabling her to get out of harbour and cover a long distance during the first night, while at the same time it pushed the blockading squadron away to leeward. This might well be a ship engaged in breaking the blockade, and if such were the case she would have small chance of escape with the *Sutherland* right to leeward of her. It would be consistent with the good fortune he had enjoyed on detached service during the present commission if this were to be another prize for him.

"Keep her steady as she goes," said Hornblower, in reply to Bush's look of inquiry. "And turn the hands up, if you please, Mr Bush."

"Deck, there!" hailed the lookout. "She's a frigate, and British by the look of her."

That was a disappointment. There were fifty possible explanations of a British frigate's presence here and on her present course which offered no chance of action as opposed to one which might involve the proximity of an enemy. Her topsails were in sight already, white against the grey sky.

"Begging your pardon, sir," said the gunlayer of one of the port side quarterdeck carronades. "Stebbing here thinks he knows who she is."

Stebbing was one of the hands taken from the East India convoy, a middle-aged man with grey hairs in his beard.

"*Cassandra*, sir, thirty-two, seems to me. She convoyed us last v'yage."

"Captain Frederick Cooke, sir," added Vincent, flipping hastily over the pages of the printed list.

"Ask her number and make sure," ordered Hornblower.

Cooke had been posted six months later than he had; in the event of any combined operations he would be the senior officer.

"Yes, she's the *Cassandra*, sir," said Vincent, his eye to his telescope, as a hoist of flags went up to the frigate's foretopsail yardarm.

"She's letting fly her sheets," said Bush, with a hint of excitement in his voice. "Queer, that is, sir."

From time immemorial, dating back long before a practical flag signalling system had been devised, letting fly the sheets had been a conventional warning all the world over of the approach of a fleet.

"She's signalling again, sir," said Vincent. "It's hard to read with the flags blowing straight towards us."

"Damn it, sir," blazed Bush. "Use your eyes, or I'll know the reason why not."

"Numeral. Four. Literal. Seventeen — astern — to windward — source — sou'west," translated Longley with the signal book.

"Beat to quarters, if you please, Mr Bush. And wear the ship directly."

It was not the *Sutherland's* task to fight odds of four to one. If there were any British ships in pursuit he could throw himself in the enemy's path and reply on crippling at least two Frenchmen so as to ensure their capture, but until he knew more about the situation he must keep as clear as was possible.

"Ask 'Are any British ships at hand?'" he said to Vincent while the *Sutherland* first lay over on her side and then rose to an even keel as Bush brought her before the wind.

"Reply negative, sir," said Vincent, a minute later, through the din of clearing for action.

It was as he expected, then. The four French ships of the line had broken out of Toulon during the darkness, and while the blockading squadron had been blown away to leeward. Only the *Cassandra*, the inshore lookout, had caught sight of them, and had run before them so as to keep them under observation.

"Ask 'Where is the enemy?'" said Hornblower. It was an interesting exercise, calling for familiarity with the signal book, to frame a message so as to use the fewest number of flags.

"Six — miles — astern — bearing — nor'east," translated Longley from the code book as Vincent read out the numbers.

So the French were lying right before the wind. That might merely be because they wanted to put as great a distance as possible between them and the blockading squadron off Toulon, but it was not likely that the officer in command would run wastefully direct to leeward unless that was the course most suited to his plan. It ruled out completely any thought of Sicily or the Adriatic or the Eastern Mediterranean as objective, and it pointed directly to the Spanish coast near Barcelona and beyond that to the Straits of Gibraltar.

Hornblower on his quarterdeck set himself to try and think the thoughts of Bonaparte at the Tuileries. Beyond the Straits lay the Atlantic and the whole world. Yet it was hard to imagine any useful objective for four French ships of the line out there; the French West Indies had been nearly all reduced by English expeditions, the Cape of Good Hope was in English hands, Mauritius was about to fall. The French squadron might be intended for a mere commerce destroying raid, but in that case an equal number of frigates would be both cheaper and more effective. That was not like Bonaparte. And on the other hand exactly enough time had elapsed for the appearance of Leighton's squadron on the Catalan coast and the resultant dearth of supplies to have been reported to the Tuileries, and for orders to have been transmitted thence to Toulon. Those orders would bear the Bonaparte stamp. Three British ships on the Catalan coast? Then send four French ones against them. Man with crews picked from all the ships rotting in Toulon harbour. Load them with all the stores for which the Barcelona garrison is clamouring. Let them slip out one dark night, hack their way through to Barcelona, crush the British squadron if they can, and return if they are lucky. In a week they might be safe and sound, and if not — every omelette demands the breaking of eggs.

That must be the French plan, and he would gladly bet all he had that he was right. It only remained to decide how to defeat the French aims, and the opening moves were obvious. First, he must keep between the French and their objective, and second, it would be desirable to keep out of sight of the French, over their horizon, as long as possible — it would be a surprise to them to find a ship of considerable force, and not a mere frigate, in their path; and surprise was half a battle. In that case his first instinctive move had been correct, and the *Sutherland* was on the right course to achieve both these ends — Hornblower wondered uneasily whether his unthinking mind had jumped at once to the conclusions which his thinking mind had only just reached. All that remained to be done was to call down the *Pluto* and the *Caligula*. Three British ships of the line and a frigate could fight four French ships, picked crews or not, and Bonaparte's opinion notwithstanding.

"Cleared for action, sir," said Bush, touching his hat. His eyes were bright with the anticipation of action.

Hornblower saw in him a fighting man of the type to which he regretted he did not belong — a man who relished the prospect of a battle for its own sake, who loved physical danger, who would never stop to count the odds against him.

"Dismiss the watch below, if you please," said Hornblower. There was no object in keeping every man at his station when action was far distant, and Hornblower saw Bush's expression alter when he heard the words. They meant that the *Sutherland* was not going to plunge immediately into action against odds of four to one.

"Aye aye, sir," he said, reluctantly.

There was something to be said for Bush's point of view, for the *Sutherland* well handled might knock away so many French spars as to leave two or three at least of the French so crippled as to fall a certain prey into British hands sooner or later. It would be at the cost of her own destruction, however, and he could think

about it again later. A fair wind today might still mean a foul wind tomorrow; there might still be time for the *Pluto* and the *Caligula* to come up if only they could be informed of the proximity of their prey.

"Give me that signal book," said Hornblower to Longley.

He turned its pages, refreshed his memory regarding the wording of some of the arbitrary signals. In sending a long message there was always danger of misunderstanding. And he pulled his chin while he composed his message. Like every British officer retreating, he was running the risk of having his motives misunderstood, even though as he told himself petulantly, not even the mad British public, gorged with past victories, could condemn him for refusing action against odds of four to one. But if everything went wrong the Wellesley faction might seek a scapegoat; and the order he was about to transmit might mean the difference between success and failure, between a court of inquiry and the thanks of Parliament.

"Send this message," he said abruptly to Vincent.

Hoist after hoist the flags crept up the mast. The *Cassandra* was to set all sail she could carry, and to make use of her frigate's turn of speed to turn westward, seek out the *Pluto* and *Caligula* — Hornblower could not be exact in his description of their position — and bring them down to Barcelona. Phrase by phrase the *Cassandra* acknowledged the signal. Then there was a pause after its completion, before Vincent, glass to eye, reported.

"*Cassandra* signalling, sir. 'Submit —'."

It was the first time Hornblower had ever had that word addressed to him. He had used it so often in signals to admirals and senior captains, had included it so often in reports, and now another officer was beginning a signal to him with the word 'Submit'. It was a clear, definite proof of his growing seniority, and gave him a thrill keener even than he had known when a ship had first piped the side for him on his being posted. Yet naturally the word 'submit' ushered in a protest. Cooke of the *Cassandra* was not in the least anxious to be thus summarily dismissed from the scene of a promising action. He submitted that it would be better for the *Cassandra* to stay in sight of the French.

"Signal 'Carry out orders acknowledged'," said Hornblower, tersely.

Cooke was wrong and he was right — Cooke's protest helped his decision to crystallise. A frigate's whole function, what she was built for, was to enable the ships of the line to come into action. The *Cassandra* could not face a single broadside from one of the ships rolling along after her; if she could bring the *Pluto* and the *Caligula* into action she would have multiplied her own value an infinity of times. It was heart-warming to Hornblower to be not only convinced that he was right, but to be able to enforce the course of action he had decided upon. That six months' difference in seniority made Cooke obedient to him, and would make him obedient all their lives — if ever Cooke and he flew their flags together as admirals, he would still be the senior and Cooke the junior. He watched the *Cassandra* shake out the reefs from her topsails and bear away westwards, with all her five knots' superiority of speed being put to its best use now.

"Shorten sail, Mr Bush," said Hornblower.

The French would see the *Cassandra* vanish over their horizon; there was a chance that the *Sutherland* might keep them under observation without being seen. He stuck his telescope into his pocket and set himself to climb the mizzen rigging, sedately — even a little laboriously; it was imperilling his dignity to do so, when every hand in the ship could climb the mast quicker than he, but he had to see with his own eyes the enemy astern of him. The ship was plunging heavily in the following sea, and the wind blew keenly about his ears. It called for resolution to continue his ascent without undignified pauses, so as to appear merely as leisurely as a captain had a right to be, and yet neither timid nor awkward.

At last he found a secure perch on the mizzen topmast cross trees, and could train his glass on the heaving horizon. With her main topsail taken in the *Sutherland's* speed was considerably reduced, and it could not be long before the French appeared. He saw them soon enough — a tiny rectangle of white just lifting over the horizon, then another beside it, and another, and another.

"Mr Bush!" he roared. "Set the main tops'l again, if you please. And send Mr Savage up here."

The four French ships were rolling along in lubberly French fashion in a wide line abreast, half a mile apart — presumably their captains were afraid of collision if they drew closer — and it was a hundred to one that their lookouts would never notice the tiny dot which would be all they could see of the *Sutherland*. Savage came tumbling up beside him, hardly out of breath after his lightning scramble up the ratlines.

"Take this glass," said Hornblower. "You see the French squadron? I want to hear instantly if they alter course, or if they headreach upon us, or we on them."

"Aye aye, sir," said Savage.

He had done all he could do now, when he reached the deck again. It only remained to wait, patiently, until tomorrow. Tomorrow would see some sort of battle, hopeless or even — or if there were no battle it would mean that the French had disappeared and he would go before a court martial. He was careful to keep his expression quite composed, and to try and appear as if he did not feel the tension of waiting in the least. It would be in the old tradition if he invited his officers to dinner and whist tonight.

Chapter XX

The situation was one likely to disturb any captain's sleep, with four hostile ships of the line to windward needing to be kept under observation, and with calculations continually bobbing up from the subconscious to the conscious regarding the chances of the *Cassandra* bringing down Admiral Leighton in time to cut off the enemy. The weather conditions were unsettling, too — the wind, having worked up nearly to a gale force towards evening, diminished until midnight, increased again, and then, with the inconsequence of Mediterranean winds, began to die away steadily.

Certainly Hornblower never expected sleep. He was too excited, and his mind was too active. He lay down on his cot when the watch was changed in the evening to have a rest, and, being quite convinced that he had no chance of sleeping he naturally fell into a heavy dreamless sleep so heavy that Polwheal had to shake him by the shoulder at midnight to awaken him. He came on deck to find Bush standing by the binnacle.

"Too dark for anything to be seen, sir," said Bush, and then, excitement and exasperation getting the better of his formality, he growled, "Black as Newgate Klocker."

"Have you seen anything of the enemy?"

"I thought I did, sir, half an hour back, but nothing to be sure of. Wind's dropped a lot, too."

"Yes," said Hornblower

As so often was the case at sea, there was nothing to do but wait. Two screened lanterns swayed down on the maindeck, where the watch lay at their stations by the guns; the keen wind harped in the rigging, and the ship rose and plunged in the following sea with a lightness and grace no one would expect of her who had only seen her with the wind abeam. Nothing to do but to wait; if he stayed on deck he would only fidget and display his nervousness, so that he might as well go and conceal his nervousness in his screened-off cot.

"Send for me at once if you catch sight of the enemy," he said, with elaborate carelessness, and went back again below.

He lay on his cot with his mind busy, for he knew that having slept once there was no chance whatever of sleeping again. So perfect was this conviction that sleep ambushed him once more, leaped upon him unawares, as he lay thinking about the *Cassandra*, so that it only seemed two minutes later that he heard Polwheal speaking to him as if from another world.

"Mr Gerard's compliments, sir, an' it's beginnin' to get lighter, sir."

It called for quite an effort to rouse himself and get up from his cot; only when he was drowsily on his feet did he begin to feel pleased at having been genuinely asleep each time that Polwheal came to call him. He could picture Polwheal telling his cronies about the iron nerves of the captain, who could sleep like a child on a night when the ship was aboil with the prospect of action.

"Anything to report, Mr Gerard?" he said, as he reached the quarterdeck.

"No, sir. I had to reef down for an hour at two bells, it blew so hard. But it's dropping fast now, sir, and backing sou'easterly."

"H'm," said Hornblower.

The faintest hint of light was beginning to tinge the gloomy sky, but nothing could be seen yet more than a cable's length away. A south-easterly wind would be nearly foul for the French on their course to Barcelona; it would be dead foul for the *Pluto* and *Caligula*.

"Thought I felt the loom o' the land, sir, before the light came," said Gerard.

"Yes," said Hornblower. Their course during the night would bring them close into Cape Creux of hated memory; he picked up the slate beside the binnacle, and, calculating from the hourly readings of the log, he made their position to be some fifteen miles off the cape. If the French had held the same course during the night they would soon have Rosas Bay and comparative security under their lee — of course, if they had not, if they had evaded him in the darkness, the consequence to him did not bear thinking about.

The light was broadening fast. Eastwards the watery clouds seemed to be thinning; just above the horizon. Undoubtedly they were thinning; for a second they parted, and a speck of gold could be seen through them, just where the white-flecked sea met the sky, and a long beam of sunlight shone level over the sea.

"Land-ho!" yelled the masthead lookout, and westward they could see a bluish smudge on the horizon where the mountains of Spain loomed faintly over the curve of the world.

And Gerard glanced anxiously at his captain, took a turn or two up and down the deck, gnawed at his knuckles, and then could restrain his impatience no longer.

"Masthead, there! What do you see of the enemy?"

The pause that followed seemed ages long before the reply came.

"Northin', sir. Northin' in sight barrin' the land to looard."

Gerard renewed his anxious glance at his captain, but Hornblower, during that pause, had set his face sternly so that his expression was unmoved. Bush was coming on to the quarterdeck now; anyone could see that he was wild with anxiety. If four French ships of the line had evaded action it would mean half pay for Hornblower for life, if nothing worse. Hornblower retained his stony expression; he was proud of being able to do so.

"Put the ship about, Mr Gerard, if you please, and lay her on the starboard tack."

The French might perhaps have altered course in the darkness, and might now be lost in the centre of the Western Mediterranean, but Hornblower still did not think it likely. His officers had made insufficient allowance for the lubberliness of the unpractised French. If Gerard had had to reef topsails in the night they might well have had to heave to; and both Bush and Gerard were over-eager — during the night the *Sutherland* might have gained twenty miles on the French. By retracting his course he was confident that he would sight them again.

Confident as far as the whist-playing part of his mind was concerned, that is to say. He could not control the sick despair in his breast, nor the acceleration of his heart beats; he could only conceal them, keeping his face a mask and forcing himself to stand still instead of pacing about in his anxiety. Then he thought of an activity which would help to occupy his mind and yet not betray his nervousness.

"Pass the word for my steward," he said.

His hands were just steady enough to permit him to shave, and a chill bath under the washdeck pump gave him new vigour. He put on clean clothes and parted his lessening hair with elaborate exactitude, for under the washdeck pump he had told himself that they would sight the French again before he had completed his toilet. It was with a sense of acute disappointment that he laid down the comb when he had no more smallest excuse to continue its use, and turned to put on his coat, with no news of the French. And then, with his foot on the companion, there came a wild yell from Midshipman Parker at the masthead.

"Sail in sight! Two — three of 'em, sir. Four! It's the enemy!"

Hornblower continued his progress up the companion without faltering in his step, and he hoped people noticed it. Bush was half way up the rigging with his glass, and Gerard was pacing — almost prancing — about the quarterdeck in his delight. Observing them, Hornblower was glad he had had no childish doubts about the correctness of his actions.

"Wear the ship, if you please, Mr Bush. Lay her on the port tack."

A talkative captain might supplement the order with a brief explanation of the necessity for keeping the ship between the French and Spain, but Hornblower bit off the explanation as it rose to his lips. No unnecessary words would escape him.

"The wind's still working round southerly, sir," said Gerard.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

And it would drop a good deal, too, as the day progressed, he decided. The sun was fast breaking through the clouds, with every prospect of a warm day — a Mediterranean autumn day, with a rising barometer and only

the faintest of breezes. The hammocks had been piled in the netting, and the watch not at their stations were clattering on to the deck with buckets and holystones. The routine of the navy had to be maintained, even though there was every chance that the decks they were swabbing would be running with blood before the day was over. The men were skylarking and joking — Hornblower felt a little thrill of pride as he looked at them and remembered the sullen despondent crowd with which he had sailed. Consciousness of real achievement was some compensation for the thankless service which employed him; and it helped him to forget, too, the uneasy feeling that today or tomorrow — soon, anyway — he would know again, as the whirl of battle eddied round him, the physical fear of which he was so intolerably ashamed.

As the sun climbed up the sky the wind dropped steadily, moving round even more southerly, and the mountains of Spain came nearer and nearer and grew more and more defined as their course brought them closer to the land. Hornblower held on as long as he could, bracing up his yards as the wind veered, and then finally heaving to while the French squadron crept up over the horizon. The shift in the wind had deprived them of the windward position; if they moved down to attack him he could escape northwards so that if they pursued him they would be running towards the *Pluto* and *Caligula*, but he had no hope that they would. French ships of the line who had evaded the blockading squadron would race to accomplish their mission first, and would only fight afterwards, however tempting the bait dangled before them. If the wind shifted no farther round they could just hold their course for Barcelona, and he had not the least doubt that they would do so if not prevented. He would hang on to them and try to attack some isolated ship during the night if no help arrived.

"They're signalling a lot, sir," said Bush, his glass to his eye. They had been signalling all day, for that matter — the first flurry of bunting, Hornblower shrewdly surmised, had been occasioned by their catching sight of the *Sutherland*, unaware that she had been keeping company with them for fifteen hours. Frenchmen retained their talkative habits at sea, and no French captain was happy without messages passing back and forth along the squadron.

The *Sutherland* was clear of the Cape Creux peninsula now, and Rosas Bay was opening out on her beam. It was in these very waters, but in very different weather conditions, that the *Pluto* had lost her masts and had been towed to safety by the *Sutherland*; over there, on those green-grey slopes, had occurred the fiasco of the attack on Rosas; through his glass Hornblower thought he could discern the precipitous face of the mesa up which Colonel Claros had led his fugitive Catalans. If the wind came farther round now, the French had a refuge open to them under the guns of Rosas, where they would be safe until the British could bring up fireships and explosion vessels to drive them out again; actually it would be a more secure refuge for them than the anchorage at Barcelona.

He looked up at the pendant flapping at the masthead — the wind was certainly more southerly. It was growing doubtful whether the French would weather Palamos Point on their present tack, while he would certainly have to go about soon and stand out into the Frenchmen's wake, with all his advantages of position lost by the inconstancy of the weather. And the wind was beginning to come in irregular puffs now — a sure sign of its diminishing force. He turned his glass on the French squadron again to see how they were behaving. There was a fresh series of signals fluttering at their yardarms.

"Deck, there!" yelled Savage from the masthead.

Then there was a pause. Savage was not too sure of what he could see.

"What is it, Mr Savage?"

"I think — I'm not quite sure, sir — there's another sail, right on the horizon, sir, abaft the enemy's beam." Another sail! It might be a stray merchant ship. Otherwise it could only be Leighton's ships or the *Cassandra*.

"Keep your eye on her, Mr Savage."

It was impossible to wait for news. Hornblower swung himself up into the shrouds and climbed upwards. At Savage's side he trained his glass in the direction indicated. For a second the French squadron danced in the object glass, disregarded, as he searched.

"A bit farther round, sir. About there, I think, sir."

It was the tiniest flash of white, too permanent for a wave crest, of a different shade from the few clouds against the blue. Hornblower nearly spoke, but succeeded in limiting himself to "Ha-h'm."

"It's nearer now, sir," said Savage, telescope to eye. "I should say, sir, it's a ship's fore-royal."

There could be no doubt about it. Some ship under full sail was out there beyond the Frenchmen, and standing in to cross their wake.

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower. He said no more, but snapped his telescope shut and addressed himself to the descent.

Bush dropped to the deck to meet him from the shrouds he had ascended; Gerard, Crystal, they were all on the quarterdeck eyeing him anxiously.

"The *Cassandra*," said Hornblower, "standing in towards us."

By saying that, he was risking his dignity to demonstrate his good sight. No one could guess the new arrival to be the *Cassandra* from just that glimpse of her royals. But it could only be the *Cassandra* who would be on that course, unless his judgment were sadly at fault. Should she be revealed not to be, he would appear ridiculous — but the temptation to appear to recognise her when Savage was not even sure whether she was a ship or a cloud was too strong.

All the implications of the *Cassandra's* appearance were evident to the officers' minds at once.

"Where's the flagship and *Caligula*?" demanded Bush, of no one in particular.

"May be coming up, too," said Gerard.

"The Frogs are cut off if they are," said Crystal

With the *Pluto* and *Caligula* to seaward of them, and the *Sutherland* to landward, Palamos Point to windward, and a fluky wind veering foul, it would be only by good fortune they could escape a battle. Every eye turned towards the French squadron; they were nearly hull-up now, heading south-by-west closehailed, a three-decker in the van followed by three two-deckers, admiral's flags flying at the foremasts of the first and third ships. The broad white stripes which decorated their sides stood out sharp and clear in the pure air. If the *Pluto* and *Caligula* were far astern of the *Cassandra* the Frenchmen would still be as much in ignorance of their proximity as was the *Sutherland*, which would explain why they were still holding their course.

"Deck there!" hailed Savage. "The strange sail's *Cassandra*. I can see her tops'I now, sir."

Bush and Gerard and Crystal looked at Hornblower with a strange respect for his penetrating vision; it had been well worth risking his dignity for that.

The sails suddenly flapped loudly; a puff of wind had followed a comparative lull, and from a more southerly point than before. Bush turned to shout orders for the trimming of the sails, and the others turned instantly to watch the French reaction.

"They're going about!" said Gerard, loudly.

Undoubtedly they were doing so; on the new tack they would weather Palamos Point but would be standing out to sea nearer to the British squadron — if the British were there.

"Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "Put the ship about, if you please."

"*Cassandra's* signalling, sir," yelled Savage.

"Up with you!" snapped Hornblower to Vincent and Longley. Telescope and signal book in hand, they raced for the masthead; everyone on the quarterdeck watched their progress anxiously.

"*Cassandra's* signalling to the flagship, sir!" yelled Vincent.

So Leighton was out there over the horizon — over the Frenchmen's horizon, too, judging from their actions. Bonaparte might send out four French ships to fight three English ones, but no French admiral safely at sea and knowing the capacity of his crews far better than his emperor, would obey those orders if he could help it.

"What's she saying, boy?" hailed Hornblower.

"She's too far off to be sure, sir, but I think she's reporting the enemy's new course."

Let the Frenchmen hold that course for an hour, and they were lost, cut off from Rosas and certain to be overhauled before they reached Barcelona.

"They're going about again, by God!" said Gerard, suddenly.

Wordless, they watched the four French ships come up into the wind, and come over on to the other tack. Then they came round, farther and farther still, until in all four ships their three masts were in line; every one of them was heading straight for the *Sutherland*.

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower, watching his fate bearing down upon him: and again, "Ha-h'm."

The French lookouts must have glimpsed Leighton's mastheads. With Rosas Bay six miles under his lee and Barcelona a hundred miles almost to the windward the French admiral could have taken little time to reach a

decision in face of those strange sails on the horizon. He was dashing instantly for shelter; the single ship of the line which lay directly in his path must be destroyed if she could not be evaded.

The sick wave of excitement and apprehension which Hornblower experienced did not prevent calculations pouring into his mind. The French had six miles to go with a fair wind. He still did not know whereabouts on the circumference of the possible circle whose centre was the French flagship *Leighton* was on at the moment. But he would have twenty miles, perhaps a little more, to sail for certain, and with the wind — such wind as there was — abeam, if he were in the most advantageous position, and on his port bow if he were far astern. And shifting as it was, it would be dead foul for him in two hours. Twenty to one, Hornblower estimated the odds against the admiral being able to catch the French before they reached the protection of the guns of Rosas. Only unheard-of flukes of wind would do it, and only then if the *Sutherland* were able to knock away a good many spars before she was beaten into helplessness. So keenly had Hornblower been calculating that it was only then that he remembered, with a gulp of excitement, that the *Sutherland* was his ship, and the responsibility his, as well.

Longley came sliding down the backstay, the whole height from topmast head to the deck, his face white with excitement.

"Vincent sent me, sir. *Cassandra's* signalling, and he thinks it's 'Flag to *Sutherland*, no. 21'. Twenty-one's 'Engage the enemy', sir. But it's hard to read the flags."

"Very good. Acknowledge."

So *Leighton* at least had the moral courage to assume the responsibility for sending one ship against four. In that respect he was worthy of being Barbara's husband.

"Mr Bush," he said. "We've a quarter of an hour. See that the men get a bite to eat in that time."

"Aye aye, sir."

He looked again at the four ships all steering slowly down upon him. He could not hope to turn them back, but he could only hope to accompany them in their race to Rosas Bay. Any ship that he could totally dismast would fall a prey to *Leighton*; the others he must damage so sorely that they could not repair themselves in Rosas, which had the smallest dockyard facilities. Then they would stay there until fireships, or a large scale cutting out expedition, or a properly organised attack by land on the fortress, should result in their destruction. He thought he ought to succeed in that, but he could not bring himself to visualise what would happen to the *Sutherland* meanwhile. He swallowed hard, and set himself to plan the manoeuvres of the first encounter. The leading French ship mounted eighty guns — they were run out and grinning at him through her open ports, while each of the Frenchmen had, as though in bravado, at least four tricolour flags floating in the rigging. He looked up at the battered red ensign hanging from the peak against the blue of the sky, and then he plunged into realities.

"Hands to the braces, Mr Bush. I want the ship handled like lightning when the time comes. Mr Gerard! I'll have every gun captain flogged tomorrow who fires before his gun bears."

The men at the guns grinned; they would give of their best for him without any threat of flogging, and they knew he knew it.

Bow to bow the *Sutherland* was approaching the eighty-gun ship, unwavering; if both captains held their courses steadily there would be a collision which might sink both ships. Hornblower kept his eye on the Frenchman to detect the first signs of irresolution; the *Sutherland* was lying as near to the wind as she could, with her sails on the point of flapping. If the French captain had the sense to bring his ship to the wind the *Sutherland* could do nothing decisive against her, but the chances were he would leave his decision to the last moment and then instinctively put his ship before the wind as the easiest course with an unhandy crew. At half a mile smoke suddenly eddied round the Frenchman's bows, and a shot came humming overhead. She was firing her bow chasers, but there was no need to warn Gerard not to reply — he knew the value of that first unhurried broadside too well. With the distance halved two holes appeared in the *Sutherland's* main topsail; Hornblower did not hear the passing of the shot, so intent was he on noting the Frenchman's actions.

"Which way will he go?" said Bush, beating one hand with the other. "Which way? He's holding on farther than I thought."

The farther the better; the more hurried the Frenchman's manoeuvre the more helpless he would be. The bowsprits were only a hundred yards apart now, and Hornblower set his teeth so as not to give the instinctive

order to up helm. Then he saw a flurry on the Frenchman's decks, and her bow swung away from him — to leeward.

"Hold your fire!" Hornblower shouted to Gerard, fearful lest a premature broadside should waste the opportunity. Gerard waved his hat in reply, with a flash of white teeth in his brown face. The two ships were overlapping now, not thirty yards apart, and the Frenchman's guns were beginning to bear. In the bright sunlight Hornblower could see the flash of the epaulettes of the officers on the quarterdeck, the men at the forecastle cannonades stooping to look along the sights. This was the moment.

"Helm a-weather, slow," he said to the helmsman. A glance at Bush was enough — he was anticipating this order. The *Sutherland* began to wear round slowly, beginning her turn to cross the Frenchman's stern before the two ships were alongside. Bush began to bellow the orders to the men at the braces and the headsail sheets, and as he did so the Frenchman's broadside burst into thunder and flame and smoke. The *Sutherland* shook and jarred with the impact of the shot; one of the mizzen shrouds above Hornblower's head parted with a twang at the same moment as a hole appeared in the quarterdeck bulwark near him amid a shower of splinters. But the *Sutherland's* bow was already almost touching the Frenchman's stern. Hornblower could see an eddy of panic on her quarterdeck.

"Keep her at that!" he shouted to the helmsman.

Then with a series of heavy crashes, one following another as the *Sutherland* crossed her enemy's stern and each section of guns bore in turn, she fired her broadside into her, heeling slightly at each discharge, with every shot tearing its destructive course from end to end of the ship. Gerard came leaping on to the quarterdeck, having run down the whole length of the maindeck, keeping pace with the firing. He bent eagerly over the nearest carronade, altered its elevation with a quick twist of the screw, and jerked the lanyard, with a wave of the hand to the other gun captains to do the same. The carronades roared out, sweeping the Frenchman's quarterdeck with grape on top of the roundshot. Hornblower saw the officers there dashed to the deck like lead soldiers, saw rigging parting, and the big stern windows of the French ship disappear like a curtain jerked from its pole.

"That's given him a bellyful," said Bush.

That was the sort of broadside which won battles. That single discharge had probably knocked half the fight out of the Frenchmen, killing and wounding a hundred men or more, dismounting half a dozen guns. In a single-ship duel she would strike her flag in less than half an hour. But now she had drawn ahead while the *Sutherland* was completing her turn, and the second Frenchman, the one with the rear-admiral's flag, was loose on the weather quarter. She had all plain sail set, and was overhauling them fast; in a moment she would be able to rake the *Sutherland* as the *Sutherland* had raked her consort.

"Starboard!" said Hornblower to the helmsman. "Stand to your guns on the port side!" His voice rang uncannily loud in the stillness following the firing.

The Frenchman came on undeviating, not disdaining a broadside to broadside duel, but not attempting to manoeuvre, especially against an enemy who had proved himself alert, at a time when manoeuvring meant delay in gaining the shelter of Rosas. The ships inclined together, growing nearer and nearer as the Frenchman headreached upon the *Sutherland* and the *Sutherland's* course approached hers. From the *Sutherland's* deck they could hear the excited orders which the French officers were shouting to their men, trying to restrain their eagerness until the decisive moment.

They were not entirely successful all the same, as first one gun and then another went off as excitable gunners let fly — where the shots went Heaven alone knew. A word from Hornblower swung the *Sutherland* round till she lay parallel to her opponent, and as she steadied on her new course Hornblower waved his hand to Gerard as a signal to open fire. There was not more than half a second between the two broadsides; the *Sutherland*, heaving up her side to the recoil of her guns, heaved over farther still to the impact of the shot. As the smoke came billowing up round her the air was filled with the splintering crash of the shot striking her sides; there were screams and cries from below in proof of the damage received.

"Keep at it now, lads! Fire as you will!" shouted Gerard.

Those hours of drill bore fruit now. The sponges were thrust into the reeking gun muzzles, and the moment they were withdrawn the powder and the rammer and the shot were ready for insertion. Almost simultaneously the gun trucks rumbled as the crews flung themselves on the tackles and ran the guns up;

almost simultaneously the guns roared out. This time there was a perceptible and measurable interval before the Frenchman replied in a straggling and irregular salvo. The gentle wind blowing on the engaged quarter kept the ship engulfed in the smoke; the gunners labouring on the main-deck were as vague as in a dense fog to Hornblower, but the masts and sails of the Frenchman still stood out clear against the blue sky. The *Sutherland's* third broadside followed close on the heels of the Frenchman's second.

"Three to her two, as usual," said Bush, coolly. A shot struck the mizzen mast bitts and sprayed the deck with splinters. "She's still drawing ahead, sir."

It was hard to think dearly in this frightful din, with death all round. Captain Morris had his marines all along the port side gangway firing away at everyone visible on the other ship's decks; the two ships were within easy musket shot. The *Sutherland's* broadsides were growing irregular now, as the most efficient crews worked their guns faster than the others, while the Frenchman was delivering a running fire in which there were occasional louder explosions to be heard when several guns went off together. It was like the clattering of the hoofs of four coach horses on a hard road, sometimes in unison for a space, and then spreading out again.

"I fancy his fire's slackening, sir," said Bush. "It doesn't surprise me."

The *Sutherland* had not suffered mortally yet, judging by the number of dead on the maindeck. She could still fight for a long time yet.

"See his main mast, sir!" yelled Bush.

His main topmast was bowing forward, slow and dignified, with the topgallant mast bowing further forward still. Through the smoke they could see the main mast inclining aft. Then all dignity left the soaring mass of spars and canvas. It hung S-shaped in the air for a breathless second, and then tumbled down with a rush, fore and mizzen topmasts falling with it. Hornblower felt a grim satisfaction at the sight — there were no spare main masts to be had in Rosas. The *Sutherland's* crew cheered piercingly, and hastened to fire in a few last shots as their ship drew ahead of her crippled opponent. A minute later the din of the firing ceased, the tiny breeze blew away the smoke, and the sun came shining through upon the littered deck again.

Aft lay their late antagonist, a great mass of wreckage trailing alongside, the second lower deck gun from the bow pointing out of its port at an impossible angle of elevation to show she had one gun at least knocked useless. A quarter of a mile ahead was the first ship they had fired into; she had paid no attention to the duel behind her but had continued under all sail for the safety of Rosas Bay, just like a Frenchman. And beyond her, sweeping round the horizon, were the cruel mountains of Spain, and the white roofs of Rosas were clearly visible above the golden shore. The *Sutherland* was close to the wide mouth of the bay; half way between her and Rosas lay two gigantic beetles on the flat blue surf ace — gunboats coming out of Rosas under sweeps. And close astern of the crippled ship came the other two ships of the French squadron, the three-decker with the vice-admiral's flag and a two-decker in her wake. It was the moment for decision.

"Masthead there!" hailed Hornblower. "Can you see anything of the flagship?"

"No, sir. Nothing but *Cassandra*."

Hornblower could see the *Cassandra's* royals himself, from the deck, pearly white on the horizon; the *Pluto* and *Caligula* must still be nearly twenty miles away — possibly becalmed. The tiny breeze which was urging the *Sutherland* into the bay was probably a sea breeze; the day was hot enough for that. Leighton would hardly arrive in time to take part in this battle. Hornblower could put his ship about now, and tack into safety, beating off the two enemies if they interfered with him, or he could throw himself into their path; and with every second carrying him a yard nearer Rosas he must decide quickly. If he fought, there was the faintest possible chance that Leighton might be brought up in time to pick up the cripples, but so faint a chance as to be negligible.

The *Sutherland* would be destroyed, but her enemies would be so knocked about as to be detained in Rosas for days or even weeks. And that was desirable, because it would be several days before preparations could be made to attack them in their anchorage, and during those days there would always be the chance of their escaping — three of them, at least — from Rosas as they had escaped from Toulon.

Hornblower balanced in his mind the loss of a seventy-four to England against the certain loss of four ships of the line to France. And then he knew, suddenly, that his cogitation had been wasted. If he withdrew, he would all the rest of his life suspect himself of having done so out of cowardice, and he foresaw with clarity the years of mental uneasiness it would bring. He would fight whether it was the right thing or not, and as he reached

that decision he realised with relief that it was the correct course as well. One more second he wasted, looking up at the blue sky which he loved, and then he gulped down his muddled emotions.

"Lay the ship on the port tack, if you please, Mr Bush," he said.

The crew cheered again, the poor fools, when they saw that they were about to face the rest of the French, even though it meant the certain death of half of them at least. Hornblower felt pity — or was it contempt? — for them and their fighting madness or thirst for glory. Bush was as bad as any of them, judging by the way his face had lit up at the order. He wanted the Frenchman's blood just because they were Frenchmen, and thought nothing of the chance of being a legless cripple if he were granted the chance of smashing a few French legs first.

The crippled two-decker with the rear-admiral's flag came drifting down on them — this sea breeze would push all wrecks into Rosas Bay under the guns of the fortress — and the men working lackadaisically at clearing the wreckage ran from their work when they looked up and saw the *Sutherland's* guns swinging around towards them. The *Sutherland* fired three broadsides into her with hardly a gun in reply before she drifted clear — another fifty or so dead Frenchmen for Bush, thought Hornblower, viciously, as the rumble of the gun trucks died away and the men stood waiting once more, silent now, beside their guns. Here came the three-decker, now, beautiful with her towering canvas, hideous with her grinning guns. Even at that moment Hornblower marked, with professional interest, the decided tumble-home of her sides, much greater than English shipwrights allowed.

"Let her pay off slowly, Mr Bush," he said. He was going to set his teeth into the three-decker like a bulldog.

Round came the *Sutherland*, slowly, slowly. Hornblower saw that his last manoeuvre with the *Sutherland* was going to be as well timed as ever he could wish. She was on the same course as the three-decker at exactly the moment the latter drew up opposite to her; the guns of both ships bore simultaneously, a hundred yards apart, and burst simultaneously into thunder and smoke.

In the earlier encounters time had seemed to pass slowly. Now it seemed to be passing fast, the infernal din of the broadsides seeming almost unintermitting, the figures hurrying about in the smoke seeming to be moving twice as fast as normally.

"Edge in closer on her," said Hornblower to the helmsman, and then, his last order given, he could abandon himself to the mad inconsequence of it all. Shots seemed to be tearing up the deck all around him, smashing great gashes in the planking. With the clear unreality of a nightmare he saw Bush fall, with blood running from the stump of one leg where a foot was missing. Two men of the surgeon's crew bent over him to carry him below.

"Leave me on deck," said Bush. "Let go of me, you dogs."

"Take him away," said Hornblower. The harshness of his voice was a piece with the madness of everything else, for he was glad to be able to order Bush into a place of safety where he might yet live.

The mizzen topmast fell, and spars and blocks and tackle came raining all round him — death falling from the heavens as well as hurtling in from overside, but still he lived. Now the foretopsail yard was shot through in the slings; dimly through the smoke he could see Hooker leading a party aloft to repair it. Out of the tail of his eye he saw something new and strange looming through the smoke — it was the fourth French ship, coming up on the *Sutherland's* disengaged side. He found himself waving his hat and shrieking some nonsense or other to his men, who cheered him back as they brought the starboard side guns into action. The smoke was thicker, and the din more tremendous, and the whole ship throbbing with every gun in action.

Little Longley was at his side now, white faced, miraculously alive after the fall of the mizzen topmast.

"I'm *not* frightened. I'm *not* frightened," the boy said; his jacket was torn clean across the breast and he was trying to hold it together as he denied the evidence of the tears in his eyes.

"No, sonny, of course you're not," said Hornblower.

Then Longley was dead, hands and breast smashed into pulp. There was a maindeck gun not run out, he saw as he looked away from Longley's body. He was about to call attention to the abandoned gun, when he noticed its slaughtered crew lying in fragments round it, and he saw that there were no longer any men to spare to get it into action again. Soon there would be more guns than one out of action. The very carronade beside him had but three men to man it — so had the next one, and the next. Down on the maindeck there

were marines carrying powder and shot; Gerard must have set them to that work, and the powder boys must be mostly dead. If only this din would stop, and allow him to think!

It seemed to him as if at that the din redoubled. Foremast and mainmast came down together with a splintering crash audible high above the gunfire, the mass of wreckage tumbling over the starboard side. He ran forward, to find Hooker there already hard at work with a group of men drawn from the blinded guns hacking away at the rigging to cut it clear. The three-feet-thick end of the broken mainmast had smashed a gun carriage and killed the crew during its fall. Shots from the two-decker on that side were smashing through the men at work, and already smoke was pouring up from the canvas hanging over the side where the flame of the guns had set it on fire. Hornblower took an axe from the hand of a dead man and fell to work hacking and cutting along with the others. When the last rope was cut, and the flaring mass had dropped overside, and hasty inspection showed that the timber of the ship had not caught fire, he swept the sweat from his forehead and looked around the ship from his new point of view.

The whole deck was heaped and littered with dead men and fragments of dead men. The wheel was gone, the masts, the bulwarks were beaten flat, the very hatch coamings indicated by a mere fringe of splinters. But the guns which could still be worked were still firing, each manned by its attenuated crew. On either side the enemy loomed through the smoke, but the three-decker had lost two topmasts and the two-decker her mizzen mast, and their sails were in shreds and their rigging hanging in festoons, seen dimly in the smoke. The firing was as fierce as ever. He wondered dully by what miracle he survived to walk through the tempest of shot back to his post on the quarterdeck.

Some puff of wind was altering the relative position of the ships. The three-decker was swinging round, coming closer; Hornblower was already running forward down the port side, with seeming feet of lead, when the three-decker's starboard bow came with a grinding bump against the *Sutherland's* port bow. Frenchmen were gathering to leap down on to the *Sutherland's* deck, and Hornblower drew his sword as he ran.

"Boarders!" he yelled. "All hands repel boarders! Boom them off, there, Hooker, Crystal."

High above his head towered the three-decker. Musketry was spattering along her bulwarks, and Hornblower heard bullets rapping into the deck around him. Men with swords and pikes in their hands were scrambling down the three-decker's sides, and more were spewing out of the middle-deck gunport on to the *Sutherland's* gangway. Hornblower found himself caught up in a wave of British sailors with cutlasses and pikes, rammers and handspikes, men naked to the waist and grey with powder smoke. Everyone was jostling and slipping and struggling. He was flung up against a dapper little French lieutenant with his hat rakishly awry. For the moment his arms were pinned to his sides by the press, and the Frenchman was struggling to pull a pistol from his waistband.

"Rends-toi," he spluttered, as the weapon came free, but Hornblower brought up his knee and the Frenchman's head went back in agony and he dropped the pistol.

And the three-decker was swinging away clear again, urged by the puff of wind and the thrust of the spar Crystal and Hooker and their party were pushing against her side. Some of the Frenchmen leaped back to the ship. Some leaped into the sea. A dozen who were left dropped their weapons — one of them too late to check the pike which was thrust into his stomach. The puff of wind was still blowing, drifting the French ships away from the dismasted *Sutherland* and rolling away the smoke. The sun came out and shone upon them and the hideous decks as though from behind a cloud, and the din of the firing ended magically as the guns ceased to bear.

Sword in hand, Hornblower stood while the men about him secured the prisoners. The cessation of the noise had not brought him the relief he had hoped for — on the contrary, he was amazed and stupid, and in his weariness he found it a desperate effort to think clearly. The wind had drifted the *Sutherland* well inside the bay, and there was no sign at all of the *Pluto* and *Caligula* — only the *Cassandra*, hull down over the horizon, a helpless spectator of the fight. The two battered French ships, almost as helpless as the *Sutherland*, thanks to the damage they had received aloft, were floating a short distance off; down the side of the three-decker, dribbling from the scuppers, Hornblower noticed a dark streak — human blood.

The two-decker was still swinging round; her shattered side was out of sight, now she was presenting her stern, and now her other side to the *Sutherland's* bow. Hornblower watched her stupidly. And then-a

bellowing roar, and her broadside came tearing into the *Sutherland*. A cloud of splinters flew from the shattered stump of the foremast, and the gun beside Hornblower rang like a bell to a glancing shot.

"Oh, stop!" muttered Hornblower. "For God's sake!"

The men on the *Sutherland's* deck were dragging themselves to the guns again. Gerard was nowhere to be seen, but Hooker — a good boy, that — was walking along the main deck apportioning the men to the guns so that some at least might be worked. But the men were faint with fatigue, and at present no gun would bear, while the dismasted *Sutherland* could do nothing to save herself. Another broadside, ripping and tearing through the ship. Hornblower became conscious of a faint undercurrent of noise — the feeble chorus of the wounded men huddled in every corner of the ship. The gunboats were working round cautiously with their sweeps to take up a position under the *Sutherland's* stern; soon they would be firing their forty-two pounders into her on the water line. Sun and blue sea and blue sky; the grey-green mountains of Spain, the golden beach and white houses of Rosas — Hornblower looked round him at them all, despairingly, and it was agony to look. Another broadside; Hornblower saw two men knocked into a bloody mess at Hooker's side.

"Strike," he said to himself. "We must strike."

But the *Sutherland* had no colours flying that she could strike, and Hornblower's dazed mind wrestled with this problem as he walked aft. The forty-two pounder in one of the gun boats boomed out loudly, and Hornblower felt the jar as the shot smashed into the ship's side below him. Hooker was on the quarterdeck now, and Crystal, and Howell the carpenter.

"There's four feet of water in the well, sir," said this last, "an' no pump left."

"Yes," said Hornblower, dully. "I shall surrender."

He read agreement in the grey faces of his officers, but they said nothing. If only the *Sutherland* would sink under them the problem would solve itself but that would be too much to hope for. She would only grow more and more waterlogged, sinking as each deck in turn was submerged, while the pitiless cannonade would continue. It might be as much as twenty-four hours before she sank completely and in that time the little wind would have drifted her aground under the guns of Rosas. All he could do was to surrender. He thought of the other British captains who had found themselves in similar positions. Thompson of the *Leander* and the captain of the *Swiftsure* and the unfortunate man under Saumarez' command in Algeciras Bay; they, too, had hauled down their flags after a long fight against heavy odds.

Somebody was hailing from the two-decker; he could not understand what was said, but it must be a demand to surrender.

"Oui," he shouted back. "Oui."

For answer there came another broadside, smashing home with a splintering of timber and to the accompaniment of a shriek from below.

"Oh God!" said Hooker.

Hornblower realised that he must have misunderstood the question, and with the realisation came a solution of the difficulty. He ran as fast as his stiff legs would carry him down to the indescribable chaos which represented what was left of his cabin. Hurriedly he turned over the litter there, while the men at the guns watched him expressionless as animals. He found what he sought at last, and came up on the quarterdeck with his arms full of it.

"Here," he said, giving it to Crystal and Howell. "Hang that over the side."

It was the tricolour flag he had had made to deceive the batteries at Llanza. At sight of it the men in the gunboats bent to their oars to propel their craft alongside, while Hornblower stood with the sun shining on his bare head waiting for them. They would take his sword of honour away from him. And the other sword of honour was still in pawn to Duddingstone the ship chandler, and he would never be able to redeem it now, with his career wrecked. And the shattered hull of the *Sutherland* would be towed in triumph under the guns of Rosas — how long would it be before the Mediterranean fleet came down to avenge her, to retake her from the captors, or burn her in one vast pyre along with her shattered conquerors? And Maria was going to bear him a child, whom he would never see during all the years of his captivity. And Lady Barbara would read of his capture in the newspapers — what would she think of his surrendering? But the sun was hot on his head, and he was very weary.



Hornblower's Charitable Offering

C. S. Forester
(1941)

HMS SUTHERLAND of two decks and seventy-four guns, Captain Horatio Hornblower, was on her way north from Gibraltar to her rendezvous in the Western Mediterranean. To port lay the coast of Spain; to starboard, and barely in sight, just peeping over the horizon, lay the hilltops of one of the Balearic Islands, Ibiza. Spain was now an ally of England, and it was no business of the Sutherland's to intercept Spanish trade or fight Spanish ships of war. Only the French were now enemies, and the French conquest of Spain had not progressed as far south yet as Valencia. It was to take a hand in the struggle in Catalonia that the Sutherland - at least so Hornblower suspected - was being sent north. Meanwhile he had little enough to worry him; a full crew, a wellfound ship, and nothing special to do until he reached his rendezvous. It was a period of transition, from one duty to another, and Hornblower revelled in the feeling of suspended animation and freedom. The Sutherland was laying over her ponderous bulk as she stood to the north close-hauled to a fine easterly wind, and Hornblower paced his deck breathing deep of the crisp air and the healing sunshine.

It was the look-out at the foretop masthead who broke into the happy neutrality of his mood.

"Deck, there! If you please, sir, there's something adrift right ahead; might just be wreckage, sir - can't rightly tell yet."

"Right ahead?"

"Aye aye, sir. We're coming right up to it. Might be a raft, sir - think I can see a man - two men, perhaps, sir."

There was an obvious explanation of the presence of a raft with men on it at sea in wartime - they might be the survivors of a battle to the death, here where the struggle for the mastery of the sea was being fought out. The Sutherland could run down to investigate without fear; there was a curious shifting sensation in Hornblower's skull when he thought of the numerous inventors who were putting forward suggestions by which small boats could explode by charges of gunpowder against the side of a ship of the line. If ever they

should succeed in their wild schemes the day of the battleship's magnificent security would be over and instead the utmost caution would be necessary in approaching strange objects. But that was all nonsense, of course, and Hornblower shrugged it away from him carelessly; the ridiculous train of thought had occupied his mind during all the minutes necessary to raise the strange object to within sight of the deck.

"It's a raft, sure enough, sir," said Lieutenant Bush, glass to eye, and gazing across the sunlit water. "There's one man waving, and I think there's another one there, too."

"Heave to when you get to wind'ard of her," ordered Hornblower.

Bush took the Sutherland up close to the strange object, and hove to neatly.

"Queer sort of raft," he said, peering over the dancing water as the Sutherland's leeway carried her down to it. It was nothing more than a couple of logs bound crudely together; the waves broke over it so that the two men on it were to some extent always submerged. One man was kneeling, holding a crude paddle in his hand, while the other lay with occasionally even his head buried under the water which washed over his body.

"Heave 'em a line," said Hornblower.

But even the man who was kneeling was too weak for the deftly-cast rope to be of use to him. He fumbled with it and lost his grip, his head falling forward with exhaustion. The quarterboat had finally to be hoisted out and the two men brought on board in a bos'un's chair swung from the main-yard arm. They lay there brown and naked, like the Indians of San Salvador, and most desperately emaciated; every bone was standing out clear and well defined, as though straining against the leathery skin stretched over it. Their long lank hair and beards dripped water on the deck. One lay motionless, the other held out a feeble hand to them as they stared down at them; with a croaking voice he pointed down his throat.

"Thirsty, poor devil," said Bush; a gesture from Hornblower had already sent one of the hands running for water.

The castaways drank eagerly, and to Hornblower and Bush it was as if a miracle were being performed before their eyes, almost like the raising of the dead, to see the astonishing effect of the water upon them. They revived magically; the one who had lain upon the deck, and whose head had had to be supported to allow him to drink, sat up. A death's head smile split his lean face.

"I expect they're hungry as well," said Bush. "They look as if they might be."

It only called for a nod from Hornblower for somebody to go and seek for food for them.

"Who are you?" asked Hornblower.

"François," said the stronger one. He had blue eyes which looked oddly out of place in his brown face.

"Frenchies, by God!" said Bush.

"Where do you come from?" asked Hornblower, repeating himself in limping French when he saw he was not understood.

The blue-eyed one extended an arm like a stick towards the Balearics to windward.

"Cabrera," he said. "We were prisoners."

Hornblower and Bush exchanged glances and Bush whistled - Bush could at least understand the gesture and the first word of the reply. Cabrera was a previously uninhabited islet which the Spaniards were using as a camp for their French prisoners of war.

The dark-eyed castaway was speaking rapidly in a hoarse voice.

"You won't send us back there, monsieur?" he said. "Make us your prisoners instead. We cannot -"

He became unintelligible with weakness and excitement. Bush, observant as usual, was yet puzzled by what he could see.

"I can understand their being thirsty," he said, "but they couldn't have got as thin as that just coming from Cabrera. They could have paddled that raft of theirs here in a couple of days, even without a wind."

"When did you leave Cabrera?" asked Hornblower.

"Yesterday."

Hornblower translated to Bush.

"That sunburn of theirs is months old," said Bush. "The fellows can't have worn a pair of breeches in weeks. There must be funny doings in Cabrera."

"Tell me," said Hornblower to the castaways, "how did you become - like this?"

It was a long story, the longer as it was interrupted while the castaways ate and drank, and while Hornblower translated the more sensational parts to Bush.

There were twenty-thousand of the poor devils - mainly the army which had surrendered at Baylen, but prisoners taken in a hundred other skirmishes as well - who had annoyed their Spanish captors inexpressibly while they were kept on the mainland by their continual attempts to escape. Finally the Spaniards had taken the whole twenty-thousand and dumped them down on the island of Cabrera, a mere rock of only a few square miles. That had been two years ago; there was no need for any Spanish garrison on the island itself - British sea power made it impossible for any French ship to attempt a rescue, and there was nothing with which to make boats except for rare driftwood. For two years these twenty-thousand miserable wretches had lived on the rock, scraping holes for shelter from the summer sun and winter storms.

"There are only two wells, monsieur," said the blue-eyed Frenchman, "and sometimes they run dry. But often it rains."

Hornblower's mathematical mind dealt with the time-problem of supplying twenty-thousand men with water from two wells. Each man would be lucky if he got one drink a day, even if the wells never ran dry.

Of course there was no fuel on the island - not one of the twenty-thousand had seen a spark of fire for two years, and no clothing had survived two years of exposure and wear.

The Spaniards landed food for them at intervals, which was eaten raw.

"It is never enough, monsieur," explained the Frenchman - Hornblower was acquainted with Spanish methods, and could understand - "and sometimes it does not come at all. Because of the wind, monsieur. When the wind is in the east, monsieur, we starve."

Bush was looking at the chart and the sailing directions for the Western Mediterranean.

"That's right, sir," he announced. "There's only one landing beach, and that's on the east. It's impracticable to land in easterly winds. It mentions the two wells and says there's no wood."

"They are supposed to bring food twice a week, monsieur," said the Frenchman. "But sometimes it has been three weeks before they have been able to put it ashore."

"Three weeks!"

"Yes, monsieur."

"But - but -"

"Those of us who are wise have little stores hidden away in the rocks for those times, monsieur. We have to defend them, of course. And as for the others - There is usually plenty of one kind of food for them to eat, monsieur. There are not twenty-thousand of us by now."

Hornblower looked out through the cabin window at the dull smudge on the horizon where, in this enlightened nineteenth century, actual cannibalism was still taking place.

"God bless us all!" said Bush, solemnly.

"There had been no food for a week when we escaped yesterday, monsieur. But easterly winds always bring driftwood, as well as famine. We found two tree-trunks, Marcel and I. There were many who wanted to take the chance, monsieur. But we are strong, stronger than most on the island."

The Frenchman looked almost with complacency down at his skinny arms.

"Yes indeed we are," said Marcel. "Even if your ship had not seen us, we might have reached Spain alive. I suppose our Emperor has now conquered all the mainland?"

"Not yet," replied Hornblower briefly. He was not prepared at short notice to try to explain the vast chaos which was acquiring the name of the Peninsular War.

"The Spaniards still hold Valencia," he said. "If you had managed to get there they would only have sent you back to Cabrera."

The Frenchmen looked at each other; they would have grown voluble again, but Hornblower checked them testily.

"Go and try to sleep," he said, and he stamped out of the cabin.

Up on deck the air seemed purer, after the foul pictures which the Frenchmen's stories had called up in his mind. Hornblower loathed human suffering; he walked his deck tormented by the thought of the starving Frenchmen on Cabrera. This brisk Levanter, blowing from the east, would go on blowing for another week at least, if he could read weather signs - and he thought he could. It was none of his business to worry about

French prisoners of war in Spanish hands. Cabrera lay out of his course. British government stores should be conserved strictly for the use of his own ship. He would have the devil's own time explaining to his admiral if he did anything to relieve the misery on Cabrera. No sensible man would attempt it; every sensible man would shrug his shoulders and do his best to forget about this whole beastly business of Frenchmen devouring their own dead among the rocks of Cabrera. Yet by laying the Sutherland as close to the wind as she would lie he could just fetch the island now. Any further delay would mean a long beat to windward. Hornblower crossed the deck and gave his orders, and without another word, solely by the look in his eye, he dared his lieutenants to question him as to his intentions. Then he went back to his walk, pacing up and down, up and down, trying to think out a method of how to land stores on a surf-beaten beach.

That queer mathematical ability of his was working to its utmost. Into his mind there came a whole series of ballistic formulae. Scientific gunnery was in its infancy, in its utter babyhood; it was only in the last few years that the arsenal authorities at Woolwich had begun to experiment practically in the endeavour to obtain data as to the behaviour of the weapons they turned out in such numbers. And most of their attention had - been devoted to the big ships' guns and not to the little 6-pounder boat gun whose employment was contemplated by Hornblower. And besides that, he was intending to use the 6-pounder in a way that had never been contemplated by the Woolwich authorities or by anyone else at all, as far as he knew. So far, nobody had thought of employing a gun to bridge a gap with a line as he was thinking of doing. If his plan did not succeed, he would have to think of another one - but he thought it was worth trying.

He broke off his train of thought to issue a whole series of orders to his puzzled subordinates. The blacksmith was given orders to forge an iron rod with a loop at the end and to wrap it with oakum and twine to fit the bore of the long boat's 6-pounder. The bos'un had to get out 100 fathoms of the finest hemp line that the ship possessed and work it into utter flexibility by straining every inch round a belaying-pin and then coil it away with perfect symmetry into one of the oaken fire-buckets. The cooper and his mates were set to work breaking out beef casks, half emptying them, and then heading them up securely. A puzzled bos'un's mate was set to work with half a dozen hands linking these twenty half-empty casks into an immense chain, like beads on a string where every bead was represented by a cask containing 2-hundredweight of meat connected with its fellows by 60 yards of cable. The deck of the Sutherland presented a pretty tangle to any possible observer by the time all these operations were well started. And through the gathering evening the Sutherland held her course steadily, closehauled for Cabrera.

At dawn she was there, and the earliest hint of daylight found her nosing her way cautiously towards the beach, from which even here, with the wind in the wrong direction, could be heard the thunderous beat of the surf.

"That's the dagos' victualling-ship, I'll lay a guinea," said Bush with his glass to his eye.

It was a small brig, hull down and hove to, over on the horizon.

"Yes," said Hornblower - the speech deserved no more ample rejoinder. He was much too occupied looking through his own glass at the craggy beach of rock on which the Spaniards had seen fit to place twenty-thousand men. It was just a grey fragment, one single ridge projecting like a tooth from the blue Mediterranean, its steep slopes unrelieved by any trace of green. Around its foot the rollers broke into white fountains of spray - Hornblower could see the waves reaching 20 or 30 feet up the cliffs as they beat upon them - save in the centre where a long flurry of foam revealed the landing beach and all its dangers. It was a wicked enough place.

"Can't blame the dagos for not landing stores here in an easterly wind," said Bush, and this time he received no answer at all.

"Hoist out the long-boat," Hornblower rasped; when approaching a difficult task he would take out no insurance by minor politeness for his subordinates' sympathy in the event of failure.

The bos'un's mates twittered on their pipes while Harrison, the bos'un, repeated the order in his resounding bellow. The tackles were manned and the long-boat was swung up from her chocks and hoisted overside. The long-boat's crew stood fending her off as the Sutherland surged in the choppy sea.

"I'm going in her, Mr Bush," said Hornblower briefly.

He took hold of one of the falls and lowered himself down; his unathletic figure dangled in ungainly fashion while the longboat's crew fell over each other in their haste to protect his fall. It was a source of continual

inward disturbance to Hornblower that the poorest topman in his whole ship was better on a rope than he was himself. He managed just well enough, and with only a small loss of dignity, with a 3-foot drop as a result of his not quite correctly estimating the relative movements of the ship and the boat. Somebody picked up his hat and gave it to him and he clapped it on his head again.

"Give way," he snapped, and the long-boat crept under oars over the surging sea towards the distant beach. Now, with his glass, Hornblower could see little figures pouring down to the water's edge on Cabrera. They were all as naked as the two men he picked up yesterday; Hornblower wondered what it was like to climb about with a bare skin over the jagged rocks of Cabrera; he wondered what it was like to try and live naked through a winter storm with only a hollow in a rock for shelter. He felt sick with the thought of all the horror and misery which that jagged lump of rock must have witnessed for the past two years. He was glad he was going to make this small attempt at relief. He put away his glass and walked forward between the rowers to where the 6-pounder was mounted in the bows.

At his command, one of the crew broke open a paper cartridge, poured the powder into the muzzle of the gun and rammed the wad home upon the charge. Another hand knotted the line to the queer missile which the blacksmith had prepared. Hornblower dropped the thing into the muzzle of the gun and rammed it down. He twirled the elevating screw; the wedges slid from under the breech of the gun, and the muzzle cocked itself up as the gun rested at its fullest elevation. He gauged the strength of the wind and glanced round him trying to predict the motion of the boat in the choppy sea. Then he pulled the lanyard, and the gun roared out.

At his elbow the line suddenly came to life, whirring viciously as it shot from the tub; the smoke vanished just in time to give him a glimpse of the line hanging in an arc in the air before the projectile fell into the surf and the line after it. A little groan went up from the crew of the long-boat- they had been taking the usual childlike interest in the novelty of all this, to be expected of sailors welcoming any break in the monotony of a long voyage.

"Get that line in again," said Hornblower sitting down on a thwart. "Make those coils absolutely smooth." That was one comforting piece of knowledge which the study of scientific gunnery had given him; because one first shot had failed was no proof at all that the twentieth would not succeed. And this time line and projectile would be wet and heavier; the gun would be hot and would react differently; the likelihood that the boat would be at the same angle to the horizon on the waves was very remote; and in any case the trial shot had indicated that they must move a little farther up the coast to make the proper allowance for the wind. He ordered a double wad to be put on top of the new charge so as to keep the wet projectile from damping the powder while the long-boat crept a few yards north along the edge of the surf.

When the gun was fired again, it looked for a second as if the shot would be successful, but it dropped into the surf 10 yards from the waiting crowd - and for all practical purposes 10 yards were as effective as 100. The third and fourth and fifth shots failed by even wider margins. It began to look to Hornblower as if the initial velocity were insufficient - perhaps the pull of the line as it ran out was stronger than he had allowed for. At the risk of straining the gun, he could increase the powder charge; there was an additional risk in that because the line might break and the projectile fly free, in which case it would go clean through somebody in the crowd on the beach. But when the sixth and seventh shots also failed, Hornblower decided to take the risk. He put in a charge and a half of powder and rammed it well down. Then he ordered the whole crew aft as far as possible into the stern sheets of the boat - if the gun should burst, he wanted only a minimum of casualties, and it seemed perfectly logical to him that he should take the risk of pulling the lanyard himself instead of ordering someone else to do so.

He took a last glance down at the line and then jerked the lanyard. The gun went off with a crash which jerked the whole long-boat sternwards, and the gun itself leapt in its carriage with a clatter. But the stout metal held firm, and the projectile, trailing its curved arc of line, cleared the water's edge and dropped into the waiting crowd.

Communication was established, but it was a frail enough bond, because those madmen on shore had no sooner grabbed the line than they began to haul it in. Hornblower cursed himself for not having seen this development; he snatched up his speaking trumpet and groped wildly in his mind for a French phrase which might be the equivalent of "Avast heaving!" or "Belay!"

"Doucement! Doucement!" he roared.

He waved his arms frantically and danced about in the bows of the boat. Perhaps the wind carried his words down to the beach, or perhaps his gestures were understood. Someone was taking charge of proceedings; there was a swirl in the crowd and the line ceased to run out. Hornblower swung the long-boat cautiously round and pulled slowly towards the Sutherland, paying out the line behind him until he could signal for his gig and row back to his ship to supervise the rest of the operation.

The Immense string of half-empty casks was dropped into the sea, and the launch took it in tow and began to drag it slowly up to the long-boat. Half empty, the casks rode high in the water. That would get them through the worst of the surf, and if the Frenchmen pulled in fast enough, most of the casks could be expected to reach land still containing most of their contents and if the worst came to the worst, the contents would be thrown up on to the beach soon enough. Meat which had already been six months in a cask would not be much spoiled by an additional immersion in sea water.

Hornblower dashed back into his gig to supervise the final operation. The heavier line was bent on to the light one which had been thrown on shore, and Hornblower stood up again with his speaking trumpet.

"Tirez! Tirez!" he yelled, and waved the instrument at the crowd.

They understood him and began to pull in. The heavy rope crept in after the line, and then the long string of casks followed. Hornblower watched their course anxiously enough, as the big ungainly objects, black in the white foam under the dazzling sun, crept towards the shore. But even without watching them he could have guessed at their safe arrival, for as each one reached the beach, there was a wild swirl in the crowd as the starving men smashed the casks to pieces with rocks and fought over the contents.

Hornblower did not wait to see the end. He wanted no further reminder of the beastliness and horror of it all, and he had himself rowed back to his ship and the boats hoisted in. He would not look back again at the island as the Sutherland braced her yards round and went on to her delayed rendezvous. The Spanish victualling-brig was coming down towards them under full sail. She passed the Sutherland close astern, and an irate officer hailed through a speaking trumpet:

"What you mean, sir?" he shouted. "What you mean interfering? Cabrera our country - you not must go there!"

"God damn you!" said Bush beside Hornblower as the words reached him. "Shall I give him a shot, sir?"

After what they had seen, the crew of the Sutherland would have thoroughly approved of such an action, but Hornblower felt he had done enough towards provoking an international incident between England and her ally as it was. He put his hand to his ear and made a gesture to indicate that he could not hear. The Spaniard repeated himself, bawling and raving and dancing on his deck until Hornblower almost came to hope that he would burst a blood-vessel. It was only a schoolboy trick, but it raised a laugh among the officers and men of the Sutherland, and that was what Hornblower was after. In these dreary times of war and at moments of tension between allies, a laugh was worth a great deal.

And then he turned back towards routine. But a new wave of depressed realization flooded over him. The relief of Cabrera had cost his ship hundreds of fathoms of line and hundreds of fathoms of cable, a score of beef casks and a whole day's time. What oppressed Hornblower was the prospect of having to account for all this. There would be at least a dozen letters and reports to write upon the subject, and that would be only the beginning, because My Lords of the Admiralty, when the letters reached them, would certainly demand further explanations, and explanations beyond those, and further explanations still - Hornblower could see those letters stretching to the crack of doom.

Then he caught sight of his two French prisoners down on the main-deck. They were clothed and shaved and looked new men, but Hornblower found no pleasure in the sight of them. To him they represented another whole series of letters and reports which he would have to write, and he groaned at the prospect. For a moment he almost wished that the Sutherland had never sighted them, that they had drifted on to meet their death in the desolate Mediterranean. He realized at once that this was not true, and groaned at his hard-heartedness while he paced the deck and breathed free air. But all the same, this work of charity was going to cost him a devil of a lot of trouble.



A HORATIO HORNBLOWER TALE OF THE SEA

C. S. FORESTER

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Flying Colours

C. S. Forester
(1938)

CHAPTER ONE

Captain Hornblower was walking up and down along the sector of the ramparts of Rosas, delimited by two sentries with loaded muskets, which the commandant had granted him for exercise. Overhead shone the bright autumn sun of the Mediterranean, hanging in a blue Mediterranean sky and shining on the Mediterranean blue of Rosas Bay — the blue water fringed with white where the little waves broke against the shore of golden sand and grey-green cliff. Black against the sun above his head there flapped the tricolour flag of France, proclaiming to the world that Rosas was in the hands of the French, that Captain Hornblower was a prisoner. Not half a mile from where he walked lay the dismantled wreck of his ship the *Sutherland*, beached to prevent her from sinking, and in line beyond her there swung at their anchors the four ships of the line which had fought her. Hornblower, narrowing his eyes and with a twinge of regret for his lost telescope could see even at that distance that they were not ready for sea again, nor were likely to be. Even the two-decker which had emerged from the fight with all her masts intact still had her pumps at work every two hours to keep her afloat, and the other three had not yet succeeded in setting up masts to replace the ones lost in the battle. The French were a lubberly lot of no-seamen, as might be expected after seventeen years of defeat at sea and six of continuous blockade.

They had been all honey to him, in their French fashion praising him for his 'glorious defence' after his 'bold initiative' in dashing in with his ship to interpose between their four and their refuge at Rosas. They had expressed the liveliest pleasure at discovering that he had miraculously emerged unhurt from a battle which had left two-thirds of his men killed and wounded. But they had plundered in the fashion which had made the armed forces of the Empire hated throughout Europe. They had searched the pockets even of the wounded who had cumbered the *Sutherland's* decks in moaning heaps. Their admiral, on his first encounter with Hornblower, had expressed surprise that the latter was not wearing the sword which the admiral had sent back to him in recognition of his gallantry, and on Hornblower's denial that he had ever seen the weapon again after giving it up had instituted a search which discovered the sword cast aside somewhere in his flagship, the glorious inscription still engraved upon the blade, but with the gold stripped from hilt and guard and scabbard. And the admiral had merely laughed at that and had not dreamed of instituting a search for the thief; the Patriotic Fund's gift still hung at Hornblower's side, the tang of the blade protruding nakedly from the scabbard without the gold and ivory and seed pearls which had adorned it.

The French soldiers and sailors which had swarmed over the captured ship had torn away even the brasswork in the same fashion; they had gorged upon the unappetizing provisions in a way which proved how miserable were the rations provided for the men who fought for the Empire — but it was only a few who had swilled themselves into insensibility from the rum casks. In face of similar temptation (to which no British officer would have exposed his men) British seamen would have drunk until nine-tenths of them were incapable or fighting mad. The French officers had made the usual appeal to their prisoners to join the French ranks, making the usual tempting offers of good treatment and regular pay to anyone who cared to enlist either in the army or the navy. Hornblower was proud that no single man had succumbed to the temptation.

As a consequence the few sound men now languished in strict confinement in one of the empty storerooms of the fortress, deprived of the tobacco and rum and fresh air which for most of them represented the difference between heaven and hell. The wounded — the hundred and forty-five wounded — were rotting in a dank casemate where gangrene and fever would soon make an end of them. To the logical French mind the

poverty-stricken Army of Catalonia, which could do little even for its own wounded, would be mad to expend any of its resources on attention to wounded who would be intolerable nuisances should they survive.

A little moan escaped Hornblower's lips as he paced the ramparts. He had a room of his own, a servant to wait on him, fresh air and sunshine, while the poor devils he had commanded were suffering all the miseries of confinement — even the three or four other unwounded officers were lodged in the town gaol. True, he suspected that he was being reserved for another fate. During those glorious days when, in command of the *Sutherland*, he had won for himself, unknowing, the nickname of 'the Terror of the Mediterranean', he had managed to storm the battery at Llanza by bringing his ship up close to it flying the tricolour flag. That had been a legitimate *ruse de guerre* for which historical precedents without number could be quoted, but the French government had apparently deemed it a violation of the laws of war. The next convoy to France or Barcelona would bear him with it as a prisoner to be tried by a military commission. Bonaparte was quite capable of shooting him, both from personal rancour and as a proof of the most convincing sort to Europe of British duplicity and wickedness, and during the last day or two Hornblower thought he had read as much in the eyes of his gaolers.

Just enough time had elapsed for the news of the *Sutherland's* capture to have reached Paris and for Bonaparte's subsequent orders to have been transmitted to Rosas. The *Moniteur Universel* would have blazed out in a paean of triumph, declaring to the Continent that this loss of a ship of the line was clear proof that England was tottering to her fall like ancient Carthage; in a month or two's time presumably there would be another announcement to the effect that a traitorous servant of perfidious Albion had met his just deserts against a wall in Vincennes or Montjuich.

Hornblower cleared his throat nervously as he walked; he expected to feel afraid and was surprised that he did not. The thought of an abrupt and inevitable end of that sort did not alarm him as much as did his shapeless imaginings when he was going into action on his quarterdeck. In fact he could almost view it with relief, as putting an end to his worries about his wife Maria whom he had left pregnant, and to his jealous torments of longing for Lady Barbara who had married his admiral; in the eyes of England he would be regarded as a martyr whose widow deserved a pension. It would be an honourable end, then, which a man ought to welcome — especially a man like Hornblower whose persistent and unfounded disbelief in his own capacity left him continually frightened of professional disgrace and ruin.

And it would be an end of captivity, too. Hornblower had been a prisoner once before, for two heartbreaking years in Ferrol, but with the passing of time he had forgotten the misery of it until his new experience. In those days, too, he had never known the freedom of his own quarterdeck, and had never tasted the unbounded liberty — the widest freedom on earth — of being a captain of a ship. It was torture now to be a prisoner, even with the liberty to look upon the sky and the sea. A caged lion must fret behind his bars in the same way as Hornblower fretted against his confinement. He felt suddenly sick and ill through restraint. He clenched his fists and only by an effort prevented himself from raising them above his head in a gesture of despair.

Then he took hold of himself again, with an inward sneer at his childish weakness. To distract himself he looked out again to the blue sea which he loved, the row of black cormorants silhouetted against the grey cliff, the gulls wheeling against the blue sky. Five miles out he could see the topsails of His Majesty's frigate *Cassandra* keeping sleepless watch over the four French ships huddled for shelter under the guns of Rosas, and beyond them he could see the royals of the *Pluto* and the *Caligula* — Admiral Leighton, the unworthy husband of his beloved Lady Barbara, was flying his flag in the *Pluto*, but he refused to let that thought worry him — where they awaited an accession of strength from the Mediterranean fleet before coming in to destroy the ships which had captured him. He could rely upon the British to avenge his defeat. Martin, the vice-admiral with the Toulon blockading squadron, would see to it that Leighton did not make a hash of this attack, powerful as might be the guns of Rosas.

He looked along the ramparts at the massive twenty-four-pounders mounted there. The bastions at the angles carried forty-two-pounders — colossal pieces. He leaned over the parapet and looked down; it was a sheer drop from there of twenty-five feet to the bottom of the ditch, and along the bottom of the ditch itself ran a line of stout palisades, which no besieging army could damage until he had sapped right up to the lip of the ditch. No hurried, extemporized attack could carry the citadel of Rosas. A score of sentries paced the ramparts, even as did he; in the opposite face he could see the massive gates with the portcullis down, where a hundred

men of the grand guard were always ready to beat back any surprise attack which might elude the vigilance of the twenty sentinels.

Down there, in the body of the place, a company of infantry was being put through its drill — the shrill words of command were clearly audible to him up here. It was Italian which was being spoken; Bonaparte had attempted his conquest of Catalonia mainly with the foreign auxiliaries of his empire, Italians, Neapolitans, Germans, Swiss, Poles. The uniforms of the infantry down there were as ragged as the lines they were forming; the men were in tatters, and even the tatters were not homogeneous — the men wore white or blue or grey or brown according to the resources of the depots which had originally sent them out. They were half starved, poor devils, as well. Of the five or six thousand men based on Rosas the ones he could see were all that could be spared for military duty; the others were all out scouring the countryside for food — Bonaparte never dreamed of trying to feed the men whom he compelled to serve him, just as he only paid them, as an afterthought, a year or two in arrears. It was amazing that his ramshackle Empire had endured so long — that was the clearest proof of the incompetence of the various kingdoms who had pitted their strength against it. Over on the other side of the Peninsula the French Empire was at this very minute putting out all its strength against a man of real ability and an army which knew what discipline was. On the issue of that struggle depended the fate of Europe. Hornblower was convinced that the redcoats with Wellington to lead them would be successful; he would have been just as certain even if Wellington were not his beloved Lady Barbara's brother.

Then he shrugged his shoulders. Not even Wellington would destroy the French Empire quickly enough to save him from trial and execution. Moreover, the time allowed him for his day's exercise was over now. The next items in his monotonous programme would be to visit the sick in the casemate, and then the prisoners in the storeroom — by the courtesy of the commandant he was allowed ten minutes for each, before being shut up again in his room, drearily to attempt to re-read the half-dozen books which were all that the garrison of Rosas possessed, or to pace up and down, three steps each way, or to lie huddled on his bed wondering about Maria and the child that was to be born in the New Year, and torturing himself with thoughts of Lady Barbara.

CHAPTER TWO

Hornblower awoke that night with a start, wondering what it was that had awakened him. A moment later he knew, when the sound was repeated. It was the dull thud of a gun fired on the ramparts above his head. He leaped from his bed with his heart pounding, and before his feet touched the floor the whole fortress was in a turmoil. Overhead there were guns firing. Somewhere else, outside the body of the fortress, there were hundreds of guns firing; through the barred windows of his room came a faint flickering as the flashes were reflected down from the sky. Immediately outside his door drums were beating and bugles were pealing as the garrison was called to arms — the courtyard was full of the sounds of nailed boots clashing on the cobbles. That tremendous pulsation of artillery which he could hear could mean only one thing. The fleet must have come gliding into the bay in the darkness, and now he could hear the rolling of its broadsides as it battered the anchored ships. There was a great naval battle in progress within half a mile of him, and he could see nothing of it. It was utterly maddening. He tried to light his candle, but his trembling fingers could do nothing with his flint and steel. He dashed the tinder-box to the floor, and, fumbling in the darkness, he dragged on his coat and trousers and shoes and then beat upon the door madly with his fists. The sentry outside was Italian, he knew, and he spoke no Italian — only fluent Spanish and bad French.

"Officier! Officier!" he shouted, and then he heard the sentry call for the sergeant of the guard, and the measured step of the sergeant as he came up. The clatter of the garrison's falling in under arms had already died away.

"What do you want?" asked the sergeant's voice — at least so Hornblower fancied, for he could not understand what was said.

"Officier! Officier!" roared Hornblower, beating still on the heavy door. The artillery was still rolling terrifically outside. Hornblower went on pounding on the door even until he heard the key in the lock. The door swung

open and he blinked at the light of a torch which shone into his eyes. A young subaltern in a neat white uniform stood there between the sergeant and the sentry.

"Qu'est-ce-que monsieur désire?" he asked — he at least understood French, even if he spoke it badly. Hornblower fumbled to express himself in an unfamiliar tongue.

"I want to see!" he stammered. "I want to see the battle! Let me go on to the walls."

The young officer shook his head reluctantly; like the other officers of the garrison, he felt a kindly feeling towards the English captain who — so rumour said — was so shortly to be conducted to Paris and shot.

"It is forbidden," he said.

"I will not escape," said Hornblower; desperate excitement was loosening his tongue now. "Word of honour — I swear it! Come with me, but let me see! I want to see!"

The officer hesitated.

"I cannot leave my post here," he said.

"Then let me go alone. I swear I will stay on the walls. I will not try to escape."

"Word of honour?" asked the subaltern.

"Word of honour. Thank you, sir."

The subaltern stood aside, and Hornblower dashed out of his room, down the short corridor to the courtyard, and up the ramp which led to the seaward bastion. As he reached it, the forty-two-pounder mounted there went off with a deafening roar, and the long tongue of orange flame nearly blinded him. In the darkness the bitter powder smoke engulfed him. Nobody in the groups bending over the guns noticed him, and he ran down the steep staircase to the curtain wall, where, away from the guns, he could see without being blinded. Rosas Bay was all a-sparkle with gun flashes. Then, five times in regular succession, came the brilliant red glow of a broadside, and each glow lit up a stately ship gliding in rigid line ahead past the anchored French ships. The *Pluto* was there; Hornblower saw her three decks, her ensign at the peak, her admiral's flag at the mizzen, her topsails set and her other canvas furled. Leighton would be there, walking his quarterdeck — thinking of Barbara, perhaps. And that next astern was the *Caligula*. Bolton would be stumping about her deck revelling in the crash of her broadsides. She was firing rapidly and well — Bolton was a good captain, although a badly educated man. The words 'Oderint dum metuant' — the Caesar Caligula's maxim — picked out in letters of gold across the *Caligula's* stern had meant nothing to Bolton until Hornblower translated and explained them to him. At this very moment, perhaps, those letters were being defaced and battered by the French shot. But the French squadron was firing back badly and irregularly. There was no sudden glow of broadsides where they lay anchored, but only an irregular and intermittent sparkle as the guns were loosed off anyhow. In a night action like this, and after a sudden surprise, Hornblower would not have trusted even an English seaman with independent fire. He doubted if as many as one-tenth of the French guns were being properly served and pointed. As for the heavy guns peeling away beside him from the fortress, he was quite certain they were doing no good to the French cause and possibly some harm. Firing at half a mile in the darkness, even from a steady platform and with large calibre guns, they were as likely to hit friend as foe. It had well repaid Admiral Martin to send in Leighton and his ships in the moonless hours of the night, risking all the navigational perils of the bay.

Hornblower choked with emotion and excitement as his imagination called up the details of what would be going on in the English ships — the leadsman chanting the soundings with disciplined steadiness, the heave of the ship to the deafening crash of the broadside, the battle lanterns glowing dimly in the smoke of the lower decks, the squeal and rattle of the gun trucks as the guns were run up again, the steady orders of the officers in charge of sections of guns, the quiet voice of the captain addressing the helmsmen. He leaned far over the parapet in the darkness, peering down into the bay.

A whiff of wood smoke came to his nostrils, sharply distinct from the acrid powder smoke which was drifting by from the guns. They had lit the furnaces for heating shot, but the commandant would be a fool if he allowed his guns to fire red-hot shot in these conditions. French ships were as inflammable as English ones, and just as likely to be hit in a close battle like this. Then his grip tightened on the stonework of the parapet, and he stared and stared again with aching eyes towards what had attracted his notice. It was the tiniest, most subdued little red glow in the distance. The English had brought in fire ships in the wake of their fighting squadron. A squadron at anchor like this was the best possible target for a fire ship, and Martin had planned

his attack well in sending in his ships of the line first to clear away guard boats and beat down the French fire and occupy the attention of the crews. The red glow suddenly increased, grew brighter and brighter still, revealing the hull and masts and rigging of a small brig; still brighter it grew as the few daring spirits who remained on board flung open hatches and gunports to increase the draught. The tongues of flame which soared up were visible even to Hornblower on the ramparts, and they revealed to him, too, the form of the *Turenne* alongside her — the one French ship which had emerged from the previous battle with all her masts. Whoever the young officer in command of the fire ship might be, he was a man with a cool head and determined will, thus to select the most profitable target of all.

Hornblower saw points of fire begin to ascend the rigging of the *Turenne* until she was outlined in red like some set-piece in a firework display. Sudden jets of flame showed where powder charges on her deck were taking fire; and then the whole set-piece suddenly swung round and began to drift before the gentle wind as the burnt cables gave way. A mast fell in an upward torrent of sparks, strangely reflected in the black water all round. At once the sparkle of gunfire in the other French ships began to die away as the crews were called from their guns to deal with the drifting menace, and a slow movement of the shadowy forms lit by the flames revealed that their cables had been cut by officers terrified of death by fire.

Then suddenly Hornblower's attention was distracted to a point closer in to shore, where the abandoned wreck of the *Sutherland* lay beached. There, too, a red glow could be seen, growing and spreading momentarily. Some daring party from the British squadron had boarded her and set her on fire, too, determined not to leave even so poor a trophy in the hands of the French. Farther out in the bay three red dots of light were soaring upwards slowly, and Hornblower gulped in sudden nervousness lest an English ship should have caught fire as well, but he realized next moment that it was only a signal — three vertical red lanterns — which was apparently the prearranged recall, for with their appearance the firing abruptly ceased. The blazing wrecks lit up now the whole of this corner of the bay with a lurid red in whose light could be distinctly seen the other French ships, drifting without masts or anchors towards the shore. Next came a blinding flash and a stunning explosion as the magazine of the *Turenne* took fire. For several seconds after the twenty tons of gunpowder had exploded Hornblower's eyes could not see nor his mind think; the blast of it had shaken him, like a child in the hands of an angry nurse, even where he stood.

He became aware that daylight was creeping into the bay, revealing the ramparts of Rosas in hard outlines, and dulling the flames from the wreck of the *Sutherland*. Far out in the bay, already beyond gunshot of the fortress, the five British ships of the line were standing out to sea in their rigid line-ahead. There was something strange about the appearance of the *Pluto*; it was only at his second glance that Hornblower realized that she had lost her main topmast — clear proof that one French shot at least had done damage. The other ships revealed no sign of having received any injury during one of the best managed affairs in the long history of the British Navy. Hornblower tore his gaze from his vanishing friends to study the field of battle. Of the *Turenne* and the fire ship there was no sign at all; of the *Sutherland* there only remained a few blackened timbers emerging from the water, with a wisp of smoke suspended above them. Two ships of the line were on the rocks to the westward of the fortress, and French seamanship would never make them seaworthy again. Only the three-decker was left, battered and mastless, swinging to the anchor which had checked her on the very edge of the surf. The next easterly gale would see her, too, flung ashore and useless. The British Mediterranean fleet would in the future have to dissipate none of its energies in a blockade of Rosas. Here came General Vidal, the governor of the fortress, making his rounds with his staff at his heels, and just in time to save Hornblower from falling into a passion of despair at watching the English squadron disappear over the horizon.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the General, checking at the sight of him. Under the sternness of his expression could be read the kindly pity which Hornblower had noticed in the faces of all his enemies when they began to suspect that a firing party awaited him.

"The officer of the grand guard allowed me to come up here," explained Hornblower in his halting French. "I gave him my parole of honour not to try to escape. I will withdraw it again now, if you please."

"He had no business to accept it, in any case," snapped the General, but with that fateful kindness still apparent. "You wanted to see the battle, I suppose?"

"Yes, General."

"A fine piece of work your companions have done." The General shook his head sadly. "It will not make the government in Paris feel any better disposed towards you, I fear, Captain."

Hornblower shrugged his shoulders; he had already caught the infection of that gesture during his few days' sojourn among Frenchmen. He noted, with a lack of personal interest which seemed odd to him even then, that this was the first time that the Governor had hinted openly at danger threatening him from Paris.

"I have done nothing to make me afraid," he said.

"No, no, of course not," said the Governor hastily and out of countenance, like a parent denying to a child that a prospective dose of medicine would be unpleasant.

He looked round for some way of changing the subject, and fortunate chance brought one. From far below in the bowels of the fortress came a muffled sound of cheering — English cheers, not Italian screeches.

"That must be those men of yours, Captain," said the General, smiling again. "I fancy the new prisoner must have told them by now the story of last night's affair."

"The new prisoner?" demanded Hornblower.

"Yes, indeed. A man who fell overboard from the admiral's ship — the *Pluto*, is it not? — and had to swim ashore. Ah, I suspected you would be interested, Captain. Yes, off you go and talk to him. Here, Dupont, take charge of the captain and escort him to the prison."

Hornblower could hardly spare the time in which to thank his captor, so eager was he to interview the new arrival and hear what he had to say. Two weeks as a prisoner had already had their effect in giving him a thirst for news. He ran down the ramp, Dupont puffing beside him, across the cobbled court, in through the door which a sentry opened for him at a gesture from his escort, down the dark stairway to the iron-studded door where stood two sentries on duty. With a great clattering of keys the doors were opened for him and he walked into the room.

It was a wide low room — a disused storeroom, in fact — lit and ventilated only by a few heavily barred apertures opening into the fortress ditch. It stank of closely confined humanity and it was at present filled with a babel of sound as what was left of the crew of the *Sutherland* plied questions at someone hidden in the middle of the crowd. At Hornblower's entrance the crowd fell apart and the new prisoner came forward; he was naked save for his duck trousers and a long pigtail hung down his back.

"Who are you?" demanded Hornblower.

"Phillips, sir. Maintopman in the *Pluto*."

His honest blue eyes met Hornblower's gaze without a sign of flinching. Hornblower could guess that he was neither a deserter nor a spy — he had borne both possibilities in mind.

"How did you come here?"

"We was settin' sail, sir, to beat out o' the bay. We'd just seen the old *Sutherland* take fire, an' Cap'n Elliott he says to us, he says, sir, 'Now's the time, my lads. Top'sls and to'gar'ns.' So up we went aloft, sir, an' I'd just taken the earring o' the main to'gar'n when down came the mast, sir, an' I was pitched off into the water. So was a lot o' my mates, sir, but just then the Frenchy which was burnin' blew up, an' I think the wreckage killed a lot of 'em, sir, 'cos I found I was alone, an' *Pluto* was gone away, an' so I swum for the shore, an' there was a lot of Frenchies what I think had swum from the burning Frenchy an' they took me to some sojers an' the sojers brought me here, sir. There was a orficer what arst me questions — it'd 'a made you laugh, sir, to hear him trying to speak English — but I wasn't sayin' nothin', sir. An' when they see that they puts me in here along with the others, sir. I was just telling 'em about the fight, sir. There was the old *Pluto*, an' *Caligula*, sir, an' —"

"Yes, I saw it," said Hornblower, shortly. "I saw that *Pluto* had lost her main topmast. Was she knocked about much?"

"Lor' bless you, sir, no, sir. We hadn't had half a dozen shot come aboard, an' they didn't do no damage, barrin' the one that wounded the Admiral."

"The Admiral!" Hornblower reeled a little as he stood, as though he had been struck. "Admiral Leighton, d'you mean?"

"Admiral Leighton, sir."

"Was — was he badly hurt?"

"I dunno, sir. I didn't see it meself, o' course, sir, seein' as how I was on the main deck at the time. Sailmaker's mate, he told me, sir, that the Admiral had been hit by a splinter. Cooper's mate told *him*, sir, what helped to carry him below."

Hornblower could say no more for the present. He could only stare at the kindly stupid face of the sailor before him. Yet even in that moment he could take note of the fact that the sailor was not in the least moved by the wounding of his Admiral. Nelson's death had put the whole fleet into mourning, and he knew of half a dozen other flag officers whose death or whose wounding would have brought tears into the eyes of the men serving under him. If it had been one of those, the man would have told of the accident to him before mentioning his own misadventures. Hornblower had known before that Leighton was not beloved by his officers, and here was a clear proof that he was not beloved by his men either.

But perhaps Barbara had loved him. She had at least married him. Hornblower forced himself to speak, to bear himself naturally.

"That will do," he said, curtly, and then looked round to catch his coxswain's eye. "Anything to report, Brown?"

"No, sir. All well, sir."

Hornblower rapped on the door behind him to be let out of prison, to be conducted by his guard back to his room again, where he could walk up and down, three steps each way, his brain seething like a pot on a fire. He only knew enough to unsettle him, to make him anxious. Leighton had been wounded, but that did not mean that he would die. A splinter wound — that might mean much or little. Yet he had been carried below. No admiral would have allowed that, if he had been able to resist — not in the heat of a fight, at any rate. His face might be lacerated or his belly torn open — Hornblower, shuddering, shook his mind free from the memories of all the horrible wounds he had seen received on ship board during twenty years' service. But, coldbloodedly, it was an even chance that Leighton would die — Hornblower had signed too many casualty lists to be unaware of the chances of a wounded man's recovery.

If Leighton were to die, Barbara would be free again. But what had that to do with him, a married man — a married man whose wife was pregnant? She would be no nearer to him, not while Maria lived. And yet it assuaged his jealousy to think of her as a widow. But then perhaps she would marry again, and he would have to go once more through all the torment he had endured when he had first heard of her marriage to Leighton. In that case he would rather Leighton lived — a cripple, perhaps mutilated or impotent; the implications of that train of thought drove him into a paroxysm of too-rapid thinking from which he only emerged after a desperate struggle for sanity.

In the cold reaction which followed he sneered at himself for a fool. He was the prisoner of a man whose empire extended from the Baltic to Gibraltar. He told himself he would be an old man, that his child and Maria's would be grown up before he regained his liberty. And then with a sudden shock he remembered that he might soon be dead — shot for violation of the laws of war. Strange how he could forget that possibility. Sneering, he told himself that he had a coward's mind which could leave the imminence of death out of its calculations because the possibility was too monstrous to bear contemplation.

There was something else he had not reckoned upon lately, too. If Bonaparte did not have him shot, if he regained his freedom, even then he still had to run the gauntlet of a court martial for the loss of the *Sutherland*. A court martial might decree for him death or disgrace or ruin; the British public would not hear lightly of a British ship of the line surrendering, however great the odds against her. He would have liked to ask Phillips, the seaman from the *Pluto*, about what had been said in the fleet regarding the *Sutherland's* action, whether the general verdict had been one of approval or not. But of course it would be impossible to ask; no captain could ask a seaman what the fleet thought of him, even if there was a chance of hearing the truth — which, too, was doubtful. He was compassed about with uncertainties — the uncertainties of his imprisonment, of the possibility of his trial by the French, of his future court martial, of Leighton's wound. There was even an uncertainty regarding Maria; she was pregnant — would the child be a girl or a boy, would he ever see it, would anyone raise a finger to help her, would she be able to educate the child properly without his supervision?

Once more the misery of imprisonment was borne in upon him. He grew sick with longing for his liberty, for his freedom, for Barbara and for Maria.

CHAPTER THREE

Hornblower was walking next day upon the ramparts again; the sentries with their loaded muskets stood one each end of the sector allotted to him, and the subaltern allotted to guard him sat discreetly against the parapet so as not to break in upon the thoughts which preoccupied him. But he was too tired to think much now — all day and nearly all night yesterday he had paced his room, three paces up and three paces back, with his mind in a turmoil. Exhaustion was saving him now, he could think no more.

He welcomed as a distraction a bustle at the main gate, the turning out of the guard, the opening of the gate, and the jingling entrance of a coach drawn by six fine horses. He stood and watched the proceedings with all the interest of a captive. There was an escort of fifty mounted men in the cocked hats and blue-and-red uniforms of Bonaparte's gendarmerie, coachmen and servants on the box, an officer dismounting hurriedly to open the door. Clearly the new arrival must be a man of importance. Hornblower experienced a faint feeling of disappointment when there climbed out of the coach not a Marshal with plumes and feathers, but just another officer of gendarmerie. A youngish man with a bullet black head, which he revealed as he held his cocked hat in his hand while stooping to descend; the star of the Legion of Honour on his breast; high black boots with spurs. Hornblower wondered idly why a colonel of gendarmerie who was obviously not crippled should arrive in a coach instead of on horseback. He watched him go clinking across the courtyard to the Governor's headquarters.

Hornblower's walk was nearly finished when one of the young French aides-de-camp of the Governor approached him on the ramparts and saluted.

"His Excellency sends you his compliments, sir, and he would be glad if you could spare him a few minutes of your time as soon as it is convenient to you."

Addressed to a prisoner, as Hornblower told himself bitterly, these words might as well have been 'Come at once.'

"I will come now, with the greatest of pleasure," said Hornblower, maintaining the solemn farce.

Down in the Governor's office the colonel of gendarmerie was standing conversing alone with His Excellency; the Governor's expression was sad.

"I have the honour of presenting to you, Captain," he said, turning, "Colonel Jean-Baptiste Caillard, Grand Eagle of the Legion of Honour, and one of His Imperial Majesty's personal aides-de-camp. Colonel, this is Captain Horatio Hornblower, of His Britannic Majesty's Navy."

The Governor was dearly worried and upset. His hands were fluttering and he stammered a little as he spoke, and he made a pitiful muddle of his attempt on the aspirates of Hornblower's name. Hornblower bowed, but as the colonel remained unbending he stiffened to attention. He could recognize that type of man at once — the servant of a tyrant, and in close personal association with him, modelling his conduct not on the tyrant's, but on what he fancied should be the correct behaviour of a tyrant, far out-Heroding Herod in arbitrariness and cruelty. It might be merely a pose — the man might be a kind husband and the loving father of a family — but it was a pose which might have unpleasant results for anyone in his power. His victims would suffer in his attempt to prove, to himself as well as to others, that he could be more stern, more unrelenting — and therefore naturally more able — than the man who employed him.

Caillard ran a cold eye over Hornblower's appearance. "What is he doing with that sword at his side?" he asked of the Governor.

"The admiral returned it to him on the day of the battle," explained the Governor hastily. "He said —"

"It doesn't matter what he said," interrupted Caillard. "No criminal as guilty as he can be allowed a weapon. And a sword is the emblem of a gentleman of honour, which he most decidedly is not. Take off that sword, sir."

Hornblower stood appalled, hardly believing he had understood. Caillard's face wore a fixed mirthless smile which showed white teeth, below the black moustache which lay like a gash across his olive face.

"Take off that sword," repeated Caillard, and then, as Hornblower made no movement, "If Your Excellency will permit me to call in one of my gendarmes, I will have the sword removed."

At the threat Hornblower unbuckled his belt and allowed the weapon to fall to the ground; the clatter rang loud in the silence. The sword of honour which the Patriotic Fund had awarded him ten years ago for his heading of the boarding party which took the *Castilla* lay on the floor, jerked half out of its scabbard. The hiltless tang and the battered places on the sheath where the gold had been torn off bore mute witness to the lust for gold of the Empire's servants.

"Good!" said Caillard. "Now will Your Excellency have the goodness to warn this man of his approaching departure?"

"Colonel Caillard," said the Governor, "has come to take you and your first lieutenant, Mistaire — Mistaire Bush, to Paris."

"Bush?" blazed out Hornblower, moved as not even the loss of his sword could move him. "Bush? That is impossible. Lieutenant Bush is seriously wounded. It might easily be fatal to take him on a long journey at present."

"The journey will be fatal to him in any case," said Caillard, still with the mirthless smile and the gleam of white teeth.

The Governor wrung his hands.

"You cannot say that, Colonel. These gentlemen have still to be tried. The Military Commission has yet to give its verdict."

"These gentlemen, as you call them, Your Excellency, stand condemned out of their own mouths."

Hornblower remembered that he had made no attempt to deny, while the admiral was questioning him and preparing his report, that he had been in command of the *Sutherland* the day she wore French colours and her landing party stormed the battery at Llanza. He had known the ruse to be legitimate enough, but he had not reckoned on a French emperor determined upon convincing European opinion of the perfidy of England and cunning enough to know that a couple of resounding executions might well be considered evidence of guilt.

"The colonel," said the Governor to Hornblower, "has brought his coach. You may rely upon it that Mistaire Bush will have every possible comfort. Please tell me which of your men you would like to accompany you as your servant. And if there is anything which I can provide which will make the journey more comfortable, I will do so with the greatest pleasure."

Hornblower debated internally the question of the servant. Polwheal, who had served him for years, was among the wounded in the casemate. Nor, he fancied, would he have selected him in any case; Polwheal was not the man for an emergency — and it was just possible that there might be an emergency. Latude had escaped from the Bastille. Was not there a faint chance that he might escape from Vincennes? Hornblower thought of Brown's bulging muscles and cheerful devotion.

"I would like to take my coxswain, Brown, if you please," he said.

"Certainly. I will send for him and have your present servant pack your things with him. And with regard to your needs for the journey?"

"I need nothing," said Hornblower. At the same time as he spoke he cursed himself for his pride. If he were ever to save himself and Bush from the firing party in the ditch at Vincennes he would need gold.

"Oh, I cannot allow you to say that," protested the Governor. "There may be some few comforts you would like to buy when you are in France. Besides, you cannot deprive me of the pleasure of being of assistance to a brave man. Please do me the favour of accepting my purse. I beg you to, sir."

Hornblower fought down his pride and took the proffered wallet. It was of surprising weight and gave out a musical chink as he took it.

"I must thank you for your kindness," he said. "And for all your courtesy while I have been your prisoner."

"It has been a pleasure to me, as I said," replied the Governor. "I want to wish you the — the very best of luck on your arrival in Paris."

"Enough of this," said Caillard. "My orders from His Majesty call for the utmost expedition. Is the wounded man in the courtyard?"

The Governor led the way out, and the gendarmes closed up round Hornblower as they walked towards the coach. Bush was lying there on a stretcher, strangely pale and strangely wasted out there in the bright light. He was feebly trying to shield his eyes from the sun; Hornblower ran and knelt beside him.

"They're going to take us to Paris, Bush," he said. "What, you and me, sir?"

"Yes."

"It's a place I've often wanted to see."

The Italian surgeon who had amputated Bush's foot was plucking at Hornblower's sleeve and fluttering some sheets of paper. These were instructions, he explained in faulty Italian French, for the further treatment of the stump. Any surgeon in France would understand them. As soon as the ligatures came away the wound would heal at once. He had put a parcel of dressings into the coach for use on the journey. Hornblower tried to thank him, but was interrupted when the surgeon turned away to supervise the lifting of Bush, stretcher and all, into the coach. It was an immensely long vehicle, and the stretcher just fitted in across one door, its ends on the two seats.

Brown was there now, with Hornblower's valise in his hand. The coachman showed him how to put it into the boot. Then a gendarme opened the other door and stood waiting for Hornblower to enter. Hornblower looked up at the ramparts towering above him; no more than half an hour ago he had been walking there, worn out with doubt. At least one doubt was settled now. In a fortnight's time perhaps they would all be settled, after he had faced the firing party at Vincennes. A spurt of fear welled up within him at the thought, destroying the first momentary feeling almost of pleasure. He did not want to be taken to Paris to be shot; he wanted to resist. Then he realized that resistance would be both vain and undignified, and he forced himself to climb into the coach, hoping that no one had noticed his slight hesitation.

A gesture from the sergeant of gendarmerie brought Brown to the door as well, and he came climbing in to sit apologetically with his officers. Caillard was mounting a big black horse, a spirited, restless creature which champed at its bit and passaged feverishly about. When he had settled himself in the saddle the word was given, and the horses were led round the courtyard, the coach jolting and heaving over the cobbles, out through the gate and down to the road which wound under the guns of the fortress. The mounted gendarmerie closed up round the coach, a whip cracked, and they were off at a slow trot, to the jingling of the harness and the clattering of the hoofs and the creaking of the leatherwork.

Hornblower would have liked to have looked out of the windows at the houses of Rosas village going by — after three weeks' captivity the change of scene allured him — but first he had to attend to his wounded lieutenant.

"How is it going, Bush?" he asked, bending over him.

"Very well, thank you, sir," said Bush.

There was sunlight streaming in through the coach windows now, and here a succession of tall trees by the roadside threw flickering shadows over Bush's face. Fever and loss of blood had made Bush's face less craggy and gnarled, drawing the flesh tight over the bones so that he looked unnaturally younger, and he was pale instead of being the mahogany brown to which Hornblower was accustomed. Hornblower thought he saw a twinge of pain cross Bush's expression as the coach lurched on the abominable road.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked, trying hard to keep the helplessness out of his voice.

"Nothing, thank you, sir," whispered Bush.

"Try and sleep," said Hornblower.

Bush's hand which lay outside the blanket twitched and stirred and moved towards him; he took it and he felt a gentle pressure. For a few brief seconds Bush's hand stroked his feebly, caressing it as though it was a woman's. There was a glimmer of a smile on Bush's drawn face with its closed eyes. During all the years they had served together it was the first sign of affection either had shown for the other. Bush's head turned on the pillow, and he lay quite still, while Hornblower sat not daring to move for fear of disturbing him.

The coach had slowed to a walk — it must be breasting the long climb which carried the road across the roots of the peninsula of Cape Creux. Yet even at that speed the coach lurched and rolled horribly; the surface of the road must be utterly uncared for. The sharp ringing of the hoofs of the escorts' horses told that they were travelling over rock, and the irregularity of the sound was a clear indication of the way the horses were picking their way among the holes. Framed in the windows Hornblower could see the gendarmes in their blue uniforms and cocked hats jerking and swaying about with the rolling of the coach. The presence of fifty gendarmes as an escort was not a real indication of the political importance of himself and Bush, but only a proof that even here, only twenty miles from France, the road was unsafe for small parties — a little band of Spanish guerilleros was to be found on every inaccessible hill-top.

But there was always a chance that Claros or Rovira with their Catalan miqueletes a thousand strong might come swooping down on the road from their Pyrenean fastnesses. Hornblower felt hope surging up within him at the thought that at any moment, in that case, he might find himself a free man again. His pulse beat faster and he crossed and uncrossed his knees restlessly — with the utmost caution so as not to disturb Bush. He did not want to be taken to Paris to face a mockery of a trial. He did not want to die. He was beginning to fret himself into a fever, when common sense came to his rescue and he compelled himself to sink into a stolid indifference.

Brown was sitting opposite him, primly upright with his arms folded. Hornblower almost grinned, sympathetically, at sight of him. Brown was actually self-conscious. He had never in his life before, presumably, had to be at such close quarters with a couple of officers. Certainly he must be feeling awkward at having to sit in the presence of two such lofty individuals as a captain and a first lieutenant. For that matter, it was at least a thousand to one that Brown had never been inside a coach before, had never sat on leather upholstery with a carpet under his feet. Nor had he had any experience in gentlemen's service, his duties as captain's coxswain being mainly disciplinary and executive. There was something comic about seeing Brown, with the proverbial adaptability of the British seaman, aping what he thought should be the manners of the gentleman's gentleman, and sitting there as if butter would not melt in his mouth.

The coach lurched again, quickening its pace and the horses broke from a walk into a trot. They must be at the top of the long hill now, with a long descent before them, which would bring them back to the seashore somewhere near Llanza, where he had stormed the battery under protection of the tricolour flag. It was an exploit he had been proud of — still was, for that matter. He had never dreamed for one moment that it would lead him to Paris and a firing party. Through the window on Bush's side he could see the rounded brown slopes of the Pyrenees soaring upwards; on the other side, as the coach swung sickeningly round a bend, he caught a glimpse of the sea far below, sparkling in the rays of the afternoon sun. He craned his neck to look at it, the sea which had played him so many scurvy tricks and which he loved. He thought, with a little catch in his throat, that this would be the last day on which he would ever see it. Tonight they would cross the frontier; tomorrow they would plunge into France, and in ten days, a fortnight, he would be rotting in his grave at Vincennes. It would be hard to leave this life, even with all its doubts and uncertainties, to lose the sea with its whims and its treacheries, Maria and the child, Lady Barbara —

Those were white cottages drifting past the windows, and on the side towards the sea, perched on the grassy cliff, was the battery of Llanza. He could see a sentry dressed in blue and white; stooping and looking upwards he could see the French flag at the top of the flagstaff — Bush, here, had hauled it down not so many weeks ago. He heard the coachman's whip crack and the horses quickened their pace; it was still eight miles or so to the frontier and Caillard must be anxious to cross before dark. The mountains, bristling here with pines, were hemming the road in close between them and the sea. Why did not Claros or Rovira come to save him? At every turn of the road there was an ideal site for an ambush. Soon they would be in France and it would be too late. He had to struggle again to remain passive. The prospect of crossing into France seemed to make his fate far more certain and imminent.

It was growing dark fast — they could not be far now from the frontier. Hornblower tried to visualize the charts he had often handled, so as to remember the name of the French frontier town, but his mind was not sufficiently under control to allow it. The coach was coming to a standstill; he heard footsteps outside, heard Caillard's metallic voice saying, "In the name of the Emperor," and an unknown voice say, "Passez, passez, monsieur." The coach lurched and accelerated again; they were in France now. Now the horses' hoofs were ringing on cobblestones. There were houses, one or two lights to be seen. Outside the houses there were men in all kinds of uniforms, and a few women picking their way among them, dressed in pretty costumes with caps on their heads. He could hear laughter and joking. Then abruptly the coach swerved to the right and drew up in the courtyard of an inn. Lights were appearing in plenty in the fading twilight. Someone opened the door of the coach and drew down the steps for him to descend.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hornblower looked round the room to which the innkeeper and the sergeant of gendarmerie had jointly conducted them. He was glad to see a fire burning there, for he was stiff and chilled with his long inactivity in the coach. There was a truckle bed against one wall, a table with a white cloth already spread. A gendarme appeared at the door, stepping slowly and heavily — he was the first of the two who were carrying the stretcher. He looked round to see where to lay it down, turned too abruptly, and jarred it against the jamb of the wall.

"Careful with that stretcher!" snapped Hornblower, and then, remembering he had to speak French, "Attention! Mettez le brancard là. Doucement!"

Brown came and knelt over the stretcher.

"What is the name of this place?" asked Hornblower of the innkeeper.

"Cerbère. Hôtel Iéna, monsieur," answered the innkeeper, fingering his leather apron.

"Monsieur is allowed no speech with anyone whatever," interposed the sergeant. "He will be served, but he must address no speech to the inn servants. If he has any wishes, he will speak to the sentry outside his door. There will be another sentry outside his window."

A gesture of his hand called attention to the cocked hat and the musket barrel of a gendarme, darkly visible through the glass.

"You are too amiable, monsieur," said Hornblower.

"I have my orders. Supper will be served in half an hour."

"I would be obliged if Colonel Caillard would give orders for a surgeon to attend Lieutenant Bush's wounds at once."

"I will ask him, sir," said the sergeant, escorting the innkeeper from the room.

Bush, when Hornblower bent over him, seemed somehow a little better than in the morning. There was a little colour in his cheeks and more strength in his movements.

"Is there anything I can do, Bush?" asked Hornblower.

"Yes —"

Bush explained the needs of sick-room nursing. Hornblower looked up at Brown, a little helplessly.

"I am afraid it'll call for two of you, sir, because I'm a heavy man," said Bush apologetically. It was the apology in his tone which brought Hornblower to the point of action.

"Of course," he said with all the cheerfulness he could bring into his voice. "Come on, Brown. Lift him from the other side."

After the business was finished, with no more than a single half-stifled groan from Bush, Brown displayed more of the astonishing versatility of the British seaman.

"I'll wash you, sir, shall I? An' you haven't had your shave to-day, have you, sir?"

Hornblower sat and watched in helpless admiration the deft movements of the burly sailor as he washed and shaved his first lieutenant. The towels were so well arranged that no single drop of water fell on the bedding.

"Thank 'ee, Brown, thank 'ee," said Bush, sinking back on his pillow.

The door opened to admit a little bearded man in a semi-military uniform carrying a leather case.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said, sounding all his consonants in the manner which Hornblower was yet to discover was characteristic of the Midi. "I am the surgeon, if you please. And this is the wounded officer? And these are the hospital notes of my confrère at Rosas? Excellent. Yes, exactly. And how are you feeling, sir?"

Hornblower had to translate, limpingly, the surgeon's question to Bush, and the latter's replies. Bush put out his tongue, and submitted to having his pulse felt, and his temperature gauged by a hand thrust into his shirt.

"So," said the surgeon. "And now let us see the stump. Will you hold the candle for me here, if you please, sir?"

He turned back the blankets from the foot of the stretcher, revealing the little basket which guarded the stump, laid the basket on the floor and began to remove the dressings.

"Would you tell him, sir," asked Bush, "that my foot which isn't there tickles most abominably, and I don't know how to scratch it?"

The translation taxed Hornblower's French to the utmost, but the surgeon listened sympathetically.

"That is not at all unusual," he said. "And the itchings will come to a natural end in course of time. Ah, now here is the stump. A beautiful stump. A lovely stump."

Hornblower, compelling himself to look, was vaguely reminded of the knuckle end of a roast leg of mutton; the irregular folds of flesh were caught in by half-healed scars, but out of the scars hung two ends of black thread.

"When Monsieur le Lieutenant begins to walk again," explained the surgeon, "he will be glad of an ample pad of flesh at the end of the stump. The end of the bone will not chafe —"

"Yes, exactly," said Hornblower, fighting down his squeamishness.

"A very beautiful piece of work," said the surgeon. "As long as it heals properly and gangrene does not set in. At this stage the surgeon has to depend on his nose for his diagnosis."

Suiting the action to the word the surgeon sniffed at the dressings and at the raw stump.

"Smell, monsieur," he said, holding the dressings to Hornblower's face. Hornblower was conscious of the faintest whiff of corruption.

"Beautiful, is it not?" said the surgeon. "A fine healthy wound and yet every evidence that the ligatures will soon free themselves."

Hornblower realized that the two threads hanging out of the scars were attached to the ends of the two main arteries. When corruption inside was complete the threads could be drawn out and the wounds allowed to heal; it was a race between the rotting of the arteries and the onset of gangrene.

"I will see if the ligatures are free now. Warn your friend that I shall hurt him a little."

Hornblower looked towards Bush to convey the message, and was shocked to see that Bush's face was distorted with apprehension.

"I know," said Bush. "I know what he's going to do — sir."

Only as an afterthought did he say that 'sir'; which was the clearest proof of his mental preoccupation. He grasped the bedclothes in his two fists, his jaw set and his eyes shut.

"I'm ready," he said through his clenched teeth.

The surgeon drew firmly on one of the threads and Bush writhed a little. He drew on the other.

"A-ah," gasped Bush, with sweat on his face.

"Nearly free," commented the surgeon. "I could tell by the feeling of the threads. Your friend will soon be well. Now let us replace the dressings. So. And so." His dexterous plump fingers rebandaged the stump, replaced the wicker basket, and drew down the bed coverings.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said the surgeon, rising to his feet and brushing his hands one against the other. "I will return in the morning."

"Hadn't you better sit down, sir," came Brown's voice to Hornblower's ears as though from a million miles away, after the surgeon had withdrawn. The room was veiled in grey mist which gradually cleared away as he sat, to reveal Bush lying back on his pillow and trying to smile, and Brown's homely honest face wearing an expression of acute concern.

"Rare bad you looked for a minute, sir. You must be hungry, I expect, sir, not having eaten nothing since breakfast, like."

It was tactful of Brown to attribute this faintness to hunger, to which all flesh might be subject without shame, and not merely to weakness in face of wounds and suffering.

"That sounds like supper coming now," croaked Bush from the stretcher, as though one of a conspiracy to ignore their captain's feebleness.

The sergeant of gendarmerie came clanking in, two women behind him bearing trays. The women set the table deftly and quickly, their eyes downcast, and withdrew without looking up, although one of them smiled at the corner of her mouth in response to a meaning cough from Brown which drew a gesture of irritation from the sergeant. The latter cast one searching glance round the room before shutting and locking the door with a clashing of keys.

"Soup," said Hornblower, peering into the tureen which steamed deliciously. "And I fancy this is stewed veal."

The discovery confirmed him in his notion that Frenchmen lived exclusively on soup and stewed veal — he put no faith in the more vulgar notions regarding frogs and snails.

"You will have some of this broth, I suppose, Bush?" he continued. He was talking desperately hard now to conceal the feeling of depression and unhappiness which was overwhelming him. "And a glass of this wine? It has no label — let's hope for the best."

"Some of their rotgut claret, I suppose," grunted Bush. Eighteen years of war with France had given most Englishmen the notion that the only wines fit for men to drink were port and sherry and Madeira, and that Frenchmen only drank thin claret which gave the unaccustomed drinker the bellyache.

"We'll see," said Hornblower as cheerfully as he could. "Let's get you propped up first."

With his hand behind Bush's shoulders he heaved him up a little; as he looked round helplessly, Brown came to his rescue with pillows taken from the bed, and between them they settled Bush with his head raised and his arms free and a napkin under his chin. Hornblower brought him a plate of soup and a piece of bread.

"M'm," said Bush, tasting. "Might be worse. Please, sir, don't let yours get cold."

Brown brought a chair for his captain to sit at the table, and stood in an attitude of attention beside it; there was another place laid, but his action proclaimed as loudly as words how far it was from his mind to sit with his captain. Hornblower ate, at first with a distaste and then with increasing appetite.

"Some more of that soup, Brown," said Bush. "And my glass of wine, if you please."

The stewed veal was extraordinarily good, even to a man who was accustomed to meat he could set his teeth in.

"Dash my wig," said Bush from the bed. "Do you think I could have some of that stewed veal, sir? This travelling has given me an appetite."

Hornblower had to think about that. A man in a fever should be kept on a low diet, but Bush could not be said to be in a fever now, and he had lost a great deal of blood which he had to make up. The yearning look on Bush's face decided him.

"A little will do you no harm," he said. "Take this plate to Mr Bush, Brown."

Good food and good wine — the fare in the *Sutherland* had been repulsive, and at Rosas scanty — tended to loosen their tongues and make them more cheerful. Yet it was hard to unbend beyond a certain unstated limit. The awful majesty surrounding a captain of a ship of the line lingered even after the ship had been destroyed; more than that, the memory of the very strict reserve which Hornblower had maintained during his command acted as a constraint. And to Brown a first lieutenant was in a position nearly as astronomically lofty as a captain; it was awesome to be in the same room as the two of them, even with the help of making-believe to be their old servant. Hornblower had finished his cheese by now, and the moment which Brown had been dreading had arrived.

"Here, Brown," he said rising, "sit down and eat your supper while it's still hot."

Brown now at the age of twenty-eight, had served His Majesty in His Majesty's ships from the age of eleven, and during that time he had never made use at table of other instruments than his sheath knife and his fingers; he had never eaten off china, nor had he drunk from a wineglass. He experienced a nightmare sensation as if his officers were watching him with four eyes as large as footballs the while he nervously picked up a spoon and addressed himself to this unaccustomed task. Hornblower realized his embarrassment in a clairvoyant flash. Brown had thews and sinews which Hornblower had often envied; he had a stolid courage in action which Hornblower could never hope to rival. He could knot and splice, hand, reef, and steer, cast the lead or pull an oar, all of them far better than his captain. He could go aloft on a black night in a howling storm without thinking twice about it, but the sight of a knife and fork made his hands tremble. Hornblower thought about how Gibbon would have pointed the moral epigrammatically in two vivid antithetical sentences.

Humiliation and nervousness never did any good to a man — Hornblower knew that if anyone ever did. He took a chair unobtrusively over beside Bush's stretcher and sat down with his back almost turned to the table, and plunged desperately into conversation with his first lieutenant while the crockery clattered behind him.

"Would you like to be moved into the bed?" he asked, saying the first thing which came into his head.

"No thank you, sir," said Bush. "Two weeks now I've slept in the stretcher. I'm comfortable enough, sir, and it'd be painful to move me, even if — if —"

Words failed Bush to describe his utter determination not to sleep in the only bed and leave his captain without one.

"What are we going to Paris for, sir?" asked Bush.

"God knows," said Hornblower. "But I have a notion that Boney himself wants to ask us questions."

That was the answer he had decided upon hours before in readiness for this inevitable question; it would not help Bush's convalescence to know the fate awaiting him.

"Much good will our answers do him," said Bush, grimly. "Perhaps we'll drink a dish of tea in the Tuileries with Maria Louisa."

"Maybe," answered Hornblower. "And maybe he wants lessons in navigation from you. I've heard he's weak at mathematics."

That brought a smile. Bush notoriously was no good with figures and suffered agonies when confronted with a simple problem in spherical trigonometry. Hornblower's acute ears heard Brown's chair scrape a little; presumably his meal had progressed satisfactorily.

"Help yourself to the wine, Brown," he said, without turning round.

"Aye aye, sir," said Brown cheerfully.

There was a whole bottle of wine left as well as some in the other. This would be a good moment for ascertaining if Brown could be trusted with liquor. Hornblower kept his back turned to him and struggled on with his conversation with Bush. Five minutes later Brown's chair scraped again more definitely, and Hornblower looked round.

"Had enough, Brown?"

"Aye aye, sir. A right good supper."

The soup tureen and the dish of stew were both empty; the bread had disappeared all save the heel of the loaf; there was only a morsel of cheese left. But one bottle of wine was still two-thirds full — Brown had contented himself with a half bottle at most, and the fact that he had drunk that much and no more was the dearest proof that he was safe as regards alcohol.

"Pull the bellrope, then."

The distant jangling brought in time the rattling of keys to the door, and in came the sergeant and the two maids; the latter set about clearing the tables under the former's eye.

"I must get something for you to sleep on, Brown," said Hornblower.

"I can sleep on the floor, sir."

"No, you can't."

Hornblower had decided opinions about that; there had been occasions as a young officer when he had slept on the bare planks of a ship's deck, and he knew their unbending discomfort.

"I want a bed for my servant," he said to the sergeant.

"He can sleep on the floor."

"I will not allow anything of the kind. You must find a mattress for him."

Hornblower was surprised to find how quickly he was acquiring the ability to talk French; the quickness of his mind enabled him to make the best use of his limited vocabulary and his retentive memory had stored up all sorts of words, once heard, and was ready to produce them from the subconscious part of his mind as soon as the stimulus of necessity was applied.

The sergeant had shrugged his shoulders and rudely turned his back.

"I shall report your insolence to Colonel Caillard to-morrow morning," said Hornblower hotly. "Find a mattress immediately."

It was not so much the threat that carried the day as long-ingrained habits of discipline. Even a sergeant of French gendarmerie was accustomed to yielding deference to gold lace and epaulettes and an authoritative manner. Possibly the obvious indignation of the maids at the suggestion that so fine a man should be left to sleep on the floor may have weighed with him too. He called to the sentry at the door and told him to bring a mattress from the stables where the escort were billeted. It was only a palliasse of straw when it came, but it was something infinitely more comfortable than bare and draughty boards, all the same. Brown looked his gratitude to Hornblower as the mattress was spread out in the corner of the room.

"Time to turn in," said Hornblower, ignoring it, as the door was locked behind the sergeant. "Let's make you comfortable, first, Bush."

It was some obscure self-conscious motive which made Hornblower select from his valise the embroidered nightshirt over which Maria's busy fingers had laboured lovingly — the nightshirt which he had brought with

him from England for use should it happen that he should dine and sleep at a Governor's or on board the flagship. All the years he had been a captain he had never shared a room with anyone save Maria, and it was a novel experience for him to prepare for bed in sight of Bush and Brown, and he was ridiculously self-conscious about it, regardless of the fact that Bush, white and exhausted, was already lying back on his pillow with drooping eyelids, while Brown modestly stripped off his trousers with downcast eyes, wrapped himself in the cloak which Hornblower insisted on his using, and curled himself up on his palliasse without a glance at his superior.

Hornblower got into bed.

"Ready?" he asked, and blew out the candle; the fire had died down to embers which gave only the faintest red glow in the room. It was the beginning of one of those wakeful nights which Hornblower had grown by now able to recognize in advance. The moment he blew out the candle and settled his head on the pillow he knew he would not be able to sleep until just before dawn. In his ship he would have gone up on deck or walked his stern gallery; here he could only lie grimly immobile. Sometimes a subdued crackling told how Brown was turning over on his straw mattress; once or twice Bush moaned a little in his feverish sleep. To-day was Wednesday. Only sixteen days ago and Hornblower had been captain of a seventy-four, and absolute master of the happiness of five hundred seamen. His least word directed the operations of a gigantic engine of war; the blows it had dealt had caused an imperial throne to totter. He thought regretfully of night-time aboard his ship, the creaking of the timbers and the singing of the rigging, the impassive quartermaster at the wheel in the faint light of the binnacle and the officer of the watch pacing the quarterdeck.

Now he was a nobody; where once he had minutely regulated five hundred men's lives he was reduced to chaffering for a single mattress for the only seaman left to him; police sergeants could insult him with impunity; he had to come and to go at the bidding of someone he despised. Worse than that — Hornblower felt the hot blood running under his skin as the full realization broke upon him again — he was being taken to Paris as a criminal. Very soon indeed, in some cold dawn, he would be led out into the ditch at Vincennes to face a firing party. Then he would be dead. Hornblower's vivid imagination pictured the impact of the musket bullets upon his breast, and he wondered how long the pain would last before oblivion came upon him. It was not the oblivion that he feared, he told himself — indeed in his present misery he almost looked forward to it. Perhaps it was the finality of death, the irrevocableness of it.

No, that was only a minor factor. Mostly it was instinctive fear of a sudden and drastic change to something completely unknown. He remembered the night he had spent as a child in the inn at Andover, when he was going to join his ship next day and enter upon the unknown life of the Navy. That was the nearest comparison — he had been frightened then, he remembered, so frightened he had been unable to sleep; and yet 'frightened' was too strong a word to describe the state of mind of someone who was quite prepared to face the future and could not be readily blamed for this sudden acceleration of heartbeat and prickling of sweat! A moaning sigh from Bush, loud in the stillness of the room, distracted him from his analysis of his fear. They were going to shoot Bush, too. Presumably they would lash him to a stake to have a fair shot at him — curious how, while it was easy to order a party to shoot an upright figure, however helpless, every instinct revolted against shooting a helpless man prostrate on a stretcher. It would be a monstrous crime to shoot Bush, who, even supposing his captain were guilty, could have done nothing except obey orders. But Bonaparte would do it. The necessity of rallying Europe round him in his struggle against England was growing ever more pressing. The blockade was strangling the Empire of the French as Antaeus had been strangled by Hercules. Bonaparte's unwilling allies — all Europe, that was to say, save Portugal and Sicily — were growing restive and thinking about defection; the French people themselves, Hornblower shrewdly guessed, were by now none too enamoured of this King Stork whom they had imposed on themselves. It would not be sufficient for Bonaparte merely to say that the British fleet was the criminal instrument of a perfidious tyranny; he had said that for a dozen years. The mere announcement that British naval officers had violated the laws of war would carry small enough weight, too. But to try a couple of officers and shoot them would be a convincing gesture, and the perverted statement of facts issued from Paris might help to sustain French public opinion — European public opinion as well — for another year or two in its opposition to England.

But it was bad luck that the victims should be Bush and he. Bonaparte had had a dozen British naval captains in his hands during the last few years, and he could have trumped up charges against half of them. Presumably it

was destiny which had selected Hornblower and Bush to suffer. Hornblower told himself that for twenty years he had been aware of a premonition of sudden death. It was certain and inevitable now. He hoped he would meet it bravely, go down with colours flying; but he mistrusted his own weak body. He feared that his cheeks would be pale and his teeth would chatter, or worse still, that his heart would weaken so that he would faint before the firing party had done their work. That would be a fine opportunity for a mordant couple of lines in the *Momteur Universel* — fine reading for Lady Barbara and Maria.

If he had been alone in the room he would have groaned aloud in his misery and turned over restlessly. But as it was he lay grimly rigid and silent. If his subordinates were awake they would never be allowed to guess that he was awake, too. To divert his mind from his approaching execution he cast round in search of something else to think about, and new subjects presented themselves in swarms. Whether Admiral Leighton were alive or dead, and whether, if the latter were the case, Lady Barbara Leighton would think more often or less often about Hornblower, her lover; how Maria's pregnancy was progressing; what was the state of British public opinion regarding the loss of the *Sutherland*, and, more especially, what Lady Barbara thought about his surrendering — there were endless things to think and worry about; there was endless flotsam bobbing about in the racing torrent of his mind. And the horses stampeded in the stable, and every two hours he heard the sentries being changed outside window and door.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dawn was not fully come, the room was only faintly illuminated by the grey light, when a clash of keys and a stamping of booted feet outside the door heralded the entrance of the sergeant of gendarmerie.

"The coach will leave in an hour's time," he announced. "The surgeon will be here in half an hour. You gentlemen will please be ready."

Bush was obviously feverish; Hornblower could see that at his first glance as he bent over him, still in his embroidered silk nightshirt. But Bush stoutly affirmed that he was not ill.

"I'm well enough, thank you, sir," he said; but his face was flushed and yet apprehensive, and his hands gripped his bedclothes. Hornblower suspected that the mere vibration of the floor as he and Brown walked about the room was causing pain to the unhealed stump of his leg.

"I'm ready to do anything you want done," said Hornblower.

"No, thank you, sir. Let's wait till the doctor comes, if you don't mind, sir."

Hornblower washed and shaved in the cold water in the wash-hand stand jug; during the time which had elapsed since he had left the *Sutherland* he had never been allowed hot. But he yearned for the cold shower bath he had been accustomed to take under the jet of the wash-deck pump; his skin seemed to creep when he stopped to consider it, and it was a ghoulish business to make shift with washing glove and soap, wetting a few inches at a time. Brown dressed himself unobtrusively in his own corner of the room, scurrying out like a mouse to wash when his captain had finished.

The doctor arrived with his leather satchel.

"And how is he this morning?" he asked, briskly; Hornblower saw a shade of concern pass over his face as he observed Bush's evident fever.

He knelt down and exposed the stump, Hornblower beside him. The limb jerked nervously as it was grasped with firm fingers; the doctor took Hornblower's hand and laid it on the skin above the wound.

"A little warm," said the doctor. It was hot to Hornblower's touch. "That may be a good sign. We shall know now."

He took hold of one of the ligatures and pulled at it. The thing came gliding out of the wound like a snake.

"Good!" said the doctor. "Excellent!"

He peered closely at the debris entangled in the knot, and then bent to examine the trickle of pus which had followed the ligature out of the wound.

"Excellent," repeated the doctor.

Hornblower went back in his mind through the numerous reports which surgeons had made to him regarding wounded men, and the verbal comments with which they had amplified them. The words 'laudable pus' came up in his mind; it was important to distinguish between the drainage from a wound struggling to heal itself and the stinking ooze of a poisoned limb. This was clearly laudable pus, judging by the doctor's comments.

"Now for the other one," said the doctor. He pulled at the remaining ligature, but all he got was a cry of pain from Bush — which seemed to go clean through Hornblower's heart — and a convulsive writhing of Bush's tortured body.

"Not quite ready," said the doctor. "I should judge that it will only be a matter of hours, though. Is your friend proposing to continue his journey to-day?"

"He is under orders to continue it," said Hornblower in his limping French. "You would consider such a course unwise?"

"Most unwise," said the doctor. "It will cause him a great deal of pain and may imperil the healing of the wound."

He felt Bush's pulse and rested his hand on his forehead.

"Most unwise," he repeated.

The door opened behind him to reveal the gendarmerie sergeant.

"The carriage is ready."

"It must wait until I have bandaged this wound. Get outside," said the doctor testily.

"I will go and speak to the Colonel," said Hornblower.

He brushed past the sergeant who tried too late to intercept him, into the main corridor of the inn, and out into the courtyard where stood the coach. The horses were being harnessed up, and a group of gendarmes were saddling their mounts on the farther side. Chance dictated that Colonel Caillard should be crossing the courtyard, too, in his blue and red uniform and his gleaming high boots, the star of the Legion of Honour dancing on his breast.

"Sir," said Hornblower.

"What is it now?" demanded Caillard.

"Lieutenant Bush must not be moved. He is very badly wounded and a crisis approaches."

The broken French came tumbling disjointedly from Hornblower's lips.

"I can do nothing in contravention of my orders," said Caillard. His eyes were cold and his mouth hard.

"You were not ordered to kill him," protested Hornblower.

"I was ordered to bring you and him to Paris with the utmost dispatch. We shall start in five minutes."

"But, sir — Cannot you wait even to-day?"

"Even as a pirate you must be aware of the impossibility of disobeying orders," said Caillard.

"I protest against those orders in the name of humanity."

That was a melodramatic speech, but it was a melodramatic moment, and in his ignorance of French Hornblower could not pick and choose his words. A sympathetic murmur in his ear attracted his notice, and, looking round, he saw the two aproned maids and a fat woman and the innkeeper all listening to the conversation with obvious disapproval of Caillard's point of view. They shut themselves away behind the kitchen door as Caillard turned a terrible eye upon them, but they had granted Hornblower a first momentary insight into the personal unpopularity which Imperial harshness was causing to develop in France.

"Sergeant," said Caillard abruptly. "Put the prisoners into the coach."

There was no hope of resistance. The gendarmes carried Bush's stretcher into the courtyard and perched it up on the seats, with Brown and Hornblower running round it to protect it from unnecessary jerks. The surgeon was scribbling notes hurriedly at the foot of the sheaf of notes regarding Bush's case which Hornblower had brought from Rosas. One of the maids came clattering across the courtyard with a steaming tray which she passed in to Hornblower through the open window. There was a platter of bread and three bowls of a black liquid which Hornblower was later to come to recognize as coffee — what blockaded France had come to call coffee. It was no pleasanter than the infusion of burnt crusts which Hornblower had sometimes drunk on shipboard during a long cruise without the opportunity of renewing cabin stores, but it was warm and stimulating at that time in the morning.

"We have no sugar, sir," said the maid apologetically.

"It doesn't matter," answered Hornblower, sipping thirstily.

"It is a pity the poor wounded officer has to travel," she went on. "These wars are terrible."

She had a snub nose and a wide mouth and big black eyes — no one could call her attractive, but the sympathy in her voice was grateful to a man who was a prisoner. Brown was propping up Bush's shoulders and holding a bowl to his lips. He took two or three sips and turned his head away. The coach rocked as two men scrambled up on to the box.

"Stand away, there!" roared the sergeant.

The coach lurched and rolled and wheeled round out of the gates, the horses' hoofs clattering loud on the cobbles, and the last Hornblower saw of the maid was the slight look of consternation on her face as she realized that she had lost the breakfast tray for good.

The road was bad, judging by the way the coach lurched; Hornblower heard a sharp intake of breath from Bush at one jerk. He remembered what the swollen and inflamed stump of Bush's leg looked like; every jar must be causing him agony. He moved up the seat to the stretcher and caught Bush's hand.

"Don't you worry yourself, sir," said Bush. "I'm all right." Even while he spoke Hornblower felt him grip tighter as another jolt caught him unexpectedly.

"I'm sorry, Bush," was all he could say; it was hard for the captain to speak at length to the lieutenant on such personal matters as his regret and unhappiness.

"We can't help it, sir," said Bush, forcing his peaked features into a smile.

That was the main trouble, their complete helplessness. Hornblower realized that there was nothing he could say, nothing he could do. The leather-scented stuffiness of the coach was already oppressing him, and he realized with horror that they would have to endure this jolting prison of theirs for another twenty days, perhaps, before they should reach Paris. He was restless and fidgety at the thought of it, and perhaps his restlessness communicated itself by contact to Bush, who gently withdrew his hand and turned his head to one side, leaving his captain free to fidget within the narrow confines of the coach.

Still there were glimpses of the sea to be caught on one side, and of the Pyrenees on the other. Putting his head out of the window Hornblower ascertained that their escort was diminished to-day. Only two troopers rode ahead of the coach, and four clattered behind at the heels of Caillard's horse. Presumably their entry into France made any possibility of a rescue far less likely. Standing thus, his head awkwardly protruding through the window, was less irksome than sitting in the stuffiness of the carriage. There were the vineyards and the stubble field to be seen, and the swelling heights of the Pyrenees receding into the blue distance. There were people, too — nearly all women, Hornblower noted — who hardly looked up from their hoeing to watch the coach and its escort bowling along the road. Now they were passing a party of uniformed soldiers — recruits and convalescents, Hornblower guessed, on their way to their units in Catalonia — shambling along the road more like sheep than soldiers. The young officer at their head saluted the glitter of the star on Caillard's chest and eyed the coach curiously at the same time.

Strange prisoners had passed along that road before him; Alvarez, the heroic defender of Gerona, who died on a wheelbarrow — the only bed granted him — in a dungeon on his way to trial, and Toussaint l'Ouverture, the Negro hero of Hayti, kidnapped from his sunny island and sent to die, inevitably, of pneumonia in a rocky fortress in the Jura; Palafox of Zaragoza, young Mina from Navarre — all victims of the tyrant's Corsican rancour. He and Bush would only be two more items in a list already notable. D'Enghien who had been shot in Vincennes six years ago was of the blood-royal, and his death had caused a European sensation, but Bonaparte had murdered plenty more. Thinking of all those who had preceded him made Hornblower gaze more yearningly from the carriage window, and breathe more deeply of the free air.

Still in sight of sea and hills — Mount Caingou still dominating the background — they halted at a posting inn beside the road to change horses. Caillard and the escort took new mounts; four new horses were harnessed up to the coach, and in less than a quarter of an hour they were off again, breasting the steep slopes before them with renewed strength. They must be averaging six miles to the hour at least, thought Hornblower, his mind beginning to make calculations. How far Paris might be he could only guess — five or six hundred miles, he fancied. From seventy to ninety hours of travel would bring them to the capital, and they might travel eight, twelve, fifteen hours a day. It might be five days, it might be twelve days, before they reached Paris — vague enough figures. He might be dead in a week's time, or he might still be alive in three weeks. Still alive! As

Hornblower thought those words he realized how greatly he desired to live; it was one of those moments when the Hornblower whom he observed so dispassionately and with faint contempt suddenly blended with the Hornblower who was himself, the most important and vital person in the whole world. He envied the bent old shepherd in the distance with the plaid rug over his shoulders, hobbling over the hillside bent over his stick.

Here was a town coming — there were ramparts, a frowning citadel, a lofty cathedral. They passed through a gateway and the horses' hoofs rang loudly on cobblestones as the coach threaded its way through narrow streets. Plenty of soldiers here, too; the streets were filled with variegated uniforms. This must be Perpignan, of course, the French base for the invasion of Catalonia. The coach stopped with a jerk in a wider street where an avenue of plane trees and a flagged quay bordered a little river, and, looking upward, Hornblower read the sign 'Hôtel de la Poste et du Perdrix. Route Nationale 9. Paris 849'. With a rush and bustle the horses were changed, Brown and Hornblower were grudgingly allowed to descend and stretch their stiff legs before returning to attend to Bush's wants — they were few enough in his present fever. Caillard and the gendarmes were snatching a hasty meal — the latter at tables outside the inn, the former visible through the windows of the front room. Someone brought the prisoners a tray with slices of cold meat, bread, wine, and cheese. It had hardly been handed into the coach when the escort climbed upon their horses again, the whip cracked and they were off. The coach heaved and dipped like a ship at sea as it mounted first one hump-backed bridge and then another, before the horses settled into a steady trot along the wide straight road bordered with poplars. "They waste no time," said Hornblower, grimly. "No, sir, that they don't!" agreed Brown. Bush would eat nothing, shaking his head feebly at the offer of bread and meat. All they could do for him was to moisten his lips with wine, for he was parched and thirsty; Hornblower made a mental note to remember to ask for water at the next posting house, and cursed himself for forgetting anything so obvious up to now. He and Brown shared the food, eating with their fingers and drinking turn and turn about from the bottle of wine, Brown apologetically wiping the bottle's mouth with the napkin after drinking. And as soon as the food was finished Hornblower was on his feet again craning through the carriage window, watching the countryside drifting by. A thin chill rain began, soaking his scanty hair as he stood there, wetting his face and even running in trickles down his neck, but still he stood there, staring out at freedom.

The sign of the inn where they stopped at nightfall read 'Hôtel de la Poste de Sigean. Route Nationale 9. Paris 805. Perpignan 44'. This place Sigean was no more than a sparse village, straggling for miles along the high road, and the inn was a tiny affair, smaller than the posting stables round the other three sides of the courtyard. The staircase to the upper rooms was too narrow and winding for the stretcher to be carried up them; it was only with difficulty that the bearers were able to turn with it into the salon which the innkeeper reluctantly yielded to them. Hornblower saw Bush wincing as the stretcher jarred against the sides of the door. "We must have a surgeon at once for the lieutenant," he said to the sergeant.

"I will inquire for one."

The innkeeper here was a surly brute with a squint; he was ungracious about clearing his best sitting-room of its spindly furniture, and bringing beds for Hornblower and Brown, and producing the various articles they asked for to help make Bush comfortable. There were no wax candles nor lamps; only tallow dips which stank atrociously.

"How's the leg feeling?" asked Hornblower, bending over Bush.

"All right, sir," said Bush, stubbornly, but he was so obviously feverish and in such obvious pain that Hornblower was anxious about him.

When the sergeant escorted in the maid with the dinner he asked, sharply:

"Why has the surgeon not come?"

"There is no surgeon in this village."

"No surgeon? The lieutenant is seriously ill. Is there no — no apothecary?"

Hornblower used the English word in default of French.

"The cow-doctor went across the hills this afternoon and will not be back to-night. There is no one to be found."

The sergeant went out of the room, leaving Hornblower to explain the situation to Bush.

"All right," said the latter, turning his head on the pillow with the feeble gesture which Hornblower dreaded. Hornblower nerved himself.

"I'd better dress that wound of yours myself," he said. "We might try cold vinegar on it, as they do in our service."

"Something cold," said Bush, eagerly.

Hornblower pealed at the bell, and when it was eventually answered he asked for vinegar and obtained it. Not one of the three had a thought for their dinner cooling on the side table.

"Now," said Hornblower.

He had a saucer of vinegar beside him, in which lay the soaking lint, and the clean bandages which the surgeon at Rosas had supplied were at hand. He turned back the bedclothes and revealed the bandaged stump. The leg twitched nervously as he removed the bandages; it was red and swollen and inflamed, hot to the touch for several inches above the point of amputation.

"It's pretty swollen here, too, sir," whispered Bush. The glands in his groin were huge.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

He peered at the scarred end, examined the dressings he had removed, with Brown holding the light. There had been a slight oozing from the point where the ligature had been withdrawn yesterday; much of the rest of the scar was healed and obviously healthy. There was only the other ligature which could be causing this trouble; Hornblower knew that if it were ready to come out it was dangerous to leave it in. Cautiously he took hold of the silken thread. The first gentle touch of it conveyed to his sensitive fingers a suggestion that it was free. It moved distinctly for a quarter of an inch, and judging by Bush's quiescence, it caused him no sudden spasm of pain. Hornblower set his teeth and pulled; the thread yielded very slowly, but it was obviously free, and no longer attached to the elastic artery. He pulled steadily against a yielding resistance. The ligature came slowly out of the wound, knot and all. Pus followed it in a steady trickle, only slightly tinged with blood. The thing was done.

The artery had not burst, and clearly the wound was in need of the free drainage open to it now with the withdrawal of the ligature.

"I think you're going to start getting well now," he said, aloud, making himself speak cheerfully. "How does it feel?"

"Better," said Bush. "I think it's better, sir."

Hornblower applied the soaking lint to the scarred surface. He found his hands trembling, but he steadied them with an effort as he bandaged the stump — not an easy job, this last, but one which he managed to complete in adequate fashion. He put back the wicker shield, tucked in the bedclothes, and rose to his feet. The trembling was worse than ever now, and he was shaken and sick, which surprised him.

"Supper, sir?" asked Brown. "I'll give Mr Bush his."

Hornblower's stomach resisted a protest at the suggestion of food. He would have liked to refuse, but that would have been too obvious a confession of weakness in front of a subordinate.

"When I've washed my hands," he said loftily. It was easier to eat than he had expected, when he sat down to force himself. He managed to choke down enough mouthfuls to make it appear as if he had eaten well, and with the passage of the minutes the memory of the revolting task on which he had been engaged became rapidly less clear. Bush displayed none of the appetite nor any of the cheerfulness which had been noticeable last night; that was the obvious result of his fever. But with free drainage to his wound it could be hoped that he would soon recover. Hornblower was tired now, as a result of his sleepless night the night before, and his emotions had been jarred into a muddle by what he had had to do; it was easier to sleep to-night, waking only at intervals to listen to Bush's breathing, and to sleep again reassured by the steadiness and tranquillity of the sound.

CHAPTER SIX

After that day the details of the journey became more blurred and indistinct — up to that day they had had all the unnatural sharpness of a landscape just before rain. Looking back at the journey, what was easiest to remember was Bush's convalescence — his steady progress back to health from the moment that the ligature was withdrawn from his wound. His strength began to come back fast, so that it would have been astonishing to anyone who did not know of his iron constitution and of the Spartan life he had always led. The transition was rapid between the time when his head had to be supported to allow him to drink and the time when he could sit himself up by his own unaided strength.

Hornblower could remember those details when he tried to, but all the rest was muddled and vague. There were memories of long hours spent at the carriage window, when it always seemed to be raining, and the rain wetted his face and hair. Those were hours spent in a sort of melancholy; Hornblower came to look back on them afterwards in the same way as someone recovered from insanity must look back on the blank days in the asylum. All the inns at which they stayed and the doctors who had attended to Bush were confused in his mind. He could remember the relentless regularity with which the kilometre figures displayed at the posting stations indicated the dwindling distance between them and Paris — Paris 525, Paris 383, Paris 287; somewhere at that point they changed from Route Nationale No. 9 to Route Nationale No. 7. Each day was bringing them nearer to Paris and death, and each day he sank farther into apathetic melancholy. Issoire, Clermont-Ferrand, Moulins; he read the names of the towns through which they passed without remembering them.

Autumn was gone now, left far behind down by the Pyrenees. Here winter had begun. Cold winds blew in melancholy fashion through the long avenues of leafless trees, and the fields were brown and desolate. At night he was sleeping heavily, tormented by dreams which he could not remember in the morning; his days he spent standing at the carriage window staring with sightless eyes over a dreary landscape where the chill rain fell. It seemed as if he had spent years consecutively in the leathery atmosphere of the coach, with the clatter of the horses' hoofs in his ears, and, visible in the tail of his eye, the burly figure of Caillard riding at the head of the escort close to the offside hind wheel.

During the bleakest afternoon they had yet experienced it did not seem as if Hornblower would be roused from his stupor even by the sudden unexpected stop which to a bored traveller might provide a welcome break in the monotony of travel. Dully, he watched Caillard ride up to ask the reason; dully, he gathered from the conversation that one of the coach horses had lost a shoe and gone dead lame. He watched with indifference the unharnessing of the unfortunate brute, and heard without interest the unhelpful answers of a passing travelling salesman with a pack-mule of whom Caillard demanded the whereabouts of the nearest smith. Two gendarmes went off at a snail's pace down a side track, leading the crippled animal; with only three horses the coach started off again towards Paris.

Progress was slow, and the stage was a long one. Only rarely before had they travelled after dark, but here it seemed that night would overtake them long before they could reach the next town. Bush and Brown were talking quite excitedly about this remarkable mishap — Hornblower heard their cackle without noticing it, as a man long resident beside a waterfall no longer hears the noise of the fall. The darkness which was engulfing them was premature. Low black clouds covered the whole sky, and the note of the wind in the trees carried with it something of menace. Even Hornblower noted that, nor was it long before he noticed something else, that the rain beating upon his face was changing to sleet, and then from sleet to snow; he felt the big flakes upon his lips, and tasted them with his tongue. The gendarme who lit the lamps beside the driver's box revealed to them through the windows the front of his cloak caked thick with snow, shining faintly in the feeble light of the lamp. Soon the sound of the horses' feet was muffled and dull, the wheels could hardly be heard, and the pace of the coach diminished still further as it ploughed through the snow piling in the road. Hornblower could hear the coachman using his whip mercilessly upon his weary animals — they were heading straight into the piercing wind, and were inclined to take every opportunity to flinch away from it.

Hornblower turned back from the window to his subordinates inside the coach — the faint light which the glass front panel allowed to enter from the lamps was no more than enough to enable him just to make out their shadowy forms. Bush was lying huddled under all his blankets; Brown was clutching his cloak round him,

and Hornblower for the first time noticed the bitter cold. He shut the coach window without a word, resigning himself to the leathery stuffiness of the interior. His dazed melancholy was leaving him without his being aware of it.

"God help sailors," he said cheerfully, "on a night like this."

That drew a laugh from the others in the darkness — Hornblower just caught the note of pleased surprise in it which told him that they had noticed and regretted the black mood which had gripped him during the last few days, and were pleased with this first sign of his recovery. Resentfully he asked himself what they expected of him. They did not know, as he did, that death awaited him and Bush in Paris. What was the use of thinking and worrying, guarded as they were by Caillard and six gendarmes? With Bush a hopeless cripple, what chance was there of escape? They did not know that Hornblower had put aside all thought of escaping by himself. If by a miracle he had succeeded, what would they think of him in England when he arrived there with the news that he had left his lieutenant to die? They might sympathize with him, pity him, understand his motive — he hated the thought of any of that; better to face a firing party at Bush's side, never to see Lady Barbara again, never to see his child. And better to spend his last few days in apathy than in fretting. Yet the present circumstances, so different from the monotony of the rest of the journey, had stimulated him. He laughed and chatted with the others as he had not done since they had left Beziers.

The coach crawled on through the darkness with the wind shrieking overhead. Already the windows on one side were opaque with the snow which was plastered upon them — there was not warmth enough within the coach to melt it. More than once the coach halted, and Hornblower, putting his head out, saw that they were having to clear the horses' hoofs of the snow balled into ice under their shoes.

"If we're more than two miles from the next post house," he announced, sitting back again, "we won't reach it until next week."

Now they must have topped a small rise, for the horses were moving quicker, almost trotting, with the coach swaying and lurching over the inequalities of the road. Suddenly from outside they heard an explosion of shouts and yells.

"He, hé, hé!"

The coach swung round without warning, lurching frightfully, and came to a halt leaning perilously over to one side. Hornblower sprang to the window and looked out. The coach was poised perilously on the bank of a river; Hornblower could see the black water sliding along almost under his nose. Two yards away a small rowing boat, moored to a post, swayed about under the influence of wind and stream. Otherwise there was nothing to be seen in the blackness. Some of the gendarmes had run to the coach horses' heads; the animals were plunging and rearing in their fright at the sudden apparition of the river before them.

Somehow in the darkness the coach must have got off the road and gone down some side track leading to the river here; the coachman had reined his horses round only a fraction of a second before disaster threatened. Caillard was sitting his horse blaring sarcasms at the others.

"A fine coachman you are, God knows. Why didn't you drive straight into the river and save me the trouble of reporting you to the sous-chef of the administration? Come along, you men. Do you want to stay here all night? Get the coach back on the road, you fools."

The snow came driving down in the darkness, the hot lamps sizzling continuously as the flakes lighted on them. The coachman got his horses under control again, the gendarmes stood back, and the whip cracked. The horses plunged and slipped, pawing for a footing, and the coach trembled without stirring from the spot.

"Come along, now!" shouted Caillard. "Sergeant, and you, Pellaton, take the horses. You other men get to the wheels! Now, altogether. Heave! Heave!"

The coach lurched a scant yard before halting again. Caillard cursed wildly.

"If the gentlemen in the coach would descend and help," suggested one of the gendarmes, "it would be better."

"They can, unless they would rather spend the night in the snow," said Caillard; he did not condescend to address Hornblower directly. For a moment Hornblower thought of telling him that he would see him damned first — there would be some satisfaction in that — but on the other hand he did not want to condemn Bush to a night of discomfort merely for an intangible self-gratification.

"Come on, Brown," he said, swallowing his resentment, and he opened the door and they jumped down into the snow.

Even with the coach thus lightened, and with five men straining at the spokes of the wheels, they could make no progress. The snow had piled up against the steep descent to the river, and the exhausted horses plunged uselessly in the deep mass.

"God, what a set of useless cripples!" raved Caillard. "Coachman, how far is it to Nevers?"

"Six kilometres, sir."

"You mean you think it's six kilometres. Ten minutes ago you thought you were on the right road and you were not. Sergeant, ride into Nevers for help. Find the mayor, and bring every able-bodied man in the name of the Emperor. You, Ramel, ride with the sergeant as far as the high road, and wait there until he returns. Otherwise they'll never find us. Go on, sergeant, what are you waiting for? And you others, tether your horses and put your cloaks on their backs. You can keep warm digging the snow away from that bank. Coachman, come off that box and help them."

The night was incredibly dark. Two yards from the carriage lamps nothing was visible at all, and with the wind whistling by they could not hear, as they stood by the coach, the movements of the men in the snow.

Hornblower stamped about beside the coach and flogged himself with his arms to get his circulation back. Yet this snow and this icy wind were strangely refreshing. He felt no desire at the moment for the cramped stuffiness of the coach. And as he swung his arms an idea came to him, which checked him suddenly in his movements, until, ridiculously afraid of his thoughts being guessed, he went on stamping and swinging more industriously than ever. The blood was running hot under his skin now, as it always did when he was making plans — when he had outmanoeuvred the *Natividad*, for instance, and when he had saved the *Pluto* in the storm off Cape Creux.

There had been no hope of escape without the means of transporting a helpless cripple; now, not twenty feet from him, there was the ideal means — the boat which rocked to its moorings at the river bank. On a night like this it was easy to lose one's way altogether — except in a boat on a river; in a boat one had only to keep shoving off from shore to allow the current to carry one away faster than any horse could travel in these conditions. Even so, the scheme was utterly harebrained. For how many days would they be able to preserve their liberty in the heart of France, two able-bodied men and one on a stretcher? They would freeze, starve — possibly even drown. But it was a chance, and nothing nearly as good would present itself (as far as Hornblower could judge from his past observations) between now and the time when the firing party at Vincennes would await them. Hornblower observed with mild interest that his fever was abating as he formed his resolve; and he was sufficiently amused at finding his jaw set in an expression of fierce resolution to allow his features to relax into a grim smile. There was always something laughable to him in being involved in heroics.

Brown came stamping round the coach and Hornblower addressed him, contriving with great effort to keep his voice low and yet matter-of-fact.

"We're going to escape down the river in that boat, Brown," he said.

"Aye, aye, sir," said Brown, with no more excitement in his voice than if Hornblower had been speaking of the cold. Hornblower saw his head in the darkness turn towards the nearly visible figure of Caillard, pacing restlessly in the snow beside the coach.

"That man must be silenced," said Hornblower.

"Aye, aye, sir." Brown meditated for a second before continuing. "Better let me do that, sir."

"Very good."

"Now, sir?"

"Yes."

Brown took two steps towards the unsuspecting figure.

"Here," he said. "Here, you."

Caillard turned and faced him, and as he turned he received Brown's fist full on his jaw, in a punch which had all Brown's mighty fourteen stone behind it. He dropped in the snow, with Brown leaping upon him like a tiger, Hornblower behind him.

"Tie him up in his cloak," whispered Hornblower. "Hold on to his throat while I get it unbuttoned. Wait. Here's his scarf. Tie his head up in that first."

The sash of the Legion of Honour was wound round and round the wretched man's head. Brown rolled the writhing figure over and with his knee in the small of his back tied his arms behind him with his neckcloth. Hornblower's handkerchief sufficed for his ankles — Brown strained the knot tight. They doubled the man in two and bundled him into his cloak, tying it about him with his swordbelt. Bush, lying on his stretcher in the darkness of the coach, heard the door open and a heavy load drop upon the floor.

"Mr Bush," said Hornblower — the formal 'Mr' came naturally again now the action had begun again — "We are going to escape in the boat."

"Good luck, sir," said Bush.

"You're coming too. Brown, take that end of the stretcher. Lift. Starboard a bit. Steady."

Bush felt himself lifted out of the coach, stretcher and all, and carried down through the snow.

"Get the boat close in," snapped Hornblower. "Cut the moorings. Now, Bush, let's get these blankets round you. Here's my cloak, take it as well. You'll obey orders, Mr Bush. Take the other side, Brown. Lift him into the stern-sheets. Lower away. Bow thwart, Brown. Take the oars. Right. Shove off. Give way."

It was only six minutes from the time when Hornblower had first conceived the idea. Now they were free, adrift on the black river, and Caillard was gagged and tied into a bundle on the floor of the coach. For a fleeting moment Hornblower wondered whether Caillard would suffocate before being discovered, and he found himself quite indifferent in the matter. Bonaparte's personal aides-de-camp, especially if they were colonels of gendarmerie as well, must expect to run risks while doing the dirty work which their situation would bring them. Meanwhile he had other things to think about.

"Easy!" he hissed at Brown. "Let the current take her."

The night was absolutely black; seated on the stern thwart he could not even see the surface of the water overside. For that matter, he did not know what river it was. But every river runs to the sea. The sea! Hornblower writhed in his seat in wild nostalgia at a vivid recollection of sea breezes in the nostrils and the feel of a heaving deck under his feet. Mediterranean or Atlantic, he did not know which, but if they had fantastic luck they might reach the sea in this boat by following the river far enough, and the sea was England's and would bear them home, to life instead of death, to freedom instead of imprisonment, to Lady Barbara, to Maria and his child.

The wind shrieked down on them, driving snow down his neck — thwarts and bottom boards were thick with snow. He felt the boat swing round under the thrust of the wind, which was in his face now instead of on his cheek.

"Turn her head to wind, Brown," he ordered, "and pull slowly into it."

The surest way of allowing the current a free hand with them was to try to neutralize the effect of the wind — a gale like this would soon blow them on shore, or even possibly blow them upstream; in this blackness it was impossible to guess what was happening to them.

"Comfortable, Mr Bush?" he asked.

"Aye, aye, sir."

Bush was faintly visible now, for the snow had driven up already against the grey blankets that swathed him and could just be seen from where Hornblower sat, a yard away.

"Would you like to lie down?"

"Thank you, sir, but I'd rather sit."

Now that the excitement of the actual escape was over, Hornblower found himself shivering in the keen wind without his cloak. He was about to tell Brown that he would take one of the sculls when Bush spoke again.

"Pardon, sir, but d'you hear anything?"

Brown rested on his oars, and they sat listening.

"No," said Hornblower. "Yes, I do, by God!"

Underlying the noise of the wind there was a distant monotonous roaring.

"H'm," said Hornblower, uneasily.

The roar was growing perceptibly louder; now it rose several notes in the scale, suddenly, and they could distinguish the sound of running water. Something appeared in the darkness beside the boat; it was a rock

nearly covered, rendered visible in the darkness by the boiling white foam round it. It came and was gone in a flash, the clearest proof of the speed with which the boat was travelling.

"Jesus!" said Brown in the bows.

Now the boat was spinning round, lurching, jolting. All the water was white overside, and the bellowing of the rapid was deafening. They could do no more than sit and cling to their seat as the boat heaved and jerked. Hornblower shook himself free from his dazed helplessness, which seemed to have lasted half an hour and probably lasted no more than a couple of seconds.

"Give me a scull," he snapped at Brown. "You fend off port side. I'll take starboard."

He groped in the darkness, found a scull, and took it from Brown's hand; the boat spun, hesitated, plunged again. All about them was the roar of the rapid. The starboard side of the boat caught on a rock; Hornblower felt icy water deluge his legs as it poured in over the side behind him. But already he was thrusting madly and blindly with his scull against the rock, he felt the boat slip and swing, he thrust so that the swing was accentuated, and next moment they were clear, wallowing sluggishly with the water up to the thwarts. Another rock slid hissing past, but the roar of the fall was already dwindling.

"Christ!" said Bush, in a mild tone contrasting oddly with the blasphemy. "We're through!"

"D'you know if there's a bailer in the boat, Brown?" demanded Hornblower.

"Yessir, there was one at my feet when I came on board."

"Find it and get this water out. Give me your other scull."

Brown splashed about in the icy water in a manner piteous to hear as he groped for the floating wooden basin. "Got it, sir," he reported, and they heard the regular sound of the water being scooped overside as he began work.

In the absence of the distraction of the rapids they were conscious of the wind again now, and Hornblower turned the boat's bows into it and pulled slowly at the sculls. Past experience appeared to have demonstrated conclusively that this was the best way to allow the current a free hand to take the boat downstream and away from pursuit. Judging by the speed with which the noise of the rapid was left behind the current of this river was very fast indeed — that was only to be expected, too, for all the rain of the past few days must have brought up every river brim full. Hornblower wondered vaguely again what river this was, here in the heart of France. The only one with whose name he was acquainted and which it might possibly be was the Rhône, but he felt a suspicion that the Rhône was fifty miles or so farther eastward. This river presumably had taken its origin in the gaunt Cevennes whose flanks they had turned in the last two days' journey. In that case it would run northward, and must presumably turn westward to find the sea — it must be the Loire or one of its tributaries. And the Loire fell into the Bay of Biscay below Nantes, which must be at least four hundred miles away. Hornblower's imagination dallied with the idea of a river four hundred miles long, and with the prospect of descending it from source to mouth in the depth of winter.

A ghostly sound as if from nowhere brought him back to earth again. As he tried to identify it it repeated itself more loudly and definitely, and the boat lurched and hesitated. They were gliding over a bit of rock which providence had submerged to a depth sufficient just to scrape their keel. Another rock, foam covered, came boiling past them close overside. It passed them from stern to bow, telling him what he had no means of discovering in any other way in the blackness, that in this reach the river must be running westward, for the wind was in the east and he was pulling into it.

"More of those to come yet, sir," said Bush — already they could hear the growing roar of water among rocks.

"Take a scull and watch the port side, Brown," said Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir. I've got the boat nearly dry," volunteered Brown, feeling for the scull.

The boat was lurching again now, dancing a little in the madness of the river. Hornblower felt bow and stern lift successively as they dropped over what felt like a downward step in the water; he reeled as he stood, and the water remaining in the bottom of the boat surged and splashed against his ankles. The din of the rapid in the darkness round them was tremendous; white water was boiling about them on either side. The boat swung and pitched and rolled. Then something invisible struck the port side amidships with a splintering crash. Brown tried unavailingly to shove off, and Hornblower swung round and with his added strength forced the boat clear. They plunged and rolled again; Hornblower, feeling in the darkness, found the gunwale stove in, but apparently only the two upper strakes were damaged — chance might have driven that rock through

below the water line as easily as it had done above it. Now the keel seemed to have caught; the boat heeled hideously, with Bush and Hornblower falling on their noses, but she freed herself and went on through the roaring water. The noise was dying down again and they were through another rapid.

"Shall I bail again, sir?" asked Brown.

"Yes. Give me your scull."

"Light on the starboard bow, sir!" interjected Bush.

Hornblower craned over his shoulder. Undoubtedly it was a light, with another close beside it, and another farther on, barely visible in the driving snow. That must be a village on the river bank, or a town — the town of Nevers, six kilometres, according to the coachman, from where they had embarked. They had come four miles already.

"Silence now!" hissed Hornblower. "Brown, stop bailing."

With those lights to guide him in the darkness, stable, permanent things in this insane world of infinite indefiniteness, it was marvellous how he felt master of his fate once more. He knew again which was upstream and which was down — the wind was still blowing downstream. With a touch of the sculls he turned the boat downstream, wind and current sped her along fast and the lights were gliding by rapidly. The snow stung his face — it was hardly likely there would be anyone in the town to observe them on a night like this. Certainly the boat must have come down the river faster than the plodding horses of the gendarmes whom Caillard had sent ahead. A new roaring of water caught his ear, different in timbre from the sound of a rapid. He craned round again to see the bridge before them silhouetted in white against the blackness by reason of the snow driven against the arches. He tugged wildly, first at one scull and then at both, heading for the centre of an arch; he felt the bow dip and the stern heave as they approached — the water was banked up above the bridge and rushed down through the arches in a long sleek black slope. As they whirled under Hornblower bent to his sculls, to give the boat sufficient way to carry her through the eddies which his seaman's instinct warned him would await them below the piers. The crown of the arch brushed his head as he pulled — the floods had risen as high as that. The sound of rushing water echoed strangely under the stonework for a second, and then they were through, with Hornblower tugging madly at the sculls.

One more light on the shore, and then they were in utter blackness again, their sense of direction lost.

"Christ!" said Bush again, this time with utter solemnity, as Hornblower rested on his sculls. The wind shrieked down upon them, blinding them with snow. From the bows came a ghostly chuckle.

"God help sailors," said Brown, "on a night like this."

"Carry on with the bailing, Brown, and save your jokes for afterwards," snapped Hornblower. But he giggled, nevertheless, even despite of the faint shock he experienced at hearing the lower deck cracking jokes to a captain and a first Lieutenant. His ridiculous habit of laughing insanely in the presence of danger or hardship was already ready to master him, and he giggled now, while he dragged at the oars and fought against the wind — he could tell by the way the blades dragged through the water that the boat was making plenty of leeway. He only stopped giggling when he realized with a shock that it was hardly more than two hours back that he had first uttered the prayer about God helping sailors on a night like this. It seemed like a fortnight ago at least that he had last breathed the leathery stuffiness of the inside of the coach.

The boat grated heavily over gravel, caught, freed itself, bumped again, and stuck fast. All Hornblower's shoving with the sculls would not get her afloat again.

"Nothing to do but shove her off," said Hornblower, laying down his sculls. He stepped over the side into the freezing water, slipping on the stones, with Brown beside him. Between them they ran her out easily, scrambled on board, and Hornblower made haste to seize the sculls and pull her into the wind. Yet a few seconds later they were aground again. It was the beginning of a nightmare period. In the darkness Hornblower could not guess whether their difficulties arose from the action of the wind in pushing them against the bank, or from the fact that the river was sweeping round in a great bend here, or whether they had strayed into a side channel with scanty water. However it was, they were continually having to climb out and shove the boat off. They slipped and plunged over the invisible stones; they fell waist deep into unseen pools, they cut themselves and bruised themselves in this mad game of blind man's buff with the treacherous river. It was bitterly cold now; the sides of the boat were glazed with ice. In the midst of his struggles with the boat Hornblower was consumed with anxiety for Bush, bundled up in cloak and blankets in the stern.

"How is it with you, Bush?" he asked.

"I'm doing well, sir," said Bush.

"Warm enough?"

"Aye aye, sir. I've only one foot to get wet now, you know, sir."

He was probably being deceitfully cheerful, thought Hornblower, standing ankle deep in rushing water and engaged in what seemed to be an endless haul of the boat through invisible shallows. Blankets or no blankets, he must be horribly cold and probably wet as well, and he was a convalescent who ought to have been kept in bed. Bush might die out here this very night. The boat came free with a run, and Hornblower staggered back waist deep in the chill water. He swung himself in over the swaying gunwale while Brown, who apparently had been completely submerged, came spluttering in over the other side. Each of them grabbed a scull in their anxiety to have something to do while the wind cut them to the bone.

The current whirled them away. Their next contact with the shore was among trees — willows, Hornblower guessed in the darkness. The branches against which they scraped volleyed snow at them, scratched them and whipped them, held the boat fast until by feeling round in the darkness they found the obstruction and lifted it clear. By the time they were free of the willows Hornblower had almost decided that he would rather have rocks if he could choose and he giggled again, feebly, with his teeth chattering. Naturally, they were among rocks again quickly enough; at this point apparently there was a sort of minor rapid down which the river rolled among rocks and banks of stones.

Already Hornblower was beginning to form a mental picture of the river — long swift reaches alternating with narrow and rock-encumbered stretches, looped back and forth at the whim of the surrounding country. This boat they were in had probably been built close to the spot where they had found her, had been kept there as a ferry boat, probably by farming people, on the clear reach where they had started, and had probably never been more than half a mile from her moorings before. Hornblower, shoving off from a rock, decided that the odds were heavily against her ever seeing her moorings again.

Below the rapid they had a long clear run — Hornblower had no means of judging how long. Their eyes were quick now to pick out the snow-covered shore when it was a yard or more away, and they kept the boat clear. Every glimpse gave them a chance to guess at the course of the river compared with the direction of the wind, so that they could pull a few lusty strokes without danger of running aground as long as there was no obstructions in mid-channel. In fact, it had almost stopped snowing — Hornblower guessed that what little snow was being flung at them by the wind had been blown from branches or scooped from drifts. That did not make it any warmer; every part of the boat was coated with ice — the floorboards were slippery with it except where his heels rested while rowing.

Ten minutes of this would carry them a mile or more — more for certain. He could not guess at all how long they had been travelling, but he could be sure that with the countryside under thick snow they were well ahead of any possible pursuit, and the longer this wonderful rock-free reach endured the safer they would be. He tugged away fiercely, and Brown in the bows responded, stroke for stroke.

"Rapids ahead, sir," said Bush at length.

Resting on his oar Hornblower could hear, far ahead, the familiar roar of water pouring over rocks; the present rate of progress had been too good to last, and soon they would be whirling down among rocks again, pitching and heaving.

"Stand by to fend off on the port side, Brown," he ordered.

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower sat on his thwart with his scull poised; the water was sleek and black overside. He felt the boat swing round. The current seemed to be carrying her over to one side, and he was content to let her go. Where the main mass of water made its way was likely to be the clearest channel down the rapid. The roar of the fall was very loud now.

"By God!" said Hornblower in sudden panic, standing up to peer ahead.

It was too late to save themselves — he had noticed the difference in the sound of the fall only when they were too close to escape. Here there was no rapid like those they had already descended, not even one much worse. Here there was a rough dam across the river — a natural transverse ledge, perhaps, which had caught and retained the rocks rolled down in the bed, or else something of human construction. Hornblower's quick

brain turned these hypotheses over even as the boat leaped at the drop. Along its whole length water was brimming over the obstruction; at this particular point it surged over in a wide swirl, sleek at the top, and plunging into foaming chaos below. The boat heaved sickeningly over the summit and went down the slope like a bullet. The steep steady wave at the foot was as unyielding as a brick wall as they crashed into it. Hornblower found himself strangling under the water, the fall still roaring in his ears, his brain still racing. In nightmare helplessness he was scraped over the rocky bottom. The pressure in his lungs began to hurt him. It was agony — agony. Now he was breathing again — one single gulp of air like fire in his throat as he went under again, and down to the rocks at the bottom until his breast was hurting worse than before. Then another quick breath — it was as painful to breathe as it was to strangle. Over and down, his ears roaring and his head swimming. The grinding of the rocks of the river bed over which he was scraped was louder than any clap of thunder he had ever heard. Another gulp of air — it was as if he had been anticipating it, but he had to force himself to make it, for he felt as if it would be easier not to, easier to allow this agony in his breast to consume him.

Down again, to the roar and torment below the surface. His brain, still working like lightning, guessed how it was with him. He was caught in the swirl below the dam, was being swept downstream on the surface, pushed into the undertow and carried up again along the bottom, to be spewed up and granted a second in which to breathe before being carried round again. He was ready this time to strike out feebly, no more than three strokes, sideways, at his next breathing space. When he was next sucked down the pain in his breast was inconceivably greater and blending with that agony was another just as bad of which he now became conscious — the pain of the cold in his limbs. It called for every scrap of his resolution to force himself to take another breath and to continue his puny effort sideways when the time came for it. Down again; he was ready to die, willing, anxious to die, now, so that this pain would stop. A bit of board had come into his hand, with nails protruding from one end. That must be a plank from the boat, shattered to fragments and whirling round and round with him, eternally. Then his resolution flickered up once more. He caught a gulp of air as he rose to the surface, striking out for the shore, waiting in apprehension to be dragged down. Marvellous; he had time for a second breath, and a third. Now he wanted to live, so heavenly were these painless breaths he was taking. But he was so tired, and so sleepy. He got to his feet, fell as the water swept his legs away again from under him, splashed and struggled in mad panic, scrambling through the shallows on his hands and knees. Rising, he took two more steps, before falling with his face in the snow and his feet still trailing in the rushing water.

He was roused by a human voice bellowing apparently in his ear. Lifting his head he saw a faint dark figure a yard or two away, bellowing with Brown's voice.

"Ahoy! Cap'n, Cap'n! Oh, Cap'n!"

"I'm here," moaned Hornblower, and Brown came and knelt over him.

"Thank God, sir," he said, and then, raising his voice, "The cap'n's here, Mr Bush."

"Good!" said a feeble voice five yards away.

At that Hornblower fought down his nauseating weakness and sat up. If Bush were still alive he must be looked after at once. He must be naked and wet, exposed in the snow to this cutting wind. Hornblower reeled to his feet, staggered, clutched Brown's arm, and stood with his brain whirling.

"There's a light up there, sir," said Brown, hoarsely. "I was just goin' to it if you hadn't answered my hail."

"A light?"

Hornblower passed his hands over his eyes and peered up the bank. Undoubtedly it was a light shining faintly, perhaps a hundred yards away. To go there meant surrender — that was the first reaction of Hornblower's mind. But to stay here meant death. Even if by a miracle they could light a fire and survive the night here they would be caught next morning — and Bush would be dead for certain. There had been a faint chance of life when he planned the escape from the coach, and now it was gone.

"We'll carry Mr Bush up," he said.

"Aye aye, sir."

They plunged through the snow to where Bush lay.

"There's a house just up the bank, Bush. We'll carry you there."

Hornblower was puzzled by his ability to think and to speak while he felt so weak; the ability seemed unreal, fictitious.

"Aye aye, sir."

They stooped and lifted him up between them, linking hands under his knees and behind his back. Bush put his arms round their necks; his flannel nightshirt dripped a further stream of water as they lifted him. Then they started trudging, knee deep in the snow, up the bank towards the distant light.

They stumbled over obstructions hidden in the snow. They slipped and staggered. Then they slid down a bank and fell, all together, and Bush gave a cry of pain.

"Hurt, sir?" asked Brown.

"Only jarred my stump. Captain, leave me here and send down help from the house."

Hornblower could still think. Without Bush to burden them they might reach the house a little quicker, but he could imagine all the delays that would ensue after they had knocked at the door — the explanations which would have to be made in his halting French, the hesitation and the time wasting before he could get a carrying party started off to find Bush — who meanwhile would be lying wet and naked in the snow. A quarter of an hour of it would kill Bush, and he might be exposed for twice as long as that. And there was the chance that there would be no one in the house to help carry him.

"No," said Hornblower cheerfully. "It's only a little way. Lift, Brown."

They reeled along through the snow towards the light. Bush was a heavy burden — Hornblower's head was swimming with fatigue and his arms felt as if they were being dragged out of their sockets. Yet somehow within the shell of his fatigue the inner kernel of his brain was still active and restless.

"How did you get out of the river?" he asked, his voice sounding flat and unnatural in his ears.

"Current took us to the bank at once, sir," said Bush, faintly surprised. "I'd only just kicked my blankets off when I touched a rock, and there was Brown beside me hauling me out."

"Oh," said Hornblower.

The whim of a river in flood was fantastic; the three of them had been within a yard of each other when they entered the water, and he had been dragged under while the other two had been carried to safety. They could not guess at his desperate struggle for life, and they would never know of it, for he would never be able to tell them about it. He felt for the moment a bitter sense of grievance against them, resulting from his weariness and his weakness. He was breathing heavily, and he felt as if he would give a fortune to lay down his burden and rest for a couple of minutes; but his pride forbade, and they went on through the snow, stumbling over the inequalities below the surface. The light was coming near at last.

They heard a faint inquiring bark from a dog.

"Give 'em a hail, Brown," said Hornblower.

"Ahoy!" roared Brown. "House ahoy!"

Instantly two dogs burst into a clamorous barking.

"Ahoy!" yelled Brown again, and they staggered on. Another light flashed into view from another part of the house. They seemed to be in some kind of garden now; Hornblower could feel plants crushing under his feet in the snow, and the thorns of a rose tree tore at his trouser leg. The dogs were barking furiously. Suddenly a voice came from a dark upper window,

"Who is there?" it asked in French.

Hornblower prodded at his weary brain to find words to reply.

"Three men," he said. "Wounded."

That was the best he could do.

"Come nearer," said the voice, and they staggered forward, slipped down an unseen incline, and halted in the square of light cast by the big lighted window in the ground floor, Bush in his nightshirt resting in the arms of the bedraggled other two.

"Who are you?"

"Prisoners of war," said Hornblower.

"Wait one moment, if you please," said the voice politely.

They stood shuddering in the snow until a door opened near the lighted window, showing a bright rectangle of light and some human silhouettes.

"Come in, gentlemen," said the polite voice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The door opened into a stone flagged hall; a tall thin man in a blue coat with a glistening white cravat stood there to welcome them, and at his side was a young woman, her shoulders bare in the lamplight. There were three others, too — maidservants and a butler, Hornblower fancied vaguely, as he advanced into the hall under the burden of Bush's weight. On a side table the lamplight caught the ivory butts of a pair of pistols, evidently laid there by their host on his deciding that his nocturnal visitors were harmless. Hornblower and Brown halted again for a moment, ragged and dishevelled and daubed with snow, and water began to trickle at once to the floor from their soaking garments; and Bush was between them, one foot in a grey worsted sock sticking out under the hem of his flannel nightshirt. Hornblower's constitutional weakness almost overcame him again and he had to struggle hard to keep himself from giggling as he wondered how these people were explaining to themselves the arrival of a night-shirted cripple out of a snowy night.

At least his host had sufficient self-control to show no surprise.

"Come in, come in," he said. He put his hand to a door beside him and then withdrew it. "You will need a better fire than I can offer you in the drawing-room. Felix, show the way to the kitchen — I trust you gentlemen will pardon my receiving you there? This way, sirs. Chairs, Felix, and send the maids away."

It was a vast low-ceilinged room, stone-flagged like the hall. Its grateful warmth was like Paradise; in the hearth glowed the remains of a fire and all round them kitchen utensils winked and glittered. The woman without a word piled fresh billets of wood upon the fire and set to work with bellows to work up a blaze. Hornblower noticed the glimmer of her silk dress; her piled up hair was golden, nearly auburn.

"Cannot Felix do that, Marie, my dear? Very well, then. As you will," said their host. "Please sit down, gentlemen. Wine, Felix."

They lowered Bush into a chair before the fire. He sagged and wavered in his weakness, and they had to support him; their host clucked in sympathy.

"Hurry with those glasses, Felix, and then attend to the beds. A glass of wine, sir? And for you, sir? Permit me."

The woman he had addressed as 'Marie' had risen from her knees, and withdrew silently; the fire was crackling bravely amid its battery of roasting spits and cauldrons. Hornblower was shivering uncontrollably, nevertheless, in his dripping clothes. The glass of wine he drank was of no help to him; the hand he rested on Bush's shoulder shook like a leaf.

"You will need dry clothes," said their host. "If you will permit me, I will —"

He was interrupted by the re-entrance of the butler and Marie, both of them with their arms full of clothes and blankets.

"Admirable!" said their host. "Felix, you will attend these gentlemen. Come, my dear."

The butler held a silken nightshirt to the blaze while Hornblower and Brown stripped Bush of his wet clothes and chafed him with a towel.

"I thought I should never be warm again," said Bush, when his head came out through the collar of the nightshirt. "And you, sir? You shouldn't have troubled about me. Won't you change your clothes now, sir? I'm all right."

"We'll see you comfortable first," said Hornblower. There was a fierce perverse pleasure in neglecting himself to attend to Bush. "Let me look at that stump of yours."

The blunt seamed end still appeared extraordinarily healthy. There was no obvious heat or inflammation when Hornblower took it in his hand, no sign of pus exuding from the scars. Felix found a cloth in which Hornblower bound it up, while Brown wrapped him about in a blanket.

"Lift him now, Brown. We'll put him into bed."

Outside in the flagged hall they hesitated as to which way to turn, when Marie suddenly appeared from the left hand door.

"In here," she said; her voice was a harsh contralto. "I have had a bed made up on the ground floor for the wounded man. I thought it would be more convenient."

One maid — a gaunt old woman, rather — had just taken a warming pan from between the sheets; the other was slipping a couple of hot bottles into the bed. Hornblower was impressed by Marie's practical forethought. He tried with poor success to phrase his thanks in French while they lowered Bush into bed, and covered him up.

"God, that's good, thank you, sir," said Bush.

They left him with a candle burning at his bedside — Hornblower was in a perfect panic now to strip off his wet clothes before that roaring kitchen fire. He towelled himself with a warm towel and slipped into a warm woollen shirt; standing with his bare legs toasting before the blaze he drank a second glass of wine. Fatigue and cold fell away from him, and he felt exhilarated and lightheaded as a reaction. Felix crouched before him tendering him a pair of trousers, and he stepped into them and suffered Felix to tuck in his shirt tails and button him up — it was the first time since childhood that he had been helped into his trousers, but this evening it seemed perfectly natural. Felix crouched again to put on his socks and shoes, stood to buckle his stock and help him on with waistcoat and coat.

"Monsieur le Comte and Madame la Vicomtesse await monsieur in the drawing room," said Felix — it was odd how, without a word of explanation, Felix had ascertained that Brown was of a lower social level. The very clothes he had allotted to Brown indicated that.

"Make yourself comfortable here, Brown," said Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir," said Brown, standing at attention with his black hair in a rampant mass — only Hornblower had had an opportunity so far of using a comb.

Hornblower stepped in to look at Bush, who was already asleep, snoring faintly at the base of his throat. He seemed to have suffered no ill effects from his immersion and exposure — his iron frame must have grown accustomed to wet and cold during twenty-five years at sea. Hornblower blew out the candle and softly closed the door, motioning to the butler to precede him. At the drawing room door Felix asked Hornblower his name, and when he announced him Hornblower was oddly relieved to hear him make a sad hash of the pronunciation — it made Felix human again.

His host and hostess were seated on either side of the fire at the far end of the room, and the Count rose to meet him.

"I regret," he said, "that I did not quite hear the name which my major-domo announced."

"Captain Horatio Hornblower, of His Britannic Majesty's ship *Sutherland*," said Hornblower.

"It is the greatest pleasure to meet you, Captain," said the Count, side-stepping the difficulty of pronunciation with the agility to be expected of a representative of the old regime. "I am Lucien Antoine de Ladon, Comte de Graçay."

The men exchanged bows.

"May I present you to my daughter-in-law? Madame la Vicomtesse de Graçay."

"Your servant, ma'am," said Hornblower, bowing again, and then felt like a graceless lout because the English formula had risen to his lips by the instinct the action prompted. He hurriedly racked his brains for the French equivalent, and ended in a shamefaced mumble of "Enchanté."

The Vicomtesse had black eyes in the maddest contrast with her nearly auburn hair. She was stoutly — one might almost say stockily — built, and was somewhere near thirty years of age, dressed in black silk which left sturdy white shoulders exposed. As she curtseyed her eyes met his in complete friendliness.

"And what is the name of the wounded gentleman whom we have the honour of entertaining?" she asked; even to Hornblower's unaccustomed ear her French had a different quality from the Count's.

"Bush," said Hornblower, grasping the import of the question with an effort. "First Lieutenant of my ship. I have left my servant, Brown, in the kitchen."

"Felix will see that he is comfortable," interposed the Count. "What of yourself, Captain? Some food? A glass of wine?"

"Nothing, thank you," said Hornblower. He felt in no need of food in this mad world, although he had not eaten since noon.

"Nothing, despite the fatigues of your journey?" There could hardly be a more delicate allusion than that to Hornblower's recent arrival through the snow, drenched and battered.

"Nothing, thank you," repeated Hornblower. "Will you not sit down, Captain?" asked the Vicomtesse. They all three found themselves chairs.

"You will pardon us, I hope," said the Count, "if we continue to speak French. It is ten years since I last had occasion to speak English, and even then I was a poor scholar, while my daughter-in-law speaks none."

"Bush," said the Vicomtesse. "Brown. I can say those names. But your name, Captain, is difficult. Orrenblor — I cannot say it."

"Bush! Orrenblor!" exclaimed the Count, as though reminded of something. "I suppose you are aware, Captain, of what the French newspapers have been saying about you recently?"

"No," said Hornblower. "I should like to know, very much."

"Pardon me, then."

The Count took up a candle and disappeared through a door; he returned quickly enough to save Hornblower from feeling too self-conscious in the silence that ensued.

"Here are recent copies of the *Moniteur*," said the Count. "I must apologize in advance, Captain, for the statements made in them."

He passed the newspapers over to Hornblower, indicating various columns in them. The first one briefly announced that a dispatch by semaphore just received from Perpignan informed the Ministry of Marine that an English ship of the line had been captured at Rosas. The next was the amplification. It proclaimed in triumphant detail that the hundred gun ship *Sutherland* which had been committing acts of piracy in the Mediterranean had met a well-deserved fate at the hands of the Toulon fleet directed by Admiral Cosmao. She had been caught unawares and overwhelmed, and had 'pusillanimously hauled down the colours of perfidious Albion under which she had committed so many dastardly crimes.' The French public was assured that her resistance had been of the poorest, it being advanced in corroboration that only one French ship had lost a topmast during the cannonade. The action took place under the eyes of thousands of the Spanish populace, and would be a salutary lesson to those few among them who, deluded by English lies or seduced by English gold, still cherished notions of resistance to their lawful sovereign King Joseph.

Another article announced that the infamous Captain Hornblower and his equally wicked lieutenant Bush had surrendered in the *Sutherland*, the latter being one of the few wounded in the encounter. All those peace-loving French citizens who had suffered as a result of their piratical depredations could rest assured that a military court would inquire immediately into the crimes these two had committed. Too long had the modern Carthage sent forth her minions to execute her vile plans with impunity! Their guilt would soon be demonstrated to a world which would readily discriminate between the truth and the vile lies which the poisoned pens in Canning's pay so persistently poured forth.

Yet another article declared that as a result of Admiral Cosmao's great victory over the *Sutherland* at Rosas English naval action on the coasts of Spain had ceased, and the British army of Wellington, so imprudently exposed to the might of the French arms, was already suffering seriously from a shortage of supplies. Having lost one vile accomplice in the person of the detestable Hornblower, perfidious Albion was about to lose another on Wellington's inevitable surrender.

Hornblower read the smudgy columns in impotent fury. 'A hundred gun ship', forsooth, when the *Sutherland* was only a seventy-four and almost the smallest of her rate in the list! 'Resistance of the poorest!' 'One topmast lost!' The *Sutherland* had beaten three bigger ships into wrecks and had disabled a fourth before surrendering. 'One of the few wounded!' Two-thirds of the *Sutherland's* crew had given life or limb, and with his own eyes he had seen the blood running from the scuppers of the French flagship. 'English naval action had ceased!' There was not a hint that a fortnight after the capture of the *Sutherland* the whole French squadron had been destroyed in the night attack on Rosas Bay.

His professional honour had been impugned; the circumstantial lies had been well told, too — that subtle touch about only one topmast being lost had every appearance of verisimilitude. Europe might well believe that he was a poltroon as well as a pirate, and he had not the slightest chance of contradicting what had been said. Even in England such reports must receive a little credit — most of the *Moniteur's* bulletins, especially the naval ones, were reproduced in the English press. Lady Barbara, Maria, his brother captains, must all be

wondering at the present moment just how much credence should be given to the *Moniteur's* statements. Accustomed as the world might be to Bonaparte's exaggerations people could hardly be expected to realize that in this case everything said — save for the bare statement of his surrender — had been completely untrue. His hands shook a little with the passion that consumed him, and he was conscious of the hot flush in his cheeks as he looked up and met the eyes of the others. It was hard to grope for his few French words while he was so angry.

"He is a liar!" he spluttered at length. "He dishonours me!"

"He dishonours everyone," said the Count, quietly.

"But this — but this," said Hornblower, and then gave up the struggle to express himself in French. He remembered that while he was in captivity in Rosas he had realized that Bonaparte would publish triumphant bulletins regarding the capture of the *Sutherland*, and it was only weakness to be enraged by them now that he was confronted by them.

"Will you forgive me," asked the Count, "if I change the subject and ask you a few personal questions?"

"Certainly."

"I presume you have escaped from an escort which was taking you to Paris?"

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"Where did you escape?"

Hornblower tried to explain that it was at a point where a by-road ran down to the river's edge, six kilometres on the farther side of Nevers. Haltingly, he went on to describe the conditions of his escape, the silencing of Colonel Caillard, and the wild navigation of the river in the darkness.

"That must have been about six o'clock, I presume?" asked the Count.

"Yes."

"It is only midnight now, and you have come twenty kilometres. There is not the slightest chance of your escort seeking you here for some time. That is what I wanted to know. You will be able to sleep in tranquillity to-night, Captain."

Hornblower realized with a shock that he had long taken it for granted that he would sleep in tranquillity, at least as far as immediate recapture was concerned; the atmosphere of the house had been too friendly for him to feel otherwise. By way of reaction, he began to feel doubts.

"Are you going to — to tell the police we are here?" he asked; it was infernally difficult to phrase that sort of thing in a foreign language and avoid offence.

"On the contrary," said the Count. "I shall tell them, if they ask me, that you are not here. I hope you will consider yourself among friends in this house, Captain, and that you will make your stay here as long as is convenient to you."

"Thank you, sir. Thank you very much," stammered Hornblower.

"I may add," went on the Count, "that circumstances — it is too long a story to tell you — make it quite certain that the authorities will accept my statement that I know nothing of your whereabouts. To say nothing of the fact that I have the honour to be mayor of this commune and so represent the government, even though my *adjoint* does all the work of the position."

Hornblower noticed his wry smile as he used the word 'honour,' and tried to stammer a fitting reply, to which the Count listened politely. It was amazing, now Hornblower came to think about it, that chance should have led him to a house where he was welcomed and protected, where he might consider himself safe from pursuit, and sleep in peace. The thought of sleep made him realize that he was desperately tired, despite his excitement. The impassive face of the Count, and the friendly face of his daughter-in-law, gave no hint as to whether or not they too were tired; for a moment Hornblower wrestled with the problem which always presents itself the first evening of one's stay in a strange house — whether the guest should suggest going to bed or wait for a hint from his host. He made his resolve, and rose to his feet.

"You are tired," said the Vicomtesse — the first words she had spoken for some time.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"I will show you your room, sir. Shall I ring for your servant? No?" said the Count.

Out in the hall, after Hornblower had bowed good night, the Count indicated the pistols still lying on the side table.

"Perhaps you would care to have those at your bedside?" he asked politely. "You might feel safer?" Hornblower was tempted, but finally he refused the offer. Two pistols would not suffice to save him from Bonaparte's police should they come for him.

"As you will," said the Count, leading the way with a candle. "I loaded them when I heard your approach because there was a chance that you were a party of *réfractaires* — young men who evade the conscription by hiding in the woods and mountains. Their number has grown considerably since the latest decree anticipating the conscription. But I quickly realized that no gang meditating mischief would proclaim its proximity with shouts. Here is your room, sir. I hope you will find here everything you require. The clothes you are wearing appear to fit so tolerably that perhaps you will continue to wear them to-morrow? Then I shall say good night. I hope you will sleep well."

The bed was deliciously warm as Hornblower slid into it and closed the curtains. His thoughts were pleasantly muddled; disturbing memories of the appalling swoop of the little boat down the long black slope of water at the fall, and of his agonized battle for life in the water, were overridden by mental pictures of the Count's long, mobile face and of Caillard bundled in his cloak and dumped down upon the carriage floor. He did not sleep well, but he could hardly be said to have slept badly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Felix entered the next morning bearing a breakfast tray, and he opened the bed curtains while Hornblower lay dazed in his bed. Brown followed Felix, and while the latter arranged the tray on the bedside table he applied himself to the task of gathering together the clothes which Hornblower had flung down the night before, trying hard to assume the unobtrusive deference of a gentleman's servant. Hornblower sipped gratefully at the steaming coffee, and bit into the bread; Brown recollected another duty and hurried across to open the bedroom curtains.

"Gale's pretty nigh dropped, sir," he said. "I think what wind there's left is backing southerly, and we might have a thaw."

Through the deep windows of the bedroom Hornblower could see from his bed a wide landscape of dazzling white, falling steeply away down to the river which was black by contrast, appearing like a black crayon mark on white paper. Trees stood out starkly through the snow where the gale had blown their branches bare; down beside the river the willows there — some of them stood in the flood, with white foam at their feet — were still domed with white. Hornblower fancied he could hear the rushing of water, and was certain that he could hear the regular droning of the fall, the tumbling water at whose foot was just visible over the shoulder of the bank. Far beyond the river could be seen the snow-covered roofs of a few small houses.

"I've been in to Mr Bush already, sir," said Brown — Hornblower felt a twinge of remorse at being too interested in the landscape to have a thought to spare for his lieutenant — "and he's all right an' sends you his best respects, sir. I'm goin' to help him shave after I've attended to you, sir."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

He felt deliciously languorous. He wanted to be idle and lazy. The present was a moment of transition between the miseries and dangers of yesterday and the unknown activities of to-day, and he wanted that moment to be prolonged on and on indefinitely; he wanted time to stand still, the pursuers who were seeking him on the other side of Nevers to be stilled into an enchanted rigidity while he lay here free from danger and responsibility. The very coffee he had drunk contributed to his ease by relieving his thirst without stimulating him to activity. He sank imperceptibly and delightfully into a vague day-dream; it was hateful of Brown to recall him to wakefulness again by a respectful shuffling of his feet,

"Right," said Hornblower resigning himself to the inevitable.

He kicked off the bedclothes and rose to his feet, the hard world of the matter-of-fact closing round him, and his daydreams vanishing like the cloud-colours of a tropical sunrise. As he shaved and washed in the absurdly small basin in the corner, he contemplated grimly the prospect of prolonged conversation in French with his hosts. He grudged the effort it would involve, and he envied Bush his complete inability to speak any other

tongue than English. Having to exert himself to-day loomed as large to his selfwilled mind as the fact that he was doomed to death if he were caught again. He listened absentmindedly to Bush's garrulity when he went in to visit him, and did nothing at all to satisfy his curiosity regarding the house in which they had found shelter, and the intentions of their hosts. Nor was his mood relieved by his pitying contempt for himself at thus working off his ill temper on his unoffending lieutenant. He deserted Bush as soon as he decently could and went off in search of his hosts in the drawing room.

The Vicomtesse alone was there, and she made him welcome with a smile.

"M. de Graçay is at work in his study," she explained. "You must be content with my entertaining you this morning."

To say even the obvious in French was an effort for Hornblower, but he managed to make the suitable reply, which the lady received with a smile. But conversation did not proceed smoothly, with Hornblower having laboriously to build up his sentences beforehand and to avoid the easy descent into Spanish which was liable to entrap him whenever he began to think in a foreign tongue. Nevertheless, the opening sentences regarding the storm last night, the snow in the fields, and the flood, elicited for Hornblower one interesting fact — that the river whose roar they could hear was the Loire, four hundred miles or more from its mouth in the Bay of Biscay. A few miles upstream lay the town of Nevers; a little way downstream the large tributary, the Allier, joined the Loire, but there was hardly a house and no village on the river in that direction for twenty miles as far as Pouilly — from whose vineyards had come the wine they had drunk last night.

"The river is only as big as this in winter," said the Vicomtesse. "In summer it dwindles away to almost nothing. There are places where one can walk across it, from one bank to the other. Then it is blue, and its banks are golden, but now it is black and ugly."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

He felt a peculiar tingling sensation down his thighs and calves as the words recalled his experience of the night before, the swoop over the fall and the mad battle in the flood. He and Bush and Brown might easily all be sodden corpses now, rolling among the rocks at the bottom of the river until the process of corruption should bring them to the surface.

"I have not thanked you and M. de Graçay for your hospitality," he said, picking his words with care. "It is very kind of the Count."

"Kind? He is the kindest man in the whole world. I can't tell you how good he is."

There was no doubting the sincerity of the Count's daughter-in-law as she made this speech; her wide humorous mouth parted and her dark eyes glowed.

"Really?" said Hornblower — the word 'vraiment' slipped naturally from his lips now that some animation had come into the conversation.

"Yes, really. He is good all the way through. He is sweet and kind, by nature and not — not as a result of experience. He has never said a word to me, not once, not a word, about the disappointment I have caused him."

"You, madame?"

"Yes. Oh, isn't it obvious? I am not a great lady — Marcel should not have married me. My father is a Normandy peasant, on his own land, but a peasant all the same, while the Ladons, Counts of Graçay, go back to — to Saint Louis, or before that. Marcel told me how disappointed was the Count at our marriage, but I should never have known of it otherwise — not by word or by action. Marcel was the eldest son then, because Antoine had been killed at Austerlitz. And Marcel is dead, too — he was wounded at Aspern — and I have no son, no child at all, and the Count has never reproached me, never."

Hornblower tried to make some kind of sympathetic noise.

"And Louis-Marie is dead as well now. He died of fever in Spain. He was the third son, and M. de Graçay is the last of the Ladons. I think it broke his heart, but he has never said a bitter word."

"The three sons are all dead?" said Hornblower.

"Yes, as I told you. M. de Graçay was an émigré — he lived in your town of London with his children for years after the Revolution. And then the boys grew up and they heard of the fame of the Emperor — he was First Consul then — and they all wanted to share in the glory of France. It was to please them that the Count took advantage of the amnesty and returned here — this is all that the Revolution has left of his estates. He never

went to Paris. What would he have in common with the Emperor? But he allowed his sons to join the army, and now they are all dead, Antoine and Marcel and Louis-Marie. Marcel married me when his regiment was billeted in our village, but the others never married. Louis-Marie was only eighteen when he died."

"Terrible!" said Hornblower.

The banal words did not express his sense of the pathos of the story, but it was all he could think of. He understood now the Count's statement of the night before that the authorities would be willing to accept his bare word that he had seen nothing of any escaped prisoners. A great gentleman whose three sons had died in the Imperial service would never be suspected of harbouring fugitives.

"Understand me," went on the Vicomtesse. "It is not because he hates the Emperor that he makes you welcome here. It is because he is kind, because you needed help — I have never known him to deny help to anyone. Oh, it is hard to explain, but I think you understand."

"I understand," said Hornblower, gently.

His heart warmed to the Vicomtesse, She might be lonely and unhappy; she was obviously as hard as her peasant upbringing would make her, and yet her first thought was to impress upon this stranger the goodness and virtue of her father-in-law. With her nearly-red hair and black eyes she was a striking-looking woman, and her skin had a thick creaminess which enhanced her looks; only a slight irregularity of feature and the wideness of her mouth prevented her from being of dazzling beauty. No wonder the young subaltern in the Hussars — Hornblower took it for granted that the dead Vicomte de Graçay had been a subaltern of Hussars — had fallen in love with her during the dreary routine of training, and had insisted on marrying her despite his father's opposition. Hornblower thought he would not find it hard to fall in love with her himself if he were mad enough to allow such a thing to happen while his life was in the hands of the Count.

"And you?" asked the Vicomtesse. "Have you a wife in England? Children?"

"I have a wife," said Hornblower.

Even without the handicap of a foreign language it was difficult to describe Maria to a stranger; he said that she was short and dark, and he said no more. Her red hands and dumpy figure, her loyalty to him which cloyed when it did not irritate — he could not venture on a fuller description lest he should betray the fact that he did not love her, and he had never betrayed it yet.

"So that you have no children either?" asked the Vicomtesse again.

"Not now," said Hornblower.

This was torment. He told of how little Horatio and little Maria had died of smallpox in a Southsea lodging, and then with a gulp he went on to say that there was another child due to be born in January next.

"Let us hope you will be home with your wife then," said the Vicomtesse. "To-day you will be able to discuss plans of escape with my father-in-law."

As if this new mention of his name had summoned him, the Count came into the room on the tail of this sentence.

"Forgive my interrupting you," he said, even while he returned Hornblower's bow, "but from my study window I have just seen a gendarme approaching this house from a group which was riding along the river bank. Would it be troubling you too much, Captain, to ask you to go into Monsieur Bush's room for a time? I shall send your servant in to you, too, and perhaps then you would be good enough to lock the door. I shall interview the gendarme myself, and you will only be detained for a few minutes, I hope."

A gendarme! Hornblower was out of the room and was crossing over to Bush's door before this long speech was finished, while M. de Graçay escorted him thither, unruffled, polite, his words unhurried. Bush was sitting up in bed as Hornblower entered, but what he began to say was broken off by Hornblower's abrupt gesture demanding silence. A moment later Brown tapped at the door and was admitted, Hornblower carefully locking the door after him.

"What is it, sir?" whispered Bush, and Hornblower whispered an explanation, still standing with his hand on the handle, stooping to listen.

He heard a knocking on the outer door, and the rattling of chains as Felix went to open it. Feverishly he tried to hear the ensuing conversation, but he could not understand it. But the gendarme was speaking with respect, and Felix in the flat passionless tones of the perfect butler. He heard the tramp of booted feet and the ring of spurs as the gendarme was led into the hall, and then all the sounds died away with the closing of a door upon

them. The minutes seemed like hours as he waited. Growing aware of his nervousness he forced himself to turn and smile at the others as they sat with their ears cocked, listening.

The wait was too long for them to preserve their tension; soon they relaxed, and grinned at each other, not with hollow mirth as Hornblower's had been at the start. At last a renewed burst of sound from the hall keyed them up again, and they stayed rigid listening to the penetrating voices. And then they heard the clash of the outside door shutting, and the voices ceased. Still it was a long time before anything more happened — five minutes — ten minutes, and then a tap on the door startled them as though it were a pistol shot.

"Can I come in, Captain?" said the Count's voice.

Hurriedly Hornblower unlocked the door to admit him, and even then he had to stand and wait in feverish patience, translating awkwardly while the Count apologized to Bush for intruding upon him, and made polite inquiries about his health and whether he slept well.

"Tell him I slept nicely, if you please, sir," said Bush.

"I am delighted to hear it," said the Count. "Now in the matter of this gendarme —"

Hornblower brought forward a chair for him. He would not allow it to be thought that his impatience overrode his good manners.

"Thank you, Captain, thank you. You are sure I will not be intruding if I stay? That is good of you. The gendarme came to tell me —"

The narrative was prolonged by the need for interpreting to Bush and Brown. The gendarme was one of those posted at Nevers; every available man in that town had been turned out shortly before midnight by a furious Colonel Caillard to search for the fugitives. In the darkness they had been able to do little, but with the coming of the dawn Caillard had begun a systematic search of both banks of the river, seeking for traces of the prisoners and making inquiries at every house and cottage along the banks. The visit of the gendarme had been merely one of routine — he had come to ask if anything had been seen of three escaped Englishmen, and to give warning that they might be in the vicinity. He had been perfectly satisfied with the Count's assurance upon the point. In fact, the gendarme had no expectation of finding the Englishmen alive. The search had already revealed a blanket, one of those which had been used by the wounded Englishman, lying on the bank down by the Bec d'Allier, which seemed a sure indication that their boat had capsized, in which case, with the river in flood, there could be no doubt that they had been drowned. Their bodies would be discovered somewhere along the course of the river during the next few days. The gendarme appeared to be of the opinion that the boat must have upset somewhere in the first rapid they had encountered, before they had gone a mile, so madly was the river running.

"I hope you will agree with me, Captain, that this information is most satisfactory," added the Count.

"Satisfactory!" said Hornblower. "Could it be better?"

If the French should believe them to be dead there would be an end to the pursuit. He turned and explained the situation to the others in English, and they endeavoured with nods and smiles to indicate to the Count their gratification.

"Perhaps Bonaparte in Paris will not be satisfied with this bald story," said the Count. "In fact I am sure he will not, and will order a further search. But it will not trouble us."

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower, and the Count made a deprecatory gesture.

"It only remains," he said, "to make up our minds about what you gentlemen would find it best to do in the future. Would it be officious of me to suggest that it might be inadvisable for you to continue your journey while Lieutenant Bush is still unwell?"

"What does he say, sir?" asked Bush — the mention of his name had drawn all eyes on him. Hornblower explained.

"Tell his lordship, sir," said Bush, "that I can make myself a jury leg in two shakes, an' this time next week I'll be walking as well as he does."

"Excellent!" said the Count, when this had been translated and expurgated for him. "And yet I cannot see that the construction of a wooden leg is going to be of much assistance in our problem. You gentlemen might grow beards, or wear disguises. It was in my mind that by posing as German officers in the Imperial service you might, during your future journey, provide an excuse for your ignorance of French. But a missing foot cannot

be disguised; for months to come the arrival of a stranger without a foot will recall to the minds of inquisitive police officers the wounded English officer who escaped and was believed to be drowned."

"Yes," said Hornblower. "Unless we could avoid all contact with police officers."

"That is quite impossible," said the Count with decision. "In this French Empire there are police officers everywhere. To travel you will need horses certainly, a carriage very probably. In a journey of a hundred leagues horses and a carriage will bring you for certain to the notice of the police. No man can travel ten miles along a road without having his passport examined."

The Count pulled in perplexity at his chin; the deep parentheses at the corners of his mobile mouth were more marked than ever.

"I wish," said Hornblower, "that our boat had not been destroyed last night. On the river, perhaps —"

The idea came up into his mind fully formed and as it did so his eyes met the Count's. He was conscious afresh of a strange sympathy between him and the Count. The same idea was forming in the Count's mind, simultaneously — it was not the first time that he had noticed a similar phenomenon.

"Of course!" said the Count, "the river! How foolish of me not to think of it. As far as Orleans the river is unnavigable; because of the winter floods the banks are practically deserted save at the towns, and there are few of those, which you could pass at night if necessary, as you did at Nevers."

"Unnavigable, sir?"

"There is no commercial traffic. There are fishermen's boats here and there, and there are a few others engaged in dredging sand from the river bed. That is all. From Orleans to Nantes Bonaparte has been making efforts to render the river available to barges, but I understand he has had small success. And above Briare the new lateral canal carries all the traffic, and the river is deserted."

"But could we descend it, sir?" persisted Hornblower.

"Oh, yes," said the Count, meditatively. "You could do so in summer in a small rowing boat. There are many places where it would be difficult, but never dangerous."

"In summer!" exclaimed Hornblower.

"Why, yes. You must wait until the lieutenant here is well, and then you must build your boat — I suppose you sailors can build your own boat? You cannot hope to start for a long time. And then in January the river usually freezes, and in February come the floods, which last until March. Nothing could live on the river then — especially as it would be too cold and wet for you. It seems to be quite necessary that you should give me the pleasure of your company until April, Captain."

This was something entirely unexpected, this prospect of waiting for four months the opportunity to start. Hornblower was taken by surprise; he had supposed that a few days, three or four weeks at most, would see them on their way towards England again. For ten years he had never been as long as four months consecutively in the same place — for that matter during those ten years he had hardly spent four months on shore altogether. His mind sought unavailingly for alternatives. To go by road undoubtedly would involve horses, carriages, contact with all sorts of people. He could not hope to bring Bush and Brown successfully through. And if they went by river they obviously would have to wait; in four months Bush could be expected to make a complete recovery, and with the coming of summer they would be able to dispense with the shelter of inns or houses, sleeping on the river bank, avoiding all intercourse with Frenchmen, drifting downstream until they reached the sea.

"If you have fishing rods with you," supplemented the Count, "anyone observing you as you go past the towns will look on you as a fishing party out for the day. For some reason which I cannot fully analyse a fresh water fisherman can never be suspected of evil intent — except possibly by the fish."

Hornblower nodded. It was odd that at that very moment he too had been visualizing the boat drifting downstream, with rods out, watched by incurious eyes from the bank. It was the safest way of crossing France which he could imagine.

And yet — April? His child would be born. Lady Barbara might have forgotten that he ever existed.

"It seems monstrous," he said, "that you should be burdened with us all through the winter."

"I assure you, Captain, your presence will give the greatest pleasure both to Madame la Vicomtesse and myself."

He could only yield to circumstances.

CHAPTER NINE

Lieutenant Bush was watching Brown fastening the last strap of his new wooden leg, and Hornblower, from across the room, was watching the pair of them.

"Vast heaving," said Bush. "Belay."

Bush sat on the edge of his bed and moved his leg tentatively.

"Good," he said. "Give me your shoulder. Now, heave and wake the dead."

Hornblower saw Bush rise and stand; he watched his lieutenant's expression change to one of hurt wonderment as he clung to Brown's burly shoulders.

"God!" said Bush feebly, "how she heaves!"

It was the giddiness only to be expected after weeks of lying and sitting. Evidently to Bush the floor was pitching and tossing, and, judging by the movement of his eyes, the walls were circling round him. Brown stood patiently supporting him as Bush confronted this unexpected phenomenon. Hornblower saw Bush set his jaw, his expression hardening as he battled with his weakness.

"Square away," said Bush to Brown. "Set a course for the captain."

Brown began walking slowly towards Hornblower, Bush clinging to him, the leather-tipped end of the wooden leg falling with a thump on the floor at each effort to take a stride with it — Bush was swinging it too high, while his sound leg sagged at the knee in its weakness.

"God!" said Bush again. "Easy! Easy!"

Hornblower rose in time to catch him and to lower him into the chair, where Bush sat and gasped. His big white face, already unnaturally pale through long confinement, was whiter than ever. Hornblower remembered with a pang the old Bush, burly and self-confident, with a face which might have been rough-hewn from a solid block of wood; the Bush who feared nothing and was prepared for anything. This Bush was frightened of his weakness. It had not occurred to him that he would have to learn to walk again — and that walking with a wooden leg was another matter still.

"Take a rest," said Hornblower, "before you start again."

Desperately anxious as Bush had been to walk, weary as he was of helplessness, there were times during the next few days when Hornblower had to give him active encouragement while he was learning to walk. All the difficulties that arose had been unforeseen by him, and depressed him out of proportion to their importance. It was a matter of some days before he mastered his giddiness and weakness, and then as soon as he was able to use the wooden leg effectively they found all manner of things wrong with it. It was none too easy to find the most suitable length, and they discovered to their surprise that it was a matter of some importance to set the leather tip at exactly the right angle to the shaft — Brown and Hornblower between them, at a work-table in the stable yard, made and remade that wooden leg half a dozen times. Bush's bent knee, on which his weight rested when he walked, grew sore and inflamed; they had to pad the kneecap and remake the socket to fit, more than once, while Bush had to take his exercise in small amounts until the skin over his kneecap grew calloused and more accustomed to its new task. And when he fell — which was often — he caused himself frightful agony in his stump, which was hardly healed; with his knee bent at right angles the stump necessarily bore the brunt of practically any fall, and the pain was acute.

But teaching Bush to walk was one way of passing the long winter days, while orders from Paris turned out the conscripts from every depot round, and set them searching once more for the missing English prisoners. They came on a day of lashing rain, a dozen shivering boys and a sergeant, wet through, and made only the poorest pretence at searching the house and its stabling — Hornblower and Bush and Brown were safe enough behind the hay in an unobtrusive loft. The conscripts were given in the kitchen a better meal by the servants than they had enjoyed for some time, and marched off to prosecute their inquiries elsewhere — every house and village for miles round was at least visited.

After that the next occurrence out of the ordinary was the announcement in Bonaparte's newspapers that the English captain and lieutenant, Hornblower and Bush, had met a well-deserved fate by being drowned in the

Loire during an attempt to escape from an escort which was conducting them to their trial; undoubtedly (said the bulletin) this had saved the miscreants from the firing party which awaited them for the purpose of exacting the penalty of their flagrant piracy in the Mediterranean.

Hornblower read the announcement with mixed feelings when the Count showed it to him; not every man has the privilege of reading his own obituary. His first reaction was that it would make their escape considerably easier, seeing that the police would no longer be on the watch for them. But that feeling of relief was swamped by a wave of other feelings. Maria in England would think herself a widow, at this very moment when their child was about to be born. What would it mean to her? Hornblower knew, only too acutely, that Maria loved him as dearly as a woman could love a man, although he only admitted it to himself at moments like this. He could not guess what she would do when she believed him dead. It would be the end of everything she had lived for. And yet she would have a pension, security, a child to cherish. She might set herself, unconsciously, to make a new life for herself. In a clairvoyant moment Hornblower visualized Maria in deep mourning, her mouth set in prim resignation, the coarse red skin of her cheeks wet with tears, and her red hands nervously clasping and unclasping. She had looked like that the summer day when little Horatio and little Maria had been buried in their common grave.

Hornblower shuddered away from the recollection. Maria would at least be in no need of money; the British press would see that the government did its duty there. He could guess at the sort of articles which would be appearing in reply to this announcement of Bonaparte's, the furious indignation that a British officer should be accused of piracy, the openly expressed suspicions that he had been murdered in cold blood and had not died while attempting to escape, the clamour for reprisals. To this day a British newspaper seldom discussed Bonaparte without recalling the death of another British naval captain, Wright, who was said to have committed suicide in prison in Paris. Everyone in England believed that Bonaparte had had him murdered — they would believe the same in this case. It was almost amusing that nearly always the most effective attacks on the tyrant were based on actions on his part which were either trivial or innocent. The British genius for invective and propaganda had long discovered that it paid better to exploit trivialities rather than inveigh broadly against policies and principles; the newspapers would give more space to a condemnation of Bonaparte for causing the death of a single naval officer than to a discussion of the criminal nature of, say, the invasion of Spain, which had resulted in the wanton slaughter of some hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

And Lady Barbara would read that he was dead, too. She would be sorry — Hornblower was prepared to believe that — but how deep her sorrow would be he could not estimate at all. The thought called up all the flood of speculations and doubts which lately he had been trying to forget — whether she cared for him at all or not, whether or not her husband had survived his wound, and what he could do in the matter in any event. "I am sorry that this announcement seems to cause you so much distress," said the Count, and Hornblower realized that his expression had been anxiously studied during the whole reading. He had for once been caught off his guard, but he was on guard again at once. He made himself smile.

"It will make our journey through France a good deal easier," he said.

"Yes. I thought the same as soon as I read it. I can congratulate you, Captain."

"Thank you," said Hornblower.

But there was a worried look in the Count's face; he had something more to say and was hesitating to say it.

"What are you thinking about, sir?" asked Hornblower.

"Only this — Your position is in one way more dangerous now. You have been pronounced dead by a government which does not admit mistakes — cannot afford to admit them. I am afraid in case I have done you a disservice in so selfishly accepting the pleasure of your company. If you are recaptured you *will* be dead; the government will see that you die without further attention being called to you."

Hornblower shrugged his shoulders with a carelessness quite unassumed for once.

"They were going to shoot me if they caught me. This makes no difference."

He dallied with the notion of a modern government dabbling in secret murder, for a moment was inclined to put it aside as quite impossible, as something one might believe of the Turks or perhaps even of the Sicilians, but not of Bonaparte, and then he realized with a shock that it was not at all impossible, that a man with unlimited power and much at stake, with underlings on whose silence he could rely, could not be expected to

risk appearing ridiculous in the eye of his public when a mere murder would save him. It was a sobering thought, but he made himself smile again, bravely.

"You have all the courage characteristic of your nation, Captain," said the Count. "But this news of your death will reach England. I fear that Madame Orrenblor will be distressed by it?"

"I am afraid she will."

"I could find means of sending a message to England — my bankers can be trusted. But whether it would be advisable is another matter."

If it were known in England that he was alive it would be known in France, and a stricter search would be instituted for him. It would be terribly dangerous. Maria would draw small profit from the knowledge that he was alive if that knowledge were to cause his death.

"I think it would not be advisable," said Hornblower.

There was a strange duality in his mind; the Hornblower for whom he could plan so coolly, and whose chances of life he could estimate so closely, was a puppet of the imagination compared with the living, flesh and blood Hornblower whose face he had shaved that morning. He knew by experience now that only when a crisis came, when he was swimming for his life in a whirlpool, or walking a quarterdeck in the heat of action, that the two blended together — that was the moment when fear came.

"I hope, Captain," said the Count, "that this news has not disturbed you too much?"

"Not at all, sir," said Hornblower.

"I am delighted to hear it. And perhaps you will be good enough to give Madame la Vicomtesse and myself the pleasure of your company again to-night at whist, you and Mr Bush?"

Whist was the regular way of passing the evening. The Count's delight in the game was another bond of sympathy between him and Hornblower. He was not a player of the mathematical variety, as was Hornblower. Rather did he rely upon a flair, an instinctive system of tactics. It was marvellous how often his blind leads found his partner's short suit and snatched tricks from the jaws of the inevitable, how often he could decide intuitively upon the winning play when confronted by a dilemma. There were rare evenings when this faculty would desert him, and when he would sit with a rueful smile losing rubber after rubber to the remorseless precision of his daughter-in-law and Hornblower. But usually his uncanny telepathic powers would carry him triumphantly through, to the exasperation of Hornblower if they had been opponents, and to his intense satisfaction if they had been partners — exasperation at the failure of his painstaking calculations, or satisfaction of their complete vindication.

The Vicomtesse was a good well-taught player of no brilliance whose interest in the game, Hornblower suspected, was entirely due to her devotion to her father-in-law. It was Bush to whom these evenings of whist were a genuine penance. He disliked card games of any sort — even the humble vingt-et-un — and in the supreme refinement of whist he was hopelessly at a loss. Hornblower had cured him of some of his worst habits — of asking, for instance, "What are trumps?" halfway through every hand — had insisted on his counting the cards as they fell, on his learning the conventional leads and discards, and by so doing had made of him a player whose presence three good players could just tolerate rather than miss their evening's amusement; but the evenings to him were periods of agonized, hard-breathing concentration, of flustered mistakes and shamefaced apology — misery made no less acute by the fact that conversation was carried on in French in which he could never acquire any facility. Bush mentally classed together French, whist, and spherical trigonometry as subjects in which he was too old ever to make any further progress, and which he would be content, if he were allowed, to leave entirely to his admired captain.

For Hornblower's French was improving rapidly, thanks to the need for continual use of the language. His defective ear would never allow him to catch the trick of the accent — he would always speak with the tonelessness of the foreigner — but his vocabulary was widening and his grammar growing more certain and he was acquiring a fluency in the idiom which more than once earned him a pretty compliment from his host. Hornblower's pride was held in check by the astonishing fact that below stairs Brown was rapidly acquiring the same fluency. He was living largely with French people, too — with Felix and his wife the housekeeper, and their daughter Louise the maid, and, living over the stables across the yard, the family of Bertrand, who was Felix's brother and incidentally the coachman; Bertrand's wife was the cook, with two daughters to help her in

the kitchen, while one of her young sons was footman under Felix and the other two worked in the stables under their father.

Hornblower had once ventured to hint to the Count that the presence of himself and the others might well be betrayed to the authorities by one of all these servants, but the Count merely shook his head with a serene confidence that could not be shaken.

"They will not betray me," he said, and so intense was his conviction on the point that it carried conviction to Hornblower — and the better he came to know the Count the more obvious it became that no one who knew him well would ever betray him. And the Count added with a wry smile —

"You must remember, too, Captain, that here I *am* the authorities."

Hornblower could allow his mind to subside into security and sloth again after that — a sense of security with a fantastic quality about it that savoured of a nightmare. It was unreal to be mewed for so long within four walls, deprived of the wide horizons and the endless variety of the sea. He could spend his mornings tramping up and down the stable yard, as though it were a quarterdeck and as though Bertrand and his sons chattering about their duties were a ship's crew engaged on their morning's deck-washing. The smell of the stables and the land winds which came in over the high walls were a poor substitute for the keen freshness of the sea. He spent hours in a turret window of the house, with a spyglass which the Count found for him, gazing round the countryside; the desolate vineyards in their winter solitude, the distant towers of Nevers — the ornate Cathedral tower and the graceful turrets of the Gonzaga palace; the rushing black river, its willows half submerged — the ice which came in January and the snow which three times covered the blank slopes that winter were welcome variations of the monotonous landscape; there were the distant hills and the nearby slopes; the trace of the valley of the Loire winding off into the unknown, and of the valley of the Allier coming down to meet it — to a landman's eye the prospect from the turret window would have been delightful, even perhaps in the lashing rain that fell so often, but to a seaman and a prisoner it was revolting. The indefinable charm of the sea was wanting, and so were the mystery and magic and freedom of the sea. Bush and Brown, noting the black bad temper in which Hornblower descended from the turret window after a sitting with his spyglass, wondered why he spent his time in that fashion. He wondered why himself, but weakly he could not stop himself from doing so. Specially marked was his bad temper when the Count and his daughter-in-law went out riding, returning flushed and healthy and happy after some brisk miles of the freedom for which he craved — he was stupidly jealous, he told himself, angrily, but he was jealous all the same.

He was even jealous of the pleasure Bush and Brown took in the building of the new boat. He was not a man of his hands, and once the design of the boat had been agreed upon — its fifteen feet of length and four feet of beam and its flat bottom, he could contribute nothing towards the work except unskilled labour. His subordinates were far more expert with tools than he was, with plane and saw and drill, and characteristically found immense pleasure in working with them. Bush's childish delight in finding his hands, softened by a long period of convalescence, forming their distinguishing callouses again, irritated him. He envied them the simple creative pleasure which they found in watching the boat grow under their hands in the empty loft which they had adopted as a workshop — more still he envied Brown the accuracy of eye he displayed, working with a spokeshave shaping the sculls without any of the apparatus of templates and models and stretched strings which Hornblower would have found necessary.

They were black days, all that winter of confinement. January came, and with it the date when his child would be born; he was half mad with the uncertainty of it all, with his worry about Maria and the child, with the thought that Barbara would think him dead and would forget him. Even the Count's sweetness of temper and unvarying courtesy irritated him as soon as it began to cloy. He felt he would give a year of his life to hear him make a tart rejoinder to one of Bush's clumsy speeches; the impulse to be rude to the Count, to fire up into a quarrel with him even though — or perhaps because — he owed him his life, was sometimes almost irresistible, and the effort of self-control tried his temper still further. He was surfeited with the Count's unwearying goodness, even with the odd way in which their thoughts ran so frequently together; it was queer, even uncanny, to see in the Count so often what seemed like reflections of himself in a mirror. It was madder still to remember that he had felt similar ties of sympathy, sometimes with the wickedest man he had ever known — with el Supremo in Central America.

El Supremo had died for his crime on a scaffold at Panama; Hornblower was worried by the thought that the Count was risking the guillotine at Paris for his friend's sake — it was mad to imagine any parallelism between the careers of el Supremo and the Count, but Hornblower was in a mad mood. He was thinking too much and he had too little to do, and his over-active brain was racketing itself to pieces. There was insanity in indulging in ridiculous mystic speculations about spiritual relationships between himself and the Count and el Supremo, and he knew it. Only self-control and patience were necessary, he told himself, to come safely through these last few weeks of waiting, but his patience seemed to be coming to an end, and he was so weary of exerting self-control.

It was the flesh that saved him when his spirit grew weak. One afternoon, descending from a long and maddening sitting with his telescope in the turret, he met the Vicomtesse in the upper gallery. She was at her boudoir door, about to enter, and she turned and smiled at him as he approached. His head was whirling; somehow his exasperation and feverishness drove him into holding out both his hands to her, risking a rebuff, risking everything, in his longing for some kind of comfort, something to ease this unbearable strain. She put her hands in his, smiling still, and at the touch self-possession broke down. It was madness to yield to the torrent of impulses let loose, but madness was somehow sweet. They were inside the room now, and the door was closed. There was sweet, healthy, satisfying flesh in his arms. There were no doubts nor uncertainties; no mystic speculations. Now blind instinct could take charge, all the bodily urges of months of celibacy. Her lips were ripe and rich and ready, the breasts which he crushed against him were hillocks of sweetness. In his nostrils was the faint intoxicating scent of womanhood.

Beyond the boudoir was the bedroom; they were there now and she was yielding to him. Just as another man might have given way to drink, might have stupefied his brain in beastly intoxication, so Hornblower numbed his own brain with lust and passion. He forgot everything, and he cared for nothing, in this mad lapse from self-control.

And she understood his motives, which was strange, and she did not resent them, which was stranger still. As his passion ebbed away, he could see her face again clearly, and her expression was tender and detached and almost maternal. She was aware of his unhappiness as she had been aware of his lust for that splendid body of hers. She had given him her body because of his crying need for it, as she might have given a cup of water to a man dying of thirst. Now she held his head to her breast, and stroked his hair, rocking a little as though he were a child, and murmuring little soothing words to him. A tear fell from her eye on to Hornblower's temple. She had come to love this Englishman, but she knew only too well that it was not love which had brought him into her arms. She knew of the wife and child in England, she guessed at the existence of the other woman whom he loved. It was not the thought of them which brought the tears to her eyes; it was the knowledge that she was not any part of his real life, that this stay of his on the banks of the Loire was as unreal to him as a dream, something to be endured until he could escape again to the sea, into the mad world which to him was sanity, where every day he would encounter peril and discomfort. These kisses he was giving her meant nothing to him compared with the business of life, which was war — the same war which had killed her young husband, the wasteful, prodigal, beastly business which had peopled Europe with widows and disfigured it with wasted fields and burned villages. He was kissing her as a man might pat his dog's head during an exciting business deal.

Then Hornblower lifted his face to hers again, and read the tragedy in her eyes. The sight of her tears moved him inexpressibly. He stroked her cheek.

"Oh, my dear," he said in English, and then began to try to find French words to express what he wanted to say. Tenderness was welling up within him. In a blinding moment of revelation he realized the love she bore him, and the motives which had brought her submissively into his arms. He kissed her mouth, he brushed away the splendid red hair from her pleading eyes. Tenderness re-awoke passion; and under his caresses her last reserve broke down.

"I love you!" she sighed, her arms about him. She had not meant to admit it, either to him or to herself. She knew that if she gave herself to him with passion he would break her heart in the end, and that he did not love her, not even now, when tenderness had replaced the blind lust in his eyes. He would break her heart if she allowed herself to love him; for one more second she had that clairvoyance before she let herself sink into the

self-deception which she knew in the future she would not believe to be self-deception. But the temptation to deceive herself into thinking he loved her was overwhelming. She gave herself to him passionately.

CHAPTER TEN

The affair thus consummated seemed, to Hornblower's mind at least, to clear the air like a thunderstorm. He had something more definite to think about now than mystic speculations; there was Marie's loving kindness to soothe him, and for counter-irritant there was the pricking of his conscience regarding his seduction of his host's daughter-in-law under his host's roof. His uneasiness lest the Count's telepathic powers should enable him to guess at the secret he shared with Marie, the fear lest someone should intercept a glance or correctly interpret a gesture, kept his mind healthily active.

And the love-affair while it ran its course brought with it a queer unexpected happiness. Marie was everything Hornblower could desire as a mistress. By marriage she was of a family noble enough to satisfy his liking for lords, and yet the knowledge that she was of peasant birth saved him from feeling any awe on that account. She could be tender and passionate, protective and yielding, practical and romantic; and she loved him so dearly, while at the same time she remained reconciled to his approaching departure and resolute to help it on in every way, that his heart softened towards her more and more with the passage of the days.

That departure suddenly became a much nearer and more likely possibility — by coincidence it seemed to come up over the horizon from the hoped-for into the expected only a day or two after Hornblower's meeting with Marie in the upper gallery. The boat was finished, and lay, painted and equipped, in the loft ready for them to use; Brown kept it filled with water from the well and proudly announced that it did not leak a drop. The plans for their journey to the sea were taking definite shape. Fat Jeanne the cook baked biscuit for them — Hornblower came triumphantly into his own then, as the only person in the house who knew how ship's biscuit should be baked, and Jeanne worked under his supervision.

Anxious debate between him and the Count had ended in his deciding against running the risk of buying food while on their way unless compelled; the fifty pounds of biscuit which Jeanne baked for them (there was a locker in the boat in which to store it) would provide the three of them with a pound of bread each day for seventeen days, and there was a sack of potatoes waiting for them, and another of dried peas; and there were long thin Arles sausages — as dry as sticks, and, to Hornblower's mind, not much more digestible, but with the merit of staying eatable for long periods — and some of the dry cod which Hornblower had come to know during his captivity at Ferrol, and a corner of bacon; taken all in all — as Hornblower pointed out to the Count who was inclined to demur — they were going to fare better on their voyage down the Loire than they had often fared in the ships of His Majesty King George. Hornblower, accustomed for so long to sea voyages, never ceased to marvel at the simplicity of planning a river trip thanks to the easy solution of the problem of water supply; overside they would have unlimited fresh water for drinking and washing and bathing — much better water, too, as he told the Count again, than the stinking green stuff, alive with animalculae, doled out at the rate of four pints a head a day, with which people in ships had to be content.

He could anticipate no trouble until they neared the sea; it was only with their entry into tidal waters that they would be in any danger. He knew how the French coast swarmed with garrisons and customs officers — as a lieutenant under Pellew he had once landed a spy in the salt marshes of Bourgneuf — and it would be under their noses that they would have to steal a fishing boat and make their way to sea. Thanks to the Continental system, and the fear of English descents, and precautions against espionage, tidal waters would be watched closely indeed. But he felt he could only trust to fortune — it was hard to make plans against contingencies which might take any shape whatever, and besides, those dangers were weeks away, and Hornblower's newly contented mind was actually too lazy to devote much thought to them. And as he grew fonder of Marie, too, it grew harder to make plans which would take him away from her. His attachment for her was growing even as strong as that.

It was left to the Count to make the most helpful suggestion of all.

"If you would permit me," he said, one evening, "I would like to tell you of an idea I have for simplifying your passage through Nantes."

"It would give me pleasure to hear it, sir," said Hornblower — the Count's long-winded politeness was infectious.

"Please do not think," said the Count, "that I wish to interfere in any way in the plans you are making, but it occurred to me that your stay on the coast might be made safer if you assumed the role of a high official of the customs service."

"I think it would, sir," said Hornblower, patiently, "but I do not understand how I could do it."

"You would have to announce yourself, if necessary, as a Dutchman," said the Count. "Now that Holland is annexed to France and King Louis Bonaparte has fled, it is to be presumed that his employes will join the Imperial service. I think it is extremely likely that, say, a colonel of Dutch douaniers should visit Nantes to learn how to perform his duties — especially as it was over the enforcement of customs regulations that Bonaparte and his brother fell out. Your very excellent French would be just what might be expected of a Dutch customs officer, even though — please pardon my frankness — you do not speak quite like a native Frenchman."

"But — but —" stammered Hornblower; it really seemed to him that the Count's customary good sense had deserted him — it would be difficult, sir —"

"Difficult?" smiled the Count. "It might be dangerous, but, if you will forgive my contradicting you so directly, it would hardly be difficult. In your English democracy you perhaps have had no opportunity of seeing how much weight an assured manner and a uniform carry with them in a country like this, which has already made the easy descent from an autocracy to a bureaucracy. A colonel of douaniers on the coast can go anywhere, command anything. He never has to account for himself — his uniform does that for him."

"But I have no uniform, sir," said Hornblower, and before the words were out of his mouth he guessed what the Count was going to say.

"We have half a dozen needlewomen in the house," smiled the Count, "from Marie here to little Christine the cook's daughter. It would be odd if between them they could not make uniforms for you and your assistants. I might add that Mr Bush's wound, which we all so much deplore, will be an actual advantage if you adopt the scheme. It is exactly consonant with Bonaparte's methods to provide for an officer wounded in his service by giving him a position in the customs. Mr Bush's presence with you would add a touch of — shall we say realism? — to the effect produced by your appearance."

The Count gave a little bow to Bush, in apology for thus alluding to Bush's crippled condition, and Bush returned it awkwardly from his chair in bland ignorance of at least two thirds of what had been said.

The value of the suggestion was obvious to Hornblower at once, and for days afterwards the women in the house were at work cutting and stitching and fitting, until the evening came when the three of them paraded before the Count in their neat coats of blue piped with white and red, and their rakish képis - it was the making of these which had taxed Marie's ingenuity most, for the képi was still at that time an unusual headdress in the French government services. On Hornblower's collar glittered the eight-pointed stars of colonel's rank, and the top of his képi bore the gold-lace rosette; as the three of them rotated solemnly before the Count the latter nodded approvingly.

"Excellent," he said, and then hesitated. "There is only one addition which I can think of to add realism. Excuse me a moment."

He went off to his study leaving the others looking at each other, but he was back directly with a little leather case in his hand which he proceeded to open. Resting on the silk was a glittering cross of white enamel, surmounted by a golden crown and with a gold medallion in the centre.

"We must pin this on you," he said. "No one reaches colonel's rank without the Legion of Honour."

"Father!" said Marie — it was rare that she used the familiar mode of address with him — "that was Louis-Marie's."

"I know, my dear, I know. But it may make the difference between Captain Hornblower's success or — or failure."

His hands trembled a little, nevertheless, as he pinned the scarlet ribbon to Hornblower's coat.

"Sir — sir, it is too good of you," protested Hornblower.

The Count's long, mobile face, as he stood up, was sad, but in a moment he had twisted it into his usual wry smile.

"Bonaparte sent it to me," he said, "after — after my son's death in Spain. It was a posthumous award. To me of course it is nothing — the trinkets of the tyrant can never mean anything to a Knight of the Holy Ghost. But because of its sentimental value I should be grateful if you would endeavour to preserve it unharmed and return it to me when the war is over."

"I cannot accept it, sir," said Hornblower, bending to unpin it again, but the Count checked him.

"Please, Captain," he said, "wear it, as a favour to me. It would please me if you would."

More than ever after his reluctant acceptance did Hornblower's conscience prick him at the thought that he had seduced this man's daughter-in-law while enjoying his hospitality, and later in the evening when he found himself alone with the Count in the drawing room the conversation deepened his sense of guilt.

"Now that your stay is drawing to an end, Captain," said the Count, "I know how much I shall miss your presence after you have gone. Your company has given me the very greatest pleasure."

"I do not think it can compare with the gratitude I feel towards you, sir," said Hornblower.

The Count waved aside the thanks which Hornblower was endeavouring awkwardly to phrase.

"A little while ago we mentioned the end of the war. Perhaps there will come an end some day, and although I am an old man perhaps I shall live to see it. Will you remember me then, and this little house beside the Loire?"

"Of course, sir," protested Hornblower. "I could never forget."

He looked round the familiar drawing room, at the silver candelabra, the old-fashioned Louis Seize furniture, the lean figure of the Count in his blue dress-coat.

"I could never forget you, sir," repeated Hornblower.

"My three sons were all young when they died," said the Count. "They were only boys, and perhaps they would not have grown into men I could have been proud of. And already when they went off to serve Bonaparte they looked upon me as an old-fashioned reactionary for whose views they had only the smallest patience — that was only to be expected. If they had lived through the wars we might have become better friends later. But they did not, and I am the last Ladon. I am a lonely man, Captain, lonely under this present regime, and yet I fear that when Bonaparte falls and the reactionaries return to power I shall be as lonely still. But I have not been lonely this winter, Captain."

Hornblower's heart went out to the lean old man with the lined face sitting opposite him in the uncomfortable armchair.

"But that is enough about myself, Captain," went on the Count. "I wanted to tell you of the news which has come through — it is all of it important. The salute which we heard fired yesterday was, as we thought, in honour of the birth of an heir to Bonaparte. There is now a King of Rome, as Bonaparte calls him, to sustain the Imperial throne. Whether it will be any support I am doubtful — there are many Bonapartists who will not, I fancy, be too pleased at the thought of the retention of power indefinitely in a Bonaparte dynasty. And the fall of Holland is undoubted — there was actual fighting between the troops of Louis Bonaparte and those of Napoleon Bonaparte over the question of customs enforcement. France now extends to the Baltic — Hamburg and Lubeck are French towns like Amsterdam and Leghorn and Trieste."

Hornblower thought of the cartoons in the English newspapers which had so often compared Bonaparte with the frog who tried to blow himself up as big as an ox.

"I fancy it is symptomatic of weakness," said the Count. "Perhaps you do not agree with me? You do? I am glad to have my suspicions confirmed. More than that; there is going to be war with Russia. Already troops are being transferred to the East, and the details of a new conscription were published at the same time as the proclamation of a King of Rome. There will be more refractories than ever hiding about the country now. Perhaps Bonaparte will find he has undertaken a task beyond his strength when he comes to grips with Russia."

"Perhaps so," said Hornblower. He had not a high opinion of Russian military virtues.

"But there is more important news still," said the Count. "There has at last been published a bulletin of the Army of Portugal. It was dated from Almeida."

It took a second or two for Hornblower to grasp the significance of this comment, and it only dawned upon him gradually, along with the endless implications.

"It means," said the Count, "that your Wellington has beaten Bonaparte's Masséna. That the attempt to conquer Portugal has failed, and that the whole of the affairs of Spain are thrown into flux again. A running sore has been opened in the side of Bonaparte's empire, which may drain him of his strength — at what cost to poor France one can hardly imagine. But of course, Captain, you can form a more reliable opinion of the military situation than I can, and I have been presumptuous in commenting on it. Yet you have not the facilities which I have of gauging the moral effect of this news. Wellington has beaten Junot, and Victor, and Soult. Now he has beaten Masséna, the greatest of them all. There is only one man now against whom European opinion can measure him, and that is Bonaparte. It is not well for a tyrant to have rivals in prestige. Last year how many years of power would one have given Bonaparte if asked? Twenty? I think so. Now in 1811 we change our minds. Ten years, we think. In 1812 we may revise our estimate again, and say five. I myself do not believe the Empire as we know it will endure after 1814 — Empires collapse at a rate increasing in geometrical progression, and it will be your Wellington who will pull this one down."

"I hope sincerely you are right, sir," said Hornblower.

The Count was not to know how disturbing this mention of Wellington was to his audience; he could not guess that Hornblower was daily tormented by speculations as to whether Wellington's sister was widowed or not, whether Lady Barbara Leighton, née Wellesley, ever had a thought to devote to the naval captain who had been reported dead. Her brother's triumphs might well occupy her mind to the exclusion of everything else, and Hornblower feared that when at last he should reach England she would be far too great a lady to pay him any attention at all. The thought irked him.

He went to bed in a peculiarly sober mood, his mind busy with problems of the most varying nature — from speculations about the approaching fall of the French Empire to calculations regarding the voyage down the Loire which he was about to attempt. Lying awake, long after midnight, he heard his bedroom door quietly open and close; he lay rigid, instantly, conscious of a feeling of faint distaste at this reminder of the intrigue which he was conducting under a hospitable roof. Very gently, the curtains of his bed were drawn open, and in the darkness he could see, through half opened eyes, a shadowy ghost bending over him. A gentle hand found his cheek and stroked it; he could no longer sham sleep, and he pretended to wake with a start.

"It is Marie, 'Oratio,'" said a voice, softly.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

He did not know what he should say or do — for that matter he did not know what he wanted. Mostly he was conscious of Marie's imprudence in thus coming to his room, risking discovery and imperilling everything. He shut his eyes as though still sleepy, to gain time for consideration; the hand ceased to stroke his cheek.

Hornblower waited for a second or two more, and was astonished to hear the slight click of the latch of the door again. He sat up with a jerk. Marie had gone, as silently as she had come. Hornblower continued to sit up, puzzling over the incident, but he could make nothing of it. Certainly he was not going to run any risks by going to seek Marie in her room and asking for explanations; he lay down again to think about it, and this time, with its usual capriciousness, sleep surprised him in the midst of his speculations, and he slept soundly until Brown brought him his breakfast coffee.

It took him half the morning to nerve himself for what he foresaw to be a very uncomfortable interview; it was only then that he tore himself away from a last inspection of the boat, in Bush's and Brown's company, and climbed the stairs to Marie's boudoir and tapped at the door. He entered when she called, and stood there in the room of so many memories — the golden chairs with their oval backs upholstered in pink and white, the windows looking out on the sunlit Loire, and Marie in the window-seat with her needlework.

"I wanted to say 'good morning'," he said at length, as Marie did nothing to help him out.

"Good morning," said Marie. She bent her head over her needlework — the sunshine through the windows lit her hair gloriously — and spoke with her face concealed. "We only have to say 'good morning' to-day, and to-morrow we shall say 'goodbye'."

"Yes," said Hornblower stupidly.

"If you loved me," said Marie, "it would be terrible for me to have you go, and to know that for years we should not meet again — perhaps for ever. But as you do not, then I am glad that you are going back to your

wife and your child, and your ships, and your fighting. That is what you wanted, and I am pleased that you should have it all."

"Thank you," said Hornblower.

Still she did not look up.

"You are the sort of man," she went on, "whom women love very easily. I do not expect that I shall be the last. I don't think that you will ever love anybody, or know what it is to do so."

Hornblower could have said nothing in English in reply to these two astonishing statements, and in French he was perfectly helpless. He could only stammer.

"Goodbye," said Marie.

"Goodbye, madame," said Hornblower, lamely.

His cheeks were burning as he came out into the upper hall, in a condition of mental distress in which humiliation only played a minor part. He was thoroughly conscious of having acted despicably, and of having been dismissed without dignity. But he was puzzled by the other remarks Marie had made. It had never occurred to him that women loved him easily. Maria — it was odd, that similarity of names, Maria and Marie — loved him, he knew; he had found it a little tiresome and disturbing. Barbara had offered herself to him, but he had never ventured to believe that she had loved him — and had she not married someone else? And Marie loved him; Hornblower remembered guiltily an incident of a few days ago, when Marie in his arms had whispered hotly, "Tell me you love me," and he had answered with facile kindness, "I love you, dear." "Then I am happy," answered Marie. Perhaps it was a good thing that Marie knew now that he was lying, and had made easy his retreat. Another woman with a word might have sent him and Bush to prison and death — there were women capable of it.

And this question of his never loving anyone; surely Marie was wrong about that. She did not know the miseries of longing he had been through on Barbara's account, how much he had desired her and how much he still desired her. He hesitated guiltily here, wondering whether his desire would survive gratification. That was such an uncomfortable thought that he swerved away from it in a kind of panic. If Marie had merely revengefully desired to disturb him she certainly had achieved her object; and if on the other hand she had wanted to win him back to her she was not far from success either. What with the torments of remorse and his sudden uneasiness about himself Hornblower would have returned to her if she had lifted a finger to him, but she did not.

At dinner that evening she appeared young and light-hearted, her eyes sparkling and her expression animated, and when the Count lifted his glass for the toast of 'a prosperous voyage home' she joined in with every appearance of enthusiasm. Hornblower was glum beneath his forced gaiety. Only now, with the prospect of an immediate move ahead of him, had he become aware that there were decided arguments in favour of the limbo of suspended animation in which he had spent the past months. To-morrow he was going to leave all this certainty and safety and indifferent negativeness. There was physical danger ahead of him; that he could face calmly and with no more than a tightening of the throat, but besides that there was the resolution of all the doubts and uncertainties which had so troubled him.

Hornblower was suddenly aware that he did not so urgently desire his uncertainties to be resolved. At present he could still hope. If Leighton were to declare that Hornblower had fought at Rosas contrary to the spirit of his orders; if the court martial were to decide that the *Sutherland* had not been fought to the last gasp — and courts martial were chancy affairs; if — if — if. And there was Maria with her cloying sweetness awaiting him, and the misery of longing for Lady Barbara, all in contrast with the smoothness of life here with the Count's unruffled politeness and the stimulus of Marie's healthy animalism. Hornblower had to force a smile as he lifted his glass.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The big green Loire was shrinking to its summer level. Hornblower had seen its floods and its ice come and go, had seen the willows at its banks almost submerged, but now it was back safely in its wide bed, with a hint of

golden-brown gravel exposed on either bank. The swift green water was clear now, instead of turbid, and under the blue sky the distant reaches were blue as well, in charming colour contrast with the springtime emerald of the valley and the gold of the banks.

The two sleek dun oxen, patient under the yoke, had dragged the travois-sledge down to the water's edge in the first early light of dawn, Brown and Hornblower walking beside to see that the precious boat balanced on it came to no harm, and Bush stumping breathlessly behind them. The boat slid gently into the water, and under Bush's supervision the stable hands loaded her with the bags of stores which they had carried down. The faint morning mist still lay in the valley, and wreathed over the surface of the water, awaiting the coming of the sun to drink it up. It was the best time for departure: the mist would shield them from inquisitive persons who might be unduly curious at the sight of the expedition starting off. Up at the house farewells had all been said — the Count as unruffled as ever, as though it were usual for him to rise at five in the morning, and Marie smiling and calm. In the stable yard and the kitchen there had been tears; all the women had lamented Brown's going, weeping unashamed and yet laughing through their tears as he laughed and joked in the voluble French which he had acquired, and as he smacked their broad posteriors. Hornblower wondered how many of them Brown had seduced that winter, and how many Anglo-French children would be born next autumn as a result.

"Remember your promise to return after the war," the Count had said to Hornblower. "Marie will be as delighted to see you as I shall be."

His smile had conveyed no hint of a hidden meaning — but how much did he guess, or know? Hornblower gulped as he remembered.

"Shove off," he rasped. "Brown, take the sculls."

The boat scraped over the gravel, and then floated free as the current took her, dancing away from the little group of stable hands and the stolid oxen, vague already in the mist. The rowlocks creaked and the boat swayed to Brown's pulls; Hornblower heard the noises, and felt Bush seated in the stern beside him, but for some seconds he saw nothing. There was a mist about him far denser than the reality.

The one mist cleared with the other, as the sun came breaking through, warm on Hornblower's back. High up the bank on the opposite side was the orchard at which Hornblower had often gazed from his window; it was marvellous now under its load of blossom. Looking back he saw the château shining in the sun. The turrets at the corners had been added, he knew, no more than fifty years ago by a Comte de Graçay with a rococo taste for the antique, but they looked genuine enough at a distance. It was like a fairy castle in the pearly light, a dream castle; and already the months he had spent there seemed like a dream too, a dream from which he regretted awakening.

"Mr Bush," he said sharply. "I'll trouble you to get out your rod and make an appearance of fishing. Take a slower stroke, Brown."

They went drifting on down the noble river, blue in the distance and green overside, clear and transparent, so that they could actually see the bottom passing away below them. It was only a few minutes before they reached the confluence of the Allier, itself a fine river almost the size of the Loire, and the united stream was majestically wide, a hundred and fifty fathoms at least from bank to bank. They were a long musket shot from land, but their position was safer even than that implied, for from the water's edge on either side stretched an extensive no man's land of sand and willow which the periodic floods kept free from human habitations and which was only likely to be visited by fishermen and laundering housewives.

The mist had entirely vanished now, and the hot sun bore with all the promise of one of those splendid spring days of central France. Hornblower shifted in his seat to make himself more comfortable. The hierarchy of this, his new command, was topheavy. A proportion of one seaman to one lieutenant and one captain was ludicrous. He would have to exercise a great deal of tact to keep them all three satisfied — to see that Brown was not made resentful by having all the work to do and yet that discipline was not endangered by a too democratic division of labour. In a fifteen foot boat it would be difficult to keep up the aloof dignity proper to a captain.

"Brown," he said. "I've been very satisfied with you so far. Keep in my good books and I'll see you're properly rewarded when we get back to England. There'll be a warrant for you as master's mate if you want it."

"Thank 'ee, sir. Thank 'ee very kindly. But I'm happy as I am, beggin' your pardon, sir."

He meant he was happy in his rating as a coxswain, but the tone of his voice implied more than that. Hornblower looked at him as he sat with his face turned up to the sun, pulling slowly at the sculls. There was a blissful smile on his face — the man was marvellously happy. He had been well-fed and well-housed for months, with plenty of women's society, with light work and no hardship. Even now there was a long prospect ahead of him of food better than he had ever known before he entered France, of no harder work than a little gentle rowing, of no need ever to turn out on a blustering night to reef topsails. Twenty years of the lower deck in King George's Navy, Hornblower realized, must make any man form the habit of living only in the present. To-morrow might bring a flogging, peril, sickness, death; certainly hardship and probably hunger, and all without the opportunity of lifting a finger to ward off any of these, for any lifting of a finger would make them all more certain. Twenty years of being at the mercy of the incalculable, and not merely in the major things of life but in the minor ones, must make a fatalist of any man — who survived them. For a moment Hornblower felt a little twinge of envy of Brown, who would never know the misery of helplessness, or the indignity of indecision.

The river channel here was much divided by islands each bordered by a rim of golden gravel; it was Hornblower's business to select what appeared to be the most navigable channel — no easy task. Shallows appeared mysteriously right in the centre of what had seemed to be the main stream; over these the clear green water ran faster and faster and shallower and shallower until the bottom of the boat was grating on the pebbles. Sometimes the bank would end there with astonishing abruptness, so that one moment they were in six inches of rushing water and the next in six feet of transparent green, but more than once now they found themselves stuck fast, and Brown and Hornblower, trousers rolled to the knee, had to get out and haul the boat a hundred yards over a barely covered bank before finding water deep enough. Hornblower thanked his stars that he had decided on having the boat built flat-bottomed — a keel would have been a hampering nuisance. Then they came to a dam, like the one which had brought them disaster in the darkness during their first attempt to navigate the river. It was half natural, half artificial, roughly formed of lumps of rock piled across the river bed, and over it the river poured in fury at a few points.

"Pull over to the bank there, Brown," snapped Hornblower as his coxswain looked to him for orders.

They ran the boat up on to the gravel just above the dam, and Hornblower stepped out and looked downstream. There was a hundred yards of turbulent water below the dam; they would have to carry everything down. It took three journeys on the part of Hornblower and Brown to carry all their stores to the point he chose for them to re-enter the river — Bush with his wooden leg could only just manage to stumble over the uneven surface unladen — and then they addressed themselves to the business of transporting the boat. It was not easy; there was a colossal difference between dragging the boat through shallows even an inch deep only and carrying her bodily. Hornblower contemplated the task glumly for some seconds before plunging at it. He stooped and got his hands underneath.

"Take the other side, Brown. Now — lift."

Between them they could just raise it; they had hardly staggered a yard with it before all the strength was gone from Hornblower's wrists and fingers and the boat slipped to the ground again. He avoided Brown's eye and stooped again, exasperated.

"Lift!" he said.

It was impossible to carry the heavy boat that way. He had no sooner lifted it than he was compelled to drop it again.

"It's no go, sir," said Brown gently. "We'll have to get her upon our backs, sir. That's the only way."

Hornblower heard the respectful murmur as if from a long distance.

"If you take the bows, beggin' your pardon, sir, I'll look after the stern. Here, sir, lift t'other way round. Hold it, sir, 'till I can get aft. Right, sir. Ready. Lift!"

They had the boat up on their backs now, stooping double under the heavy load. Hornblower, straining under the lighter bows, thought of Brown carrying the much heavier stern, and he set his teeth and vowed to himself that he would not rest until Brown asked to. Within five seconds he was regretting his vow. His breath was coming with difficulty and there were stabbing pains in his chest. It grew harder and harder to take the trouble to attend to the proper placing of his feet as he stumbled over the uneven surface. Those months in the Château de Graçay had done their work in making him soft and out of condition; for the last few yards of the

portage he was conscious of nothing save the overwhelming weight on his neck and shoulders and his difficulty of breathing. Then he heard Bush's bluff voice.

"Right, sir. Let me get hold, sir."

With the small but welcome help that Bush could afford he was able to disengage himself and lower the boat to the ground; Brown was standing over the stern gasping, and sweeping the sweat off his forehead with his forearm. Hornblower saw him open his mouth to make a remark, presumably regarding the weight of the boat, and then shut it again when he remembered that now he was under discipline again and must only speak when spoken to. And discipline, Hornblower realized, required that he himself should display no sign of weakness before his subordinates — it was bad enough that he should have had to receive advice from Brown as to how to lift the boat.

"Take hold again, Brown, and we'll get her into the water," he said, controlling his breathing with a vast effort. They slid the boat in, and heaved the stores on board again. Hornblower's head was swimming with the strain; he thought longingly of his comfortable seat in the stern, and then put the thought from him.

"I'll take the sculls, Brown," he said.

Brown opened and shut his mouth again, but he could not question explicit orders. The boat danced out over the water, with Hornblower at the sculls happy in the rather baseless conviction that he had demonstrated that a captain in the King's Navy was the equal even in physical strength of any mere coxswain, however Herculean his thews.

Once or twice that day shallows caught them out in midstream which they were unable to pass without lightening the boat to a maximum extent. When Hornblower and Brown, ankle-deep in rushing water, could drag the boat no farther, Bush had to get out too, his wooden leg sinking in the sand despite its broad leather sole, and limp downstream to the edge of the shallows and wait until the others dragged the lightened boat up to him — once he had to stand holding the bag of bread and the roll of bedding before they could tug the boat over the shallows, and on that occasion they had to unstrap his wooden leg, help him in, and then tug the leg free from the sand, so deeply had it sunk. There was another portage to be made that day, fortunately not nearly such a long one as the first; altogether there was quite enough interest in the day's journey to keep them from growing bored.

On that big lonely river it was almost like travelling through an uninhabited country. For the greater part of the day there was hardly a soul in sight. Once they saw a skiff moored to the bank which was obviously used as a ferry-boat, and once they passed a big wagon ferry — a flat-bottomed scow which was moored so as to swing itself across the river by the force of the current, pendulum-fashion on long mooring ropes. Once they passed a small boat engaged in the task of dredging sand for building purposes from the river bed; there were two weather-beaten men on board, hard at work with, small hand dredgers on poles, which they scraped over the bottom and emptied into the boat. It was a nervous moment as they approached them, Bush and Brown with their ornamental fishing rods out, Hornblower forcing himself to do no more with the sculls than merely keep the boat in midstream. He had thought, as they drifted down, of giving orders to Bush and Brown regarding the instant silencing of the two men if they appeared suspicious, but he checked himself. He could rely on their acting promptly without warning, and his dignity demanded that he should betray none of the apprehension which he felt.

But the apprehension was quite baseless. There was no curiosity in the glances which the two sand dredgers threw at them, and there was cordiality in their smiles and in their polite "Bonjour, messieurs".

"Bonjour," said Hornblower and Brown — Bush had the sense to keep shut the mouth which would instantly have betrayed them, and devoted his attention instead to his rod. Clearly boats with fishing parties on board were just common enough on the Loire to escape comment; and, besides, the intrinsic innocence of fishing as a pastime shielded them from suspicion, as Hornblower and the Count had agreed long before. And nobody could ever dream that a small boat in the heart of France was manned by escaped prisoners of war.

The commonest sight of all along the river was the women washing clothes, sometimes singly, sometimes in little groups whose gossiping chatter floated out to them distinctly over the water. The Englishmen could hear the 'clap clap clap' of the wooden beaters smacking the wet clothes on the boards, and could see the kneeling women sway down and up as they rinsed them in the current; most of the women looked up from their work and gave them a glance as they drifted by, but it was never more than a long glance, and often not as much. In

time of war and upheaval there were so many possible explanations for the women not to know the occupants of the boat that their inability did not trouble them.

Of the roaring rapids such as had nearly destroyed them once before, they saw nothing; the junction of the Allier, and the cessation of the winter floods, accounted for that. The rock-strewn sand bars represented the sites of winter rapids and were far easier to navigate, or rather to circumvent. In fact, there were no difficulties at all. Even the weather was benign, a lovely clear day of sunshine, comfortably warm, lighting up the changing panorama of gold and blue and green. Brown basked in it all unashamedly, and the hard-bitten Bush took his ease whenever the peacefulness of it caught him napping; in Bush's stern philosophy mankind — naval mankind at least — was born to sorrow and difficulty and danger, and any variation from such a state of affairs must be viewed with suspicion and not enjoyed too much lest it should have to be paid for at compound interest. It was too good to be true, this delightful drifting down the river, as morning wore into noon and noon into prolonged and dreamy afternoon, with a delicious lunch to eat of a cold pate (a parting gift from fat Jeanne) and a bottle of wine.

The little towns, or rather villages, which they passed were all perched up high on the distant banks beyond the flood limits; Hornblower, who already knew by heart the brief itinerary and table of distances which the Count had made out for him, was aware that the first town with a bridge was at Briare, which they could not reach until late evening. He had intended to wait above the town until nightfall and then to run through in the darkness, but as the day wore on his resolve steadily hardened to push on without waiting. He could not analyse his motives. He was aware that it was a very remarkable thing for him to do, to run into danger, even the slightest, when urged neither by the call of duty nor the thirst for distinction. Here the only benefit would be the saving of an hour or two's time. The Nelsonian tradition to 'lose not an hour' was grained deeply into him, but it was hardly that which influenced him.

Partly it was his innate cross-grainedness. Everything had gone so supremely well. Their escape from their escort had been almost miraculous, the coincidence which had brought them to the Château de Graçay, where alone in all France they could have found safety, was more nearly miraculous still. Now this voyage down the river bore every promise of easy success. His instinctive reaction to all this unnatural prosperity was to put himself into the way of trouble — there had been so much trouble in his life that he felt uneasy without it. But partly he was being driven by devils. He was morose and cantankerous. Marie was being left behind, and he was regretting that more with every yard that divided them. He was tormented by the thought of the shameful part he had played, and by memories of the hours they had spent together; sentimentally he was obsessed with longing for her. And ahead of him lay England where they thought him dead, where Maria would by now have reconciled herself to her loss and would be doubly and painfully happy with him in consequence, and where Barbara would have forgotten him, and where a court martial to inquire into his conduct awaited him. He thought grimly that it might be better for everyone if he *were* dead; he shrank a little from the prospect of returning to England as one might shrink from a cold plunge, or as he shrank from the imminent prospect of danger. That was the ruling motive. He had always forced himself to face danger, to advance bravely to meet it. He had always gulped down any pill which life had presented to him, knowing that any hesitation would give him a contempt for himself more bitter still. So now he would accept no excuse for delay.

Briare was in sight now, down at the end of the long wide reach of the river. Its church tower was silhouetted against the evening sky, and its long straggling bridge stood out black against the distant silver of the water. Hornblower at the sculls looked over his shoulder and saw all this; he was aware of his subordinates' eye turned inquiringly upon him.

"Take the sculls, Brown," he growled.

They changed places silently, and Bush handed over the tiller to him with a puzzled look — he had been well aware of the design to run past bridges only at night. There were two vast black shapes creeping over the surface of the river down there, barges being warped out of the lateral canal on one side and into the canal of Briare on the other by way of a channel across the river dredged for the purpose. Hornblower stared forward as they approached under the impulse of Brown's steady strokes. A quick examination of the water surface told him which arch of the bridge to select, and he was able to discern the tow-ropes and warps of the barges

— there were teams of horses both on the bridge and on the banks, silhouetted clearly against the sky as they tugged at the ropes to drag the bulky barges across the rushing current.

Men were looking at them now from the bridge, and there was just sufficient gap left between the barges to enable the boat to slip between without the necessity to stop and make explanations.

"Pull!" he said to Brown, and the boat went careering headlong down the river. They slid under the bridge with a rush, and neatly rounded the stern of one of the barges; the burly old man at the tiller, with a little grandchild beside him, looked down at them with a dull curiosity as they shot by. Hornblower waved his hand gaily to the child — excitement was a drug which he craved, which always sent his spirits high — and looked up with a grin at the other men on the bridge and on the banks. Then they were past, and Briare was left behind.

"Easy enough, sir," commented Bush.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

If they had been travelling by road they certainly would have been stopped for examination of their passports; here on the unnavigable river such a proceeding occurred to no one. The sun was low now, shining right into his eyes as he looked forward, and it would be dark in less than an hour. Hornblower began to look out for a place where they could be comfortable for the night. He allowed one long island to slide past them before he saw the ideal spot — a tiny hummock of an island with three willow trees, the green of the central part surrounded by a broad belt of golden brown where the receding river had left the gravel exposed.

"We'll run the boat aground over there, Brown," he announced. "Easy. Pull starboard. Pull both. Easy."

It was not a very good landing. Hornblower, despite his undoubted ability in handling big ships, had much to learn regarding the behaviour of flat-bottomed boats amid the shoals of a river. There was a black eddy, which swung them round; the boat had hardly touched bottom before the current had jerked her free again. Brown, tumbling over the bows, was nearly waist deep in water and had to grab the painter and brace himself against the current to check her. The tactful silence which ensued could almost be felt while Brown tugged the boat up to the gravel again — Hornblower, in the midst of his annoyance, was aware of Bush's restless movement and thought of how his first lieutenant would have admonished a midshipman guilty of such a careless piece of work. It made him grin to think of Bush bottling up his feelings, and the grin made him forget his annoyance. He stepped out into the shallow water and helped Brown run the lightened boat farther up the bank, checking Bush when he made to step out too — Bush could never accustom himself to seeing his captain at work while he sat idle. The water was no more than ankle-deep by the time he allowed Bush to disembark; they dragged the boat up as far as she could go and Brown made fast the painter to a peg driven securely into the earth, as a precaution in case any unexpected rise in the water level should float the boat off. The sun had set now in the flaming west, and it was fast growing dark.

"Supper," said Hornblower. "What shall we have?"

A captain with strict ideas of discipline would merely have announced what they should eat, and would certainly not have called his subordinates into consultation, but Hornblower was too conscious of the top-heavy organization of his present ship's company to be able to maintain appearances to that extent. Yet Bush and Brown were still oppressed by a life-long experience of subordination and could not bring themselves to proffer advice to their captain; they merely fidgeted and stood silent, leaving it to Hornblower to decree that they should finish off the cold pate with some boiled potatoes. Once the decision was made, Bush proceeded to amplify and interpret his captain's original order, just as a good first lieutenant should.

"I'll handle the fire here," he said. "There ought to be all the driftwood we need, Brown. Yes, an' I'll want some sheer-legs to hang the pan over the fire — cut me three off those trees, there."

Bush felt it in his bones that Hornblower was meditating taking part in the preparation of supper, and could not bear the thought. He looked up at his captain half appealingly, half defiantly. A captain should not merely never be seen doing undignified work, but he should be kept in awful isolation, screened away in the mysterious recesses of his cabin. Hornblower left them to it, and wandered off round the tiny island, looking over at the distant banks and the far houses, fast disappearing in the growing twilight. It was a shock to discover that the pleasant green which carpeted most of the island was not the grass he had assumed it to be, but a bank of nettles, knee high already despite the earliness of the season. Judging by his language, Brown on the other side had just made the same discovery while seeking fuel with his feet bare.

Hornblower paced the gravel bank for a space, and on his return it was an idyllic scene which met his eyes. Brown was tending the little fire which flickered under the pot swinging from its tripod, while Bush, his wooden leg sticking stiffly out in front of him, was peeling the last of the potatoes. Apparently Bush had decided that a first lieutenant could share menial work with the sole member of the crew without imperilling discipline. They all ate together, wordless but friendly, beside the dying fire; even the chill air of the evening did not cool the feeling of comradeship of which each was conscious in his own particular way.

"Shall I set a watch, sir?" asked Bush, as supper ended.

"No," said Hornblower.

The minute additional security which would be conferred by one of them staying awake would not compare with the discomfort and inconvenience of everyone losing four hours' sleep each night.

Bush and Brown slept in cloak and blanket on the bare soil, probably, Hornblower anticipated, most uncomfortably. For himself there was a mattress of cut nettles cunningly packed under the boat cover which Brown had prepared for him on the most level part of the gravel spit, presumably at a grave cost in stings. He slept on it peacefully, the dew wetting his face and the gibbous moon shining down upon it from the starry sky. Vaguely he remembered, in a troubled fashion, the stories of the great leaders of men — Charles XII especially — who shared their men's coarse fare and slept like them on the bare ground. For a second or two he feared he should be doing likewise, and then his common sense overrode his modesty and told him that he did not need to have recourse to theatrical tricks to win the affections of Bush and Brown.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Those days on the Loire were pleasant, and every day was more pleasant than the one preceding. For Hornblower there was not merely the passive pleasure of a fortnight's picnic, but there was the far more active one of the comradeship of it all. During his ten years as a captain his natural shyness had reinforced the restrictions surrounding his position, and had driven him more and more in upon himself until he had grown unconscious of his aching need for human companionship. In that small boat, living at close quarters with the others, and where one man's misfortune was everyone's, he came to know happiness. His keen insight made him appreciate more than ever the sterling good qualities of Bush, who was secretly fretting over the loss of his foot, and the inactivity to which that loss condemned him, and the doubtfulness of his future as a cripple.

"I'll see you posted as captain," said Hornblower, on the only occasion on which Bush hinted at his troubles, "if it's my last act on earth."

He thought he might possibly contrive that, even if disgrace awaited him personally in England. Lady Barbara must still remember Bush and the old days in the *Lydia*, and must be aware of his good qualities as Hornblower was himself. An appeal to her, properly worded — even from a man broken by court martial — might have an effect, and might set turning the hidden wheels of Government patronage. Bush deserved post rank more than half the captains he knew on the list.

Then there was Brown with his unfailing cheerfulness. No one could judge better than Hornblower the awkwardness of Brown's position, living in such close proximity to two officers. But Brown always could find the right mixture of friendliness and deference; he could laugh gaily when he slipped on a rounded stone and sat down in the Loire, and he could smile sympathetically when the same thing happened to Hornblower. He busied himself over the jobs of work which had to be done, and never, not even after ten days' routine had established something like a custom, appeared to take it for granted that his officers would do their share. Hornblower could foresee a great future for Brown, if helped by a little judicious exertion of influence. He might easily end as a captain, too — Darby and Westcott had started on the lower deck in the same fashion. Even if the court martial broke him Hornblower could do something to help him. Elliott and Bolton at least would not desert him entirely, and would rate Brown as midshipman in their ships if he asked them to with special earnestness.

In making these plans for the future of his friends, Hornblower could bring himself to contemplate the end of the voyage and the inevitable court martial with something like equanimity; for the rest, during those golden days, he was able to avoid all thought of their approaching end. It was a placid journey through a placid Limbo. He was leaving behind him in the past the shameful memory of his treatment of Marie, and the troubles to come were still in the future; for once in his life he was able to live in the lotus-eating present.

All the manifold little details of the journey helped towards this desirable end — they were so petty and yet temporarily so important. Selecting a course between the golden sandbanks of the river; stepping out overside to haul the boat over when his judgement was incorrect; finding a lonely island on which to camp at night, and cooking supper when one was found; drifting past the gravel dredgers and the rare fishing parties; avoiding conspicuous behaviour while passing towns; there were always trifles to occupy the mind. There were the two nights when it rained, and they all slept huddled together under the shelter of a blanket stretched between willow trees — there had been a ridiculous pleasure about waking up to find Bush snoring beside him with a protective arm across him.

There was the pageantry of the Loire — Gien with its château-fortress high on its terraces, and Sully with its vast rounded bastions, and Château-Neuf-sur-Loire, and Jargeau. Then for miles along the river they were in sight of the gaunt square towers of the cathedral of Orleans — Orleans was one of the few towns with an extensive river front, past which they had to drift unobtrusively and with special care at its difficult bridges. Orleans was hardly out of sight before they reached Beaugency with its interminable bridges of countless arches and its strange square tower. The river was blue and gold and green. The rocks above Nevers were succeeded by the gravel banks of the middle reaches, and now the gravel gave way to sand, golden sand amid the shimmering blue of the river whose water was a clear green overside. All the contrasted greens delighted Hornblower's eyes, the green of the never-ending willows, of the vineyards and the cornfields and the meadows.

They passed Blois, its steeply-humped bridge crowned by the pyramid whose inscription proclaimed the bridge to be the first public work of the infant Louis XV, and Chaumont and Amboise, their lovely châteaux towering above the river, and Tours — an extensive water front to sidle past here, too — and Langeais. The wild desolation of the island-studded river was punctuated everywhere by towers and châteaux and cathedrals on the distant banks. Below Langeais the big placid Vienne entered the river on their left, and appeared to convey some of its own qualities to the united stream, which was now a little slower and more regular in its course, its shallows becoming less and less frequent. After Saumur and the innumerable islands of Les Ponts de Cé, the even bigger Maine came in on their right, and finally deprived the wild river of all the characteristics which had endeared it to them. Here it was far deeper and far slower, and for the first time they found the attempt to make the river available for commercial traffic successful here — they had passed numerous traces of wasted work on Bonaparte's part higher up.

But below the confluence of the Maine the groynes and dykes had withstood the winter floods and the continual erosion, had piled up long beaches of golden sand on either bank, and had left in the centre a deep channel navigable to barges — they passed several working their way up to Angers from Nantes. Mostly they were being towed by teams of mules, but one or two were taking advantage of a westerly wind to make the ascent under vast gaff-mainsails. Hornblower stared hungrily at them, for they were the first sails he had seen for months, but he put aside all thought of stealing one. A glance at their clumsy lines assured him that it would be more dangerous to put to sea, even for a short distance, in one of those than in the cockleshell boat they had already.

That westerly wind that brought the barges up brought something else with it, too. Brown, diligently tugging at the sculls as he forced the boat into it, suddenly wrinkled his nose.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he said, "I can smell the sea."

They sniffed at the breeze, all three of them.

"By God, you're right, Brown," said Bush.

Hornblower said nothing, but he had smelt the salt as well, and it had brought with it such a wave of mixed feelings as to leave him without words. And that night after they had camped — there were just as many desolate islands to choose from, despite the changes in the river — Hornblower noticed that the level of the water had risen perceptibly above where it had stood when they beached the boat. It was not flood water like

the time when after a day of heavy rain their boat had nearly floated during the night; on this evening above Nantes there had been no rain, no sign of it, for three days. Hornblower watched the water creep up at a rate almost perceptible, watched it reach a maximum, dally there for a space, and then begin to sink. It was the tide. Down at Paimbœuf at the mouth there was a rise and fall of ten or twelve feet, at Nantes one of four or six; up here he was witnessing the last dying effort of the banked up sea to hold the river back in its course.

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There was a strange emotion in the thought. They had reached tidewater at last, the habitat on which he had spent more than half his life; they had travelled from sea to sea, from the Mediterranean to what was at least technically the Atlantic; this same tide he was witnessing here washed also the shores of England, where were Barbara, and Maria, and his unknown child, and the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. But more than that. It meant that their pleasant picnic on the Loire was over. In tidal water they could not hope to move about with half the freedom they had known inland; strange faces and new arrivals would be scanned with suspicion, and probably the next forty-eight hours or so would determine whether he was to reach England to face a court martial or be recaptured to face a firing squad. Hornblower knew that moment the old sensation of excitement, which he called fear to himself — the quickened heart beat, the dampening palms, the tingling in the calves of his legs. He had to brace himself to master these symptoms before returning to the others to tell them of his observations.

"High water half an hour back, sir?" repeated Bush in reply.

"Yes.

"M'm," said Bush.

Brown said nothing, as accorded with his position in life, but his face bore momentarily the same expression of deep cogitation. They were both assimilating the fact, in the manner of seamen. Hornblower knew that from now on, with perhaps a glance at the sun but not necessarily with a glance at the river, they would be able to tell offhand the state of the tide, producing the information without a thought by the aid of a subconscious calculating ability developed during a lifetime at sea. He could do the same himself — the only difference between them was that he was interested in the phenomenon while they were indifferent to it or unaware of it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For their entrance into Nantes Hornblower decided that they must wear their uniforms as officials of the customs service. It called for long and anxious thought to reach this decision, a desperately keen balancing of chances. If they arrived in civilian clothes they would almost certainly be questioned, and in that case it would be almost impossible to explain their lack of papers and passports, whereas in uniform they might easily not be questioned at all, and if they were a haughty demeanour might still save them. But to pose as a colonel of douaniers would call for histrionic ability on the part of Hornblower, and he mistrusted himself — not his ability, but his nerve. With remorseless self-analysis he told himself that he had played a part for years, posing as a man of rigid imperturbability when he was nothing of the kind, and he asked himself why he could not pose for a few minutes as a man of swaggering and overbearing haughtiness, even under the additional handicap of having to speak French. In the end it was in despite of his doubts that he reached his decision, and put on the neat uniform and pinned the glittering Legion of Honour on his breast.

As always, it was the first moment of departure which tried him most — getting into the sternsheets of the boat and taking the tiller while Brown got out the sculls. The tension under which he laboured was such that he knew that, if he allowed it, the hand that rested on the tiller would tremble, and the voice which gave the orders to Brown would quaver. So he carried himself with the unbending rigidity which men were accustomed to see in him, and he spoke with the insensitive harshness he always used in action.

Under the impulse of Brown's sculls the river glided away behind them, and the city of Nantes came steadily nearer. Houses grew thicker and thicker on the banks, and then the river began to break up into several arms; to Hornblower the main channel between the islands was made obvious by the indications of traces of

commercial activity along the banks — traces of the past, largely, for Nantes was a dying town, dying of the slow strangulation of the British blockade. The lounging idlers along the quays, the deserted warehouses, all indicated the dire effects of war upon French commerce.

They passed under a couple of bridges, with the tide running strongly, and left the huge mass of the ducal château to starboard; Hornblower forced himself to sit with careless ease in the boat, as though neither courting nor avoiding observation; the Legion of Honour clinked as it swung upon his breast. A side glance at Bush suddenly gave him enormous comfort and reassurance, for Bush was sitting with a masklike immobility of countenance which told Hornblower that he was nervous too. Bush could go into action and face an enemy's broadside with an honest indifference to danger, but this present situation was trying his nerves severely, sitting watched by a thousand French eyes, and having to rely upon mere inactivity to save himself from death or imprisonment. The sight was like a tonic to Hornblower. His cares dropped from him, and he knew the joy and thrill of reckless bravery.

Beyond the next bridge the maritime port began. Here first were the fishing boats — Hornblower looked keenly at them, for he had in mind to steal one of them. His experience under Pellew in the blockading squadron years ago was serving him in good stead now, for he knew the ways of those fishing boats. They were accustomed to ply their trade among the islands of the Breton coast, catching the pilchards which the French persisted in calling 'sardines', and bringing their catch up the estuary to sell in the market at Nantes. He and Bush and Brown between them could handle one of those boats with ease, and they were seaworthy enough to take them safely out to the blockading squadron, or to England if necessary. He was practically certain that he would decide upon such a plan, so that as they rowed by he sharply ordered Brown to pull more slowly, and he turned all his attention upon them.

Below the fishing boats two American ships were lying against the quay, the Stars and Stripes fluttering jauntily in the gentle wind. His attention was caught by a dreary clanking of chains — the ships were being emptied of their cargoes by gangs of prisoners, each man staggering bent double under a bag of grain. That was interesting. Hornblower looked again. The chain gangs were under the charge of soldiers — Hornblower could see the shakos and the flash of the musket barrels — which gave him an insight into who the poor devils might be. They were military criminals, deserters, men caught sleeping at their posts, men who had disobeyed an order, all the unfortunates of the armies Bonaparte maintained in every corner of Europe. Their sentences condemned them to 'the galleys' and as the French Navy no longer used galleys in which they could be forced to tug at the oars, they were now employed in all the hard labour of the ports; twice as lieutenant in Pellew's *Indefatigable* Hornblower had seen picked up small parties of desperate men who had escaped from Nantes in much the same fashion as he himself proposed now to do.

And then against the quay below the American ships they saw something else, something which caused them to stiffen in their seats. The tricolour here was hoisted above a tattered blue ensign, flaunting a petty triumph. "*Witch of Endor*, ten-gun cutter," said Bush hoarsely. "A French frigate caught her on a lee shore off Noirmoutier last year. By God, isn't it what you'd expect of the French? It's eleven months ago and they're still wearing French colours over British."

She was a lovely little ship; even from where they were they could see the perfection of her lines — speed and seaworthiness were written all over her.

"The Frogs don't seem to have over-sparred her the way you'd expect 'em to," commented Bush.

She was ready for sea, and their expert eyes could estimate the area of the furled mainsail and jib. The high graceful mast nodded to them, almost imperceptibly, as the cutter rocked minutely beside the quay. It was as if a prisoner were appealing to them for aid, and the flapping colours, tricolour over blue ensign, told a tragic story. In a sudden rush of impulse Hornblower put the helm over.

"Lay us alongside the quay, he said to Brown.

A few strokes took them there; the tide had turned some time ago, and they headed against the flood. Brown caught a ring and made the painter fast, and first Hornblower, nimbly, and then Bush, with difficulty, mounted the stone steps to the top of the quay.

"Suivez-nous," said Hornblower to Brown, remembering at the last moment to speak French.

Hornblower forced himself to hold up his head and walk with a swagger; the pistols in his side pockets bumped reassuringly against his hips, and his sword tapped against his thigh. Bush walked beside him, his wooden leg

thumping with measured stride on the stone quay. A passing group of soldiers saluted the smart uniform, and Hornblower returned the salute nonchalantly, amazed at his new coolness. His heart was beating fast, but ecstatically he knew he was not afraid. It was worth running this risk to experience this feeling of mad bravery. They stopped and looked at the *Witch of Endor* against the quay. Her decks were not of the dazzling whiteness upon which an English first lieutenant would have insisted, and there was a slovenliness about her standing rigging which was heartbreaking to contemplate. A couple of men were moving lackadaisically about the deck under the supervision of a third.

"Anchor watch," muttered Bush. "Two hands and a master's mate."

He spoke without moving his lips, like a naughty boy in school, lest some onlooker should read his words and realize that he was not speaking French.

"Everyone else on shore, the lubbers," went on Bush.

Hornblower stood on the quay, the tiny breeze blowing round his ears, soldiers and sailors and civilians walking by, the bustle of the unloading of the American ships noisy in the distance. Bush's thoughts were following on the heels of his own. Bush was aware of the temptation Hornblower was feeling, to steal the *Witch of Endor* and to sail her to England — Bush would never have thought of it himself, but years of service under his captain made him receptive of ideas, however fantastic.

Fantastic was the right word. Those big cutters carried a crew of sixty men, and the gear and tackle were planned accordingly. Three men — one a cripple — could not even hope to be able to hoist the big mainsail, although it was just possible that the three of them might handle her under sail in the open sea in fair weather. It was that possibility which had given rise to the train of thought, but on the other hand there was all the tricky estuary of the Loire between them and the sea; and the French, Hornblower knew, had removed the buoys and navigation marks for fear of an English raid. Unpiloted they could never hope to find their way through thirty-five miles of shoals without going aground, and besides, there were batteries at Paimbœuf and Saint Nazaire to prohibit unauthorized entrance and exit. The thing was impossible — it was sheer sentimentality to think of it, he told himself, suddenly self-critical again for a moment.

He turned away and strolled up towards the American ships, and watched with interest the wretched chain gangs staggering along the gang planks with their loads of grain. The sight of their misery sickened him; so did the bullying sergeants who strutted about in charge of them. Here, if anywhere, he told himself, was to be found the nucleus of that rising against Bonaparte which everyone was expecting. All that was needed was a desperate leader — that would be something worth reporting to the Government when he reached home. Farther down the river yet another ship was coming up to the port, her topsails black against the setting sun, as, with the flood behind her, she held her course close hauled to the faint southerly breeze. She was flying the Stars and Stripes — American again. Hornblower experienced the same feeling of exasperated impotence which he had known in the old days of his service under Pellew. What was the use of blockading a coast, and enduring all the hardships and perils of that service, if neutral vessels could sail in and out with impunity? Their cargoes of wheat were officially noncontraband, but wheat was of as vital importance to Bonaparte as ever was hemp, or pitch, or any other item on the contraband list — the more wheat he could import, the more men he could draft into his armies. Hornblower found himself drifting into the eternal debate as to whether America, when eventually she became weary of the indignities of neutrality, would turn her arms against England or France — she had actually been at war with France for a short time already, and it was much to her interest to help pull down the imperial despotism, but it was doubtful whether she would be able to resist the temptation to twist the British lion's tail.

The new arrival, smartly enough handled, was edging in now to the quay. A backed topsail took the way off her, and the warps creaked round the bollards. Hornblower watched idly, Bush and Brown beside him. As the ship was made fast, a gang plank was thrown to the quay, and a little stout man made ready to walk down it from the ship. He was in civilian clothes, and he had a rosy round face with a ridiculous little black moustache with upturned ends. From his manner of shaking hands with the captain, and from the very broken English which he was speaking, Hornblower guessed him to be the pilot.

The pilot! In that moment a surge of ideas boiled up in Hornblower's mind. It would be dark in less than an hour, with the moon in its first quarter — already he could see it, just visible in the sky high over the setting sun. A clear night, the tide about to ebb, a gentle breeze, southerly with a touch of east. A pilot available on

the one hand, a crew on the other. Then he hesitated. The whole scheme was rash to the point of madness — beyond that point. It must be ill-digested, unsound. His mind raced madly through the scheme again, but even as it did so he was carried away by the wave of recklessness. There was an intoxication about throwing caution to the winds which he had forgotten since his boyhood. In the tense seconds which were all he had, while the pilot was descending the gang plank and approaching them along the quay, he had formed his resolution. He nudged his two companions, and then stepped forward and intercepted the fat little pilot as he walked briskly past them.

"Monsieur," he said. "I have some questions to ask you. Will you kindly accompany me to my ship for a moment?"

The pilot noted the uniform, the star of the Legion of Honour, the assured manner.

"Why, certainly," he said. His conscience was clear; he was guilty of no more than venal infringements of the Continental system. He turned and trotted alongside Hornblower. "You are a newcomer to this port, Colonel, I fancy?"

"I was transferred here yesterday from Amsterdam," answered Hornblower shortly.

Brown was striding along at the pilot's other elbow; Bush was bringing up the rear, gallantly trying to keep pace with them, his wooden leg thumping the pavement. They came up to the *Witch of Endor*, and made their way up her gang plank to her deck; the officer there looked at them with a little surprise. But he knew the pilot, and he knew the customs uniform.

"I want to examine one of your charts, if you please," said Hornblower. "Will you show us the way to the cabin?"

The mate had not a suspicion in the world. He signed to his men to go on with their work and led the way down the brief companion to the after cabin. The mate entered, and politely Hornblower thrust the pilot in next, before him. It was a tiny cabin, but there was sufficient room to be safe when they were at the farther end. He stood by the door and brought out his two pistols.

"If you make a sound," he said, and excitement rippled his lips into a snarl, "I will kill you."

They simply stood and stared at him, but at last the pilot opened his mouth to speak — speech was irrepressible with him.

"Silence!" snapped Hornblower.

He moved far enough into the room to allow Brown and Bush to enter after him.

"Tie 'em up," he ordered.

Belts and handkerchiefs and scarves did the work efficiently enough; soon the two men were gagged and helpless, their hands tied behind them.

"Under the table with 'em," said Hornblower. "Now, be ready for the two hands when I bring 'em down."

He ran up on deck.

"Here, you two," he snapped. "I've some questions to ask you. Come down with me."

They put down their work and followed him meekly, to the cabin where Hornblower's pistols frightened them into silence. Brown ran on deck for generous supply of line with which to bind them and to make the lashings of the other two more secure yet. Then he and Bush — neither of them had spoken as yet since the adventure began — looked to him for further orders.

"Watch 'em," said Hornblower. "I'll be back in five minutes with a crew. There'll be one more man at least to make fast."

He went up to the quay again, and along to where the gangs of galley slaves were assembling, weary after their day's work of unloading. The ten chained men under the sergeant whom he addressed looked at him with lack-lustre eyes, only wondering faintly what fresh misery this spruce colonel was bringing them.

"Sergeant," he said. "Bring your party down to my ship. There is work for them there."

"Yes, Colonel," said the sergeant.

He rasped an order at the weary men, and they followed Hornblower down the quay. Their bare feet made no sound, but the chain which ran from waist to waist clashed rhythmically with their stride.

"Bring them down on to the deck," said Hornblower. "Now come down into the cabin for your orders."

It was all so easy, thanks to that uniform and star. Hornblower had to try hard not to laugh at the sergeant's bewilderment as they disarmed him and tied him up. It took no more than a significant gesture with Hornblower's pistol to make the sergeant indicate in which pocket was the key of the prisoners' chain. "I'll have these men laid out under the table, if you please, Mr Bush," said Hornblower. "All except the pilot. I want him on deck."

The sergeant and the mate and the two hands were laid out, none too gently, and Hornblower went out on deck while the others dragged the pilot after him; it was nearly quite dark now, with only the moon shining. The galley slaves were squatting listlessly on the hatchcoaming. Hornblower addressed them quietly. Despite his difficulty with the language, his boiling excitement conveyed itself to them.

"I can set you men free," he said. "There will be an end of beatings and slavery if you will do what I order. I am an English officer, and I am going to sail this ship to England. Does anyone not want to come?"

There was a little sigh from the group; it was as if they could not believe they were hearing aright — probably they could not.

"In England," went on Hornblower, "you will be rewarded. There will be a new life awaiting you."

Now at last they were beginning to understand that they had not been brought on board the cutter for further toil, that there really was a chance of freedom.

"Yes, sir," said a voice.

"I am going to unfasten your chain," said Hornblower. "Remember this. There is to be no noise. Sit still until you are told what to do."

He fumbled for the padlock in the dim light, unlocked it and snapped it open — it was pathetic, the automatic gesture with which the first man lifted his arms. He was accustomed to being locked and unlocked daily, like an animal. Hornblower set free each man in turn, and the chain clanked on the deck; he stood back with his hands on the butts of his pistols ready in case of trouble, but there was no sign of any. The men stood dazed — the transition from slavery to freedom had taken no more than three minutes.

Hornblower felt the movement of the cutter under his feet as the wind swung her; she was bumping gently against the fends-off hung between her and the quay. A glance over the side confirmed his conclusions — the tide had not yet begun to ebb. There were still some minutes to wait, and he turned to Brown, standing restless aft of the mainmast with the pilot sitting miserably at his feet.

"Brown," he said quietly, "run down to our boat and bring me my parcel of clothes. Run along now — what are you waiting for?"

Brown went unhappily. It seemed dreadful to him that his captain should waste precious minutes over recovering his clothes, and should even trouble to think of them. But Hornblower was not as mad as he might appear. They could not start until the tide turned, and Brown might as well be employed fetching clothes as standing fidgeting. For once in his life Hornblower had no intention of posing before his subordinates. His head was clear despite his excitement.

"Thank you," he said, as Brown returned, panting with the canvas bag. "Get me my uniform coat out."

He stripped off his colonel's tunic and put on the coat which Brown held for him, experiencing a pleasant thrill as his fingers fastened the buttons with their crown and anchor. The coat was sadly crumpled, and the gold lace bent and broken, but still it was a uniform, even though the last time he had worn it was months ago when they had been capsized in the Loire. With this coat on his back he could no longer be accused of being a spy, and should their attempt result in failure and recapture it would shelter both himself and his subordinates. Failure and recapture were likely possibilities, as his logical brain told him, but secret murder now was not. The stealing of the cutter would attract sufficient public attention to make that impossible. Already he had bettered his position — he could not be shot as a spy nor be quietly strangled in prison. If he were recaptured now he could only be tried on the old charge of violation of the laws of war, and Hornblower felt that his recent exploits might win him sufficient public sympathy to make it impolitic for Bonaparte to press even that charge.

It was time for action now. He took a belaying pin from the rail, and walked up slowly to the seated pilot, weighing the instrument meditatively in his hand.

"Monsieur," he said, "I want you to pilot this ship out to sea."

The pilot goggled up at him in the faint moonlight.

"I cannot," he gabbled. "My professional honour — my duty —"

Hornblower cut him short with a menacing gesture of the belaying pin.

"We are going to start now," he said. "You can give instructions or not, as you choose. But I tell you this, monsieur. The moment this ship touches ground, I will beat your head into a paste with this."

Hornblower eyed the white face of the pilot — his moustache was lop-sided and ridiculous now after his rough treatment. The man's eyes were on the belaying pin with which Hornblower was tapping the palm of his hand, and Hornblower felt a little thrill of triumph. The threat of a pistol bullet through the head would not have been sufficient for this imaginative southerner. But the man could picture so clearly the crash of the belaying pin upon his skull, and the savage blows which would beat him to death, that the argument Hornblower had selected was the most effective one.

"Yes, monsieur," said the pilot, weakly.

"Right," said Hornblower. "Brown, lash him to the rail, there. Then we can start. Mr Bush, will you take the tiller, if you please?"

The necessary preparations were brief; the convicts were led to the halliards and the ropes put in their hands, ready to haul on the word of command. Hornblower and Brown had so often before had experience in pushing raw crews into their places, thanks to the all-embracing activities of the British press-gangs, and it was good to see that Brown's French, eked out by the force of his example, was sufficient for the occasion.

"Cut the warps, sir?" volunteered Brown.

"No. Cast them off," snapped Hornblower.

Cut warps left hanging to the bollards would be a sure proof of a hurried and probably illegal departure; to cast them off meant possibly delaying inquiry and pursuit by a few more minutes, and every minute of delay might be precious in the uncertain future. The first of the ebb was tightening the ropes now, simplifying the business of getting away from the quay. To handle the tiny fore-and-aft rigged ship was an operation calling for little either of the judgement or of the brute strength which a big square rigger would demand, and the present circumstances — the wind off the quay and the ebbing tide — made the only precaution necessary that of casting off the stern warp before the bow, as Brown understood as clearly as Hornblower. It happened in the natural course of events, for Hornblower had to fumble in the dim light to disentangle the clove hitches with which some French sailor had made fast, and Brown had completed his share long before him. The push of the tide was swinging the cutter away from the quay. Hornblower, in the uncertain light, had to time his moment for setting sail, making allowance for the unreliability of his crew, the eddy along the quayside, the tide and the wind.

"Hoist away," said Hornblower, and then, to the men, "Tirez."

Mainsail and jib rose, to the accompaniment of the creaking of the blocks. The sails flapped, bellied, flapped again. Then they filled, and Bush at the tiller — the cutter steered with a tiller, not a wheel — felt a steady pressure. The cutter was gathering way; she was changing from a dead thing to a live. She heeled the tiniest fraction to the breeze with a subdued creaking of her cordage, and simultaneously Hornblower heard a little musical chuckle from the bows as her forefoot bubbled through the water. He picked up the belaying pin again, and in three strides was at the pilot's side, balancing the instrument in his hand.

"To the right, monsieur," gabbled the individual. "Keep well to the right."

"Port your helm, Mr Bush. We're taking the starboard channel," said Hornblower, and then, translating the further hurried instructions of the pilot. "Meet her! Keep her at that!"

The cutter glided on down the river in the faint moonlight. From the bank of the river she must make a pretty picture — no one would guess that she was not setting forth on some quite legitimate expedition.

The pilot was saying something else now; Hornblower bent his ear to listen. It had regard to the advisability of having a man at work with the lead taking soundings, and Hornblower would not consider it for a moment. There were only Brown and himself who could do that, and they both might be wanted at any moment in case it should be necessary for the cutter to go about — moreover, there would be bound to be a muddle about fathoms and metres.

"No," said Hornblower. "You will have to do your work without that. And my promise still holds good."

He tapped his palm with the belaying pin, and laughed. That laugh surprised him, it was so blood-curdling in its implications. Anyone hearing it would be quite sure that Hornblower was determined upon clubbing the pilot

to death if they went aground. Hornblower asked himself if he were acting and was puzzled to discover that he could not answer the question. He could not picture himself killing a helpless man — and yet he could not be sure. This fierce, relentless determination that consumed him was something new to him, just as it always was. He was aware of the fact that once he had set his hand to a scheme he never allowed any consideration to stop his carrying it through, but he always looked upon himself as fatalistic or resigned. It was always startling to detect in himself qualities which he admired in other men. But it was sufficient, and satisfactory, for the moment, to know that the pilot was quite sure that he would be killed in an unpleasant fashion if the cutter should touch ground.

Within half a mile it was necessary to cross to the other side — it was amusing to note how this vast estuary repeated on a grand scale the characteristics of the upper river, where the clear channel serpented from shore to shore between the sandbanks. At the pilot's warning Hornblower got his motley crew together in case it might be necessary to go about, but the precaution was needless. Closehailed, and with the tide running fast behind her, the cutter glided across, Hornblower and Brown at the sheets, and Bush at the tiller demonstrating once more what an accomplished seaman he was. They steadied her with the wind again over her quarter, Hornblower anxiously testing the direction of the wind and looking up at the ghostly sails.

"Monsieur," pleaded the pilot. "Monsieur, these cords are tight."

Hornblower laughed again, horribly.

"They will serve to keep you awake, then," he said.

His instinct had dictated the reply; his reason confirmed it. It would be best to show no hint of weakness towards this man who had it in his power to wreck everything — the more firmly the pilot was convinced of his captor's utter pitilessness the less chance there was of his playing them false. Better that he should endure the pain of tight ligatures than that three men should risk imprisonment and death. And suddenly Hornblower remembered the four other men — the sergeant and the mate and the two hands — who lay gagged and bound in the cabin. They must be highly uncomfortable, and probably fairly near to suffocation. It could not be helped. No one could be spared for a moment from the deck to go below and attend them. There they must lie until there was no hope of rescue for them.

He found himself feeling sorry for them, and put the feeling aside. Naval history teemed with stories of recaptured prizes, in which the prisoners had succeeded in overpowering weak prize crews. He was going to run no risk of that. It was interesting to note how his mouth set itself hard at the thought without his own volition; and it was equally interesting to observe how his reluctance to go home and face the music reacted contrariwise upon his resolution to see this affair through. He did not want to fail, and the thought that he might be glad of failure because of the postponement of the settlement of his affairs only made him more set in his determination not to fail.

"I will loosen the cords," he said to the pilot, "when we are off Noirmoutier. Not before."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They were off Noirmoutier at dawn, with the last dying puff of wind. The grey light found them becalmed and enwreathed in a light haze which drifted in patches over the calm surface of the sea, awaiting the rising of the sun to dissipate it. Hornblower looked round him as the details became more clear. The galley slaves were all asleep on the foredeck, huddled together for warmth like pigs in a sty, with Brown squatting on the hatch beside them, his chin on his hand. Bush still stood at the tiller, betraying no fatigue after his sleepless night; he held the tiller against his hip with his wooden leg braced against a ring bolt. Against the rail the pilot drooped in his bonds; his face which yesterday had been plump and pink was this morning drawn and grey with pain and fatigue.

With a little shudder of disgust Hornblower cut him loose.

"I keep my promise, you see," he said, but the pilot only dropped to the deck, his face distorted with pain, and a minute later he was groaning with the agony of returning circulation.

The big mainsail boom came inboard with a clatter as the sail flapped.

"I can't hold the course, sir," said Bush.

"Very well," said Hornblower.

He might have expected this. The gentle night wind which had wafted them down the estuary was just the sort to die away with the dawn, leaving them becalmed. But had it held for another half hour, had they made another couple of miles of progress, they would be far safer. There lay Noirmoutier to port, and the mainland astern; through the shredding mist he could make out the gaunt outlines of the semaphore station on the mainland — sixteen years ago he had been second in command of the landing party which Pellew had sent ashore to destroy it. The islands were all heavily garrisoned now, with big guns mounted, as a consequence of the incessant English raids. He scanned the distance which separated them from Noirmoutier, measuring it with his eye — they were out of big gun range, he fancied, but the tide might easily drift them in closer. He even suspected, from what he remembered of the set of the tides, that there was danger of their being drifted into the Bay of Bourgneuf.

"Brown," he called, sharply. "Wake those men up. Set them to work with the sweeps."

On either side of every gun was a thole for a sweep, six on each side of the ship; Brown shoved his bleary-eyed crew into their positions and showed them how to get out the big oars, with the long rope joining the looms.

"One, two, three, pull!" shouted Brown.

The men put their weight on the oars; the blades bubbled ineffectively through the still water.

"One, two, three, pull! One, two, three, pull!"

Brown was all animation, gesticulating, running from man to man beating time with his whole body. Gradually the cutter gathered way, and as she began to move the oar blades began to bite upon the water with more effect.

"One, two, three, pull!"

It did not matter that Brown was counting time in English, for there was no mistaking his meaning, nor the meaning of the convulsive movements of his big body.

"Pull!"

The galley slaves sought for foothold on the deck as they tugged; Brown's enthusiasm was infectious, so that one or two of them even raised their voices in a cracked cheer as they leaned back. Now the cutter was perceptibly moving; Bush swung the tiller over, felt the rudder bite, and steadied her on her course again. She rose and fell over the tiny swell with a clattering of blocks.

Hornblower looked away from the straining men over the oily sea. If he had been lucky he might have found one of the ships of the blockading squadron close inshore — often they would come right in among the islands to beard Bonaparte. But to-day there was no sail in sight. He studied the grim outlines of the island for signs of life. Even as he looked the gallows-like arms of the semaphore station on the mainland sprang up to attention. They made no further movement, and Hornblower guessed that they were merely announcing the operators' readiness to receive a message from the station further inshore invisible to him — he could guess the purport of the message. Then the arms started signalling, moving jerkily against the blue sky, transmitting a brief reply to the interior. Another period of quiescence, and then Hornblower saw the signal arms swing round towards him — previously they had been nearly in profile. Automatically he turned towards Noirmoutier, and he saw the tiny speck of the flag at the masthead there dip in acknowledgement. Noirmoutier was ready to receive orders from the land. Round and round spun the arms of the semaphore; up and down went the flag in acknowledgement of each sentence.

Near the foot of the mast appeared a long jet of white smoke, rounding off instantly into a ball, and one after the other four fountains of water leaped from the glassy surface of the sea as a shot skipped over it, the dull report following after. The nearest fountain was a full half mile away, so that they were comfortably out of range.

"Make those men pull!" roared Hornblower to Brown.

He could guess what would be the next move. Under her sweeps the cutter was making less than a mile in the hour, and all day long they would be in danger, unless a breeze came, and his straining eye could see no hint of a breeze on the calm surface of the sea, nor in the vivid blue of the morning sky. At any moment boats crowded with men would be putting off towards them — boats whose oars would move them far faster than

the cutter's sweeps. There would be fifty men in each, perhaps a gun mounted in the bows as well. Three men with the doubtful aid of a dozen galley slaves could not hope to oppose them.

"Yes I can, by God," said Hornblower to himself.

As he sprang into action he could see the boats heading out from the tip of the island, tiny dots upon the surface of the sea. The garrison must have turned out and bundled into the boats immediately on receiving the order from the land.

"Pull!" shouted Brown.

The sweeps groaned on the tholes, and the cutter lurched under the impulse.

Hornblower had cleared away the aftermost six-pounder on the port side. There was shot in the locker under the rail, but no powder.

"Keep the men at work, Brown," he said, "and watch the pilot."

"Aye aye, sir," said Brown.

He stretched out a vast hand and took hold of the pilot's collar, while Hornblower dived into the cabin. One of the four prisoners there had writhed and wriggled his way to the foot of the little companion — Hornblower trod on him in his haste. With a curse he dragged him out of the way; as he expected there was a hatchway down into the lazarette. Hornblower jerked it open and plunged through; it was nearly dark, for the only light was what filtered through the cabin skylight and down the hatchway, and he stumbled and blundered upon the piled-up stores inside. He steadied himself; whatever the need for haste there was no profit in panic. He waited for his eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness, while overhead he could hear Brown still bellowing and the sweeps still groaning on the tholes. Then in the bulkhead before him he saw what he sought, a low doorway with a glass panel, which must indicate the magazine — the gunner would work in there by the light of a lantern shining through.

He heaved the piled-up stores out of his way, sweating in his haste and the heat, and wrenched open the door. Feeling about him in the tiny space, crouching nearly double, his hands fell upon four big hogsheads of gunpowder. He fancied he could feel the grittiness of gunpowder under his feet; any movement on his part might start a spark and blow the cutter to fragments — it was just like the French to be careless with explosives. He sighed with relief when his fingers encountered the paper containers of ready charges. He had hoped to find them, but there had always been the chance that there were no cartridges available, and he had not been enamoured of the prospect of using a powder-ladle. He loaded himself with cartridges and backed out of the tiny magazine to the cabin, and sprang up on deck again, to the clear sunshine.

The boats were appreciably nearer, for they were no longer black specks but boats, creeping beetle-like over the surface towards them, three of them, already spaced out in their race to effect a recapture. Hornblower put down his cartridges upon the deck. His heart was pounding with his exertions and with excitement, and each successive effort that he made to steady himself seemed to grow less successful. It was one thing to think and plan and direct, to say "Do this" or "Go there," and it was quite another to have success dependent upon the cunning of his own fingers and the straightness of his own eye.

His sensations were rather similar to those he experienced when he had drunk a glass of wine too many — he knew clearly enough what he had to do, but his limbs were not quite as ready as usual to obey the orders of his brain. He rumbled more than once as he rigged the train-tackle of the gun.

That fumbling cured him; he rose from the task shaking his unsteadiness from him like Christian losing his burden of sin. He was cool now, set completely on the task in hand.

"Here, you," he said to the pilot.

The pilot demurred for a moment, full of fine phrases regarding the impossibility of training a gun upon his fellow countrymen, but a sight of the alteration in Hornblower's expression reduced him to instant humble submission. Hornblower was unaware of the relentless ferocity of his glance, being only conscious of a momentary irritation at anyone crossing his will. But the pilot had thought that any further delay would lead to Hornblower's killing him, pitilessly — and the pilot may have been right. Between them they laid hold of the train-tackle and ran the gun back. Hornblower took out the tampion and went round to the breech; he twirled the elevating screw until his eye told him that the gun was at the maximum elevation at which it could be run out. He cocked the lock, and then, crouching over the gun so that the shadow of his body cut off the sunlight, jerked the lanyard. The spark was satisfactory.

He ripped open a cartridge, poured the powder into the muzzle of the gun, folded the paper into a wad, and rammed the charge home with the flexible rammer. A glance towards the boats showed that they were still probably out of range, so that he was not pressed for time. He devoted a few seconds to turning over the shot in the locker, selecting two or three of the roundest, and then strolled across the deck to the starboard side locker and made a selection from there. For long range work with a six-pounder he did not want shot that bounced about during its passage up the gun and was liable to fly off God-knew-where when it emerged. He rammed his eventual selection well down upon the wad — at this elevation there was no need for a second wad — and, ripping open a second cartridge, he primed the breach.

"Allons!" he snapped at the pilot, and then ran the gun up. Two men were the barest minimum crew for a six-pounder, but Hornblower's long slight body was capable of exerting extraordinary strength at the behest of his mind.

With a handspike he trained the gun round aft as far as possible. Even so, the gun did not point towards the leading boat, which lay far abaft the beam; the cutter would have to yaw to fire at her. Hornblower straightened himself up in the sunlight. Brown was chanting hoarsely at the galley slaves almost in his ear, and the aftermost sweep had been working right at his elbow, and he had not noticed either, so intent had he been on his task. For the cutter to yaw meant losing a certain amount of distance; he had to balance that certain loss against the chances of hitting a boat with a six-pounder ball at two thousand yards. It would not pay at present; it would be better to wait a little, for the range to shorten, but it was an interesting problem, even though it could have no exact solution in consequence of the presence of an unknown, which was the possibility of the coming of a wind.

Of that there was still no sign, long and anxiously though Hornblower stared over the glassy sea. As he looked round he caught the eye of Bush at the tiller directed anxiously at him — Bush was awaiting the order to yaw. Hornblower smiled at him and shook his head, resuming his study of the horizon, the distant islands, the unbroken expanse to seaward where lay freedom. A seagull was wheeling overhead, dazzling white against the blue, and crying plaintively. The cutter was nodding a little in the faint swell.

"Beggin' you pardon, sir," said Brown in his ear. "Beggin' your pardon, sir — Pull! — These men can't go on much longer, sir. Look at that one over there on the starboard side, sir — Pull!"

There could be no doubt of it; the men were swaying with fatigue as they reached forward with the long sweeps. Dangling from Brown's hand was a length of knotted cord; clearly he had already been using the most obvious argument to persuade them to work.

"Give 'em a bit of a rest, sir, and summat to eat an' drink, an' they'll go on all right, sir. Pull, you bastards! They haven't had no breakfast, sir, nor no supper yesterday."

"Very good," said Hornblower. "You can rest 'em and get 'em fed. Mr Bush! Let her come slowly round."

He bent over the gun, oblivious at once to the clatter of the released sweeps as the galley slaves ceased work, just as he was oblivious that he himself had not eaten or drunk or slept since yesterday. At the touch of the tiller and with her residual way the cutter turned slowly. The black mass of a boat appeared in the V of the dispart sight, and he waved his hand to Bush. The boat had disappeared again, and came back into his field of vision as Bush checked the turn with the tiller, but not quite in alignment with the gun. Hornblower eased the gun round with the handspike until the aim was true, drew himself up, and stepped out of the way of the recoil, lanyard in hand. Of necessity, he was far more doubtful of the range than of the direction, and it was vital to observe the fall of the shot. He took note of the motion of the cutter on the swell, waited for the climax of the roll, and jerked the lanyard. The gun roared out and recoiled past him; he sprang sideways to get clear of the smoke. The four seconds of the flight of the shot seemed to stretch out indefinitely, and then at last he saw the jet of water leap into brief existence, fully two hundred yards short and a hundred yards to the right. That was poor shooting.

He sponged out the gun and reloaded it, called the pilot to him with an abrupt gesture, and ran the gun out again. It was necessary, he realized, to get acquainted with the weapon if he wanted to do any fancy shooting with it, so that he made no alteration in elevation, endeavoured to lay the gun exactly as before, and jerked the lanyard at as nearly the same instant of the roll as possible. This time it appeared that the elevation was correct, for the shot pitched well up to the boat, but it was out to the right again, fifty yards off at least. It seemed likely that the gun, therefore, had a tendency to throw to the right. He trained the gun round a trifle

to the left, and, still without altering the elevation, fired again. Too far to the left, and two hundred yards short again.

Hornblower told himself that a variation of two hundred yards in the fall of shot from a six-pounder at full elevation was only to be expected, and he knew it to be true, but that was cold comfort to him. The powder varied from charge to charge, the shot were never truly round, quite apart from the variations in atmospheric conditions and in the temperature of the gun. He set his teeth, aimed and fired again. Short, and a trifle to the left. It was maddening.

"Breakfast, sir," said Brown at his elbow. Hornblower turned abruptly, and there was Brown with a tray, bearing a basin of biscuit, a bottle of wine, a jug of water, a pewter mug; the sight made Hornblower realize that he was intensely hungry and thirsty.

"What about you?" asked Hornblower. "We're all right, sir," said Brown.

The galley slaves were squatting on the deck wolfing bread and drinking water; so was Bush, over by the tiller. Hornblower discovered that his tongue and the roof of his mouth were dry as leather — his hands shook as he mixed water with wine and gulped it down. Beside the cabin skylight lay the four men who had been left in bonds in the cabin. Their hands were free now, although their feet were still bound. The sergeant and one of the seamen were noticeably pale.

"I took the liberty of bringing 'em up, sir," said Brown. "Those two was pretty nigh dead, 'cause o' their gags, sir. But they'll be all right soon, I fancy, sir."

It had been thoughtless cruelty to leave them bound, thought Hornblower. But going back in his mind through the events of the night he could not think of any time until now when any attention could have been spared for them. In war there was always plenty of cruelty.

"These beggars," said Brown, indicating the galley slaves, "wanted to throw the sojer overboard when they saw 'im, sir."

He grinned widely, as though that were very amusing. The remark opened a long vista of thought, regarding the miseries of the life of a galley slave and the brutalities of their guards.

"Yes," said Hornblower, gulping down a morsel of biscuit and drinking again. "You had better set 'em all to work at the sweeps."

"Aye aye, sir. I had the same idea, beggin' your pardon, sir. We can have two watches with all these men."

"Arrange it as you like," said Hornblower, turning back to the gun.

The nearest boat was appreciably nearer now; Hornblower judged it advisable to make a small reduction in the elevation, and this time the shot pitched close to the boat, almost among the oars on one side, apparently.

"Beautiful, sir!" said Bush beside the tiller.

Hornblower's skin was prickling with sweat and powder smoke. He took off his gold laced coat, suddenly conscious of the heavy weight of the pistols in the side pockets; he proffered them to Bush, but the latter shook his head and grinned, pointing to the bell-mouthed blunderbuss on the deck beside him. That would be a far more efficacious weapon if there was trouble with their motley crew. For an exasperated moment Hornblower wondered what to do with the pistols, and finally laid them handy in the scuppers before sponging out and reloading the gun. The next shot was a close one, too — apparently the small reduction of range had had a profound effect on the accuracy of the gun. Hornblower saw the shot pitch close to the bows of the boat; it would be a matter of pure chance at that range if he scored an actual hit, for no gun could be expected to be accurate to fifty yards.

"Sweeps are ready, sir," said Brown.

"Very good. Mr Bush, kindly lay a course so that I can keep that boat under fire."

Brown was a pillar of strength. He had had rigged only the three foremost sweeps on each side, setting six men to work on them. The others were herded together forward, ready to relieve the men at work when they were tired — six sweeps would only just give the big cutter steerage way, but continuous slow progress was preferable to an alternation of movement and passivity. What arguments he had used to persuade the four Frenchmen who were not galley slaves to work at the sweeps Hornblower judged it best not to inquire — it was sufficient that they were there, their feet hobbled, straining away at the sweeps while Brown gave them the time, his knotted rope's end dangling from his fist.

The cutter began to creep through the blue water again, the rigging rattling at each tug on the sweeps. To make the chase as long as possible she should have turned her stern to her pursuers, instead of keeping them on her quarter. But Hornblower had decided that the chance of scoring a hit with the gun was worth the loss in distance — a decision of whose boldness he was painfully aware and which he had to justify. He bent over the gun and aimed carefully, and this time the shot flew wide again. Watching the splash from the rail Hornblower felt a surge of exasperation. For a moment he was tempted to hand the gun over to Bush, for him to try his hand, but he put the temptation aside. In the face of stark reality, without allowing false modesty to enter into the debate, he could rely on himself to lay a gun better than Bush could, "Tirez!" he snapped at the pilot, and between them they ran the gun up again.

The pursuing boats, creeping black over the blue sea, had shown no sign so far of being dismayed by the bombardment to which they were being subjected. Their oars kept steadily at work, and they maintained resolutely a course which would cut the *Witch of Endor's* a mile or so further on. They were big boats, all three of them, carrying at least a hundred and fifty men between them — only one of them need range alongside to do the business. Hornblower fired again and then again, doggedly, fighting down the bitter disappointment at each successive miss. The range was little over a thousand yards now, he judged — what he would call in an official report 'long cannon shot.' He hated those black boats creeping onward, immune, threatening his life and liberty, just as he hated this cranky gun which would not shoot the same two rounds running. The sweat was making his shirt stick to him, and the powder-grains were irritating his skin.

At the next shot there was no splash; Hornblower could see no sign of its fall anywhere. Then he saw the leading boat swing half round, and her oars stop moving.

"You've hit her, sir," called Bush.

Next moment the boat straightened on her course again, her oars hard at work. That was disappointing — it had hardly been likely that a ship's long boat could survive a direct hit from a six-pounder ball without injury to her fighting ability, but it was possible, all the same. Hornblower felt for the first time a sense of impending failure. If the hit he had scored with such difficulty was of no avail, what was the sense in continuing the struggle? Then, doggedly, he bent over the gun again, staring along the sights to allow for the small amount of right hand bias which the gun exhibited. Even as he looked he saw the leading boat cease rowing again. She wavered and then swung round, signalling wildly to the other boats. Hornblower trained the gun round upon her and fired again and missed, but he could see that she was perceptibly lower in the water. The other boats drew up alongside her, evidently to transfer her crew.

"Port a point, Mr Bush!" yelled Hornblower — already the group of boats was out of the field of fire of the gun, and yet was far too tempting a mark to ignore. The French pilot groaned as he helped to run the gun up, but Hornblower had no time for his patriotic protests. He sighted carefully, and fired. Again there was no sign of a splash — the ball had taken effect, but presumably upon the boat which had already been hit, for immediately afterwards the other two drew away from their water-logged fellow to resume the pursuit.

Brown was changing over the men at the sweeps — Hornblower remembered now that he had heard him cheering hoarsely when he had scored his hit — and Hornblower found a second in which to admire his masterful handling of the men, prisoners of war and escaping slaves alike. There was time for admiration, but no time for envy. The pursuers were changing their tactics — one boat was heading straight at them, while the other, diverging a little, was still heading to intercept them. The reason was soon obvious, for from the bows of the former boat came a puff of smoke, and a cannon-ball raised a splash from the surface of the water on the cutter's quarter and skipped past the stern.

Hornblower shrugged his shoulders at that — a three-pounder boat gun, fired from a platform far more unsteady even than the *Witch of Endor*, could hardly do them any harm at that range, and every shot meant delay in the pursuit. He trained his gun round upon the intercepting boat, fired, and missed. He was already taking aim again before the sound of the second shot from the boat gun reached his ears, and he did not trouble to find out where the ball went. His own shot fell close to its target, for the range was shortening and he was growing more experienced with the gun and more imbued with the rhythm of the long Atlantic swell which rocked the *Witch of Endor*. Three times he dropped a shot so close to the boat that the men at the oars must have been wetted by the splashes — each shot deserved to be a hit, he knew, but the incalculable residuum of variables in powder and ball and gun made it a matter of chance just where the ball fell in a circle

of fifty yards radius, however well aimed. Ten guns properly controlled, and fired together in a broadside, would do the business, but there was no chance of firing ten guns together.

There was a crash from forward, a fountain of splinters from the base of a stanchion, and a shot scarred the deck diagonally close beside the fore hatchway.

"No you don't," roared Brown, leaping forward with his rope's end. "Keep pulling, you bastard!"

He jerked the scared galley slave who had dropped his sweep — the shot must have missed him by no more than a yard — back into position.

"Pull!" he shouted, standing, magnificent in his superb physique, right in the midst of them, the weary ones lying on the deck, the others sweating at the sweeps, the knotted rope swinging from his hand. He was like a lion tamer in a cage. Hornblower could see there was no need for him and his pistols, and he bent again, this time with a real twinge of envy, over his gun.

The boat which was firing at them had not closed in at all — if anything she had fallen a trifle back — but the other one was far nearer by now. Hornblower could see the individual men in her, the dark heads and the brown shoulders. Her oars were still for the moment, and there was some movement in her, as if they were re-arranging the men at the oars. Now she was in motion again, and moving far faster, and heading straight at them. The officer in charge, having worked up as close as this, had double-banked his oars so as to cover the last, most dangerous zone with a rush, pouring out the carefully conserved energy of his men prodigally in his haste to come alongside.

Hornblower estimated the rapidly diminishing range, twirled the elevating screw, and fired. The shot hit the water ten yards from her bows and must have ricocheted clean over her. He sponged and loaded and rammed — a miss-fire now, he told himself, would be fatal, and he forced himself to go through the routine with all the exactness he had employed before. The sights of the gun were looking straight at the bows of the boat, it was point blank range. He jerked the lanyard and sprang instantly to reload without wasting time by seeing where the shot went. It must have passed close over the heads of the men at the oars, for when he looked along the sights again there she was, still heading straight at him. A tiny reduction in elevation, and he stepped aside and jerked the lanyard. He was dragging at the train tackles before he could look again. The bows of the boat had opened like a fan. In the air above her there was a black dot — a water breaker, presumably, sent flying like a football by the impact of the shot, which had hit clean and square upon her stem at water level. Her bows were lifted a little out of the water, the loose strakes spread wide, and then they came down again and the water surged in, and she was gunwale deep in a flash, her bottom smashed, presumably, as well as her bows, by the passage of the shot.

Brown was cheering again, and Bush was capering as well as he could with a wooden leg while steering, and the little French pilot at his side pulling in his breath with a sharp hissing noise. There were black dots on the surface of the blue water where men struggled for their lives — it must be bitter cold and they would die quickly, those who could not find support on the shattered hull, but nothing could be done to help them. Already they had more prisoners than they could conveniently handle, and any delay would bring the other boat alongside them.

"Keep the men at work!" said Hornblower, harshly, to Brown, and unnecessarily. Then he bent to reload the gun once more.

"What course, sir?" asked Bush, from the tiller. He wanted to know if he should steer so as to allow fire to be opened on the third boat, which had ceased firing now and was pulling hastily towards the wreck.

"Keep her as she is," snapped Hornblower. He knew perfectly well that the boat would not annoy them further; having seen two of her fellows sunk and being of necessity vastly overcrowded she would turn back sooner than maintain the contest. And so it proved. After the boat had picked up the survivors they saw her swing round and head towards Noirmoutier, followed by a derisive cheer from Brown.

Hornblower could look round him now. He walked aft to the taffrail beside Bush — it was curious how much more natural it felt to be there than at the gun — and scanned the horizon. During the fight the cutter had made very decided progress under her sweeps. The mainland was lost in the faint haze; Noirmoutier was already far behind. But there was still no sign of a breeze. They were still in danger — if darkness should find them where boats could reach them from the islands a night attack would tell a very different story. They

needed every yard they could gain, and the men must go on slaving at the sweeps all through the day, all through the night too, if necessary.

He was conscious now that he ached in every joint after the frantic exertions of serving the gun the whole morning, and he had had a whole night without sleep — so had Bush, so had Brown. He felt that he stank of sweat and smoke, and his skin tingled with powder grains. He wanted rest, yet automatically he walked over to make the gun secure again, to put the unused cartridges out of harm's way, and to repocket the pistols which he noticed reproaching his carelessness from the scuppers.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

At midnight, and not before, a tiny breeze came whispering over the misty surface of the water, at first merely swinging over the big mainsail and setting the rigging chattering, but then breathing more strongly until the sails could catch it and hold it, filling out in the darkness until Hornblower could give the word for the exhausted men at the sweeps to abandon their labour and the cutter could glide on with almost imperceptible motion, so slowly that there was hardly a bubble at her bows, yet even at that faster than the sweeps had moved her. Out of the east came that breath of wind, steady even though feeble; Hornblower could feel hardly any pull as he handled the mainsheet, and yet the cutter's big area of canvas was able to carry her graceful hull forward over the invisible surface as though in a dream.

It was like a dream indeed — weariness and lack of sleep combined to make it so for Hornblower, who moved about his tasks in a misty unreality which matched the misty darkness of the sea. The galley slaves and prisoners could lie and sleep — there was no fear of trouble from them at present, when they had spent ten hours out of the last twenty pulling at the sweeps with hands which by nightfall were running with blood, but there was no sleep for him nor for Bush and Brown. His voice sounded strange and distant in his own ears, like that of a stranger speaking from another room, as he issued his orders; the very hands with which he held the ropes seemed not to belong to him. It was as if there was a cleavage between the brain with which he was trying to think and the body which condescended to obey him.

Somewhere to the northwest lay the fleet which maintained its unsleeping watch over Brest; he had laid the cutter on a northwesterly course with the wind comfortably on her quarter, and if he could not find the Channel fleet he would round Ushant and sail the cutter to England. He knew all this — it made it more like a dream than ever that he could not believe it although he knew it. The memory of Marie de Graçay's upper boudoir, or of his battle for life in the flood-water of the Loire, was far more real to him than this solid little ship whose deck he trod and whose mainsheet he was handling. Setting a course for Bush to steer was like playing a make-believe game with a child. He told himself desperately that this was not a new phenomenon, that often enough before he had noticed that although he could dispense with one night's sleep without missing it greatly, on the second in succession his imagination began to play tricks with him, but it did not help to clear his mind.

He came back to Bush at the tiller, when the faint binnacle light made the lieutenant's face just visible in the darkness; Hornblower was even prepared to enter into conversation in exchange for a grasp at reality.

"Tired, Mr Bush?" he asked.

"No, sir. Of course not. But how is it with you, sir?"

Bush had served with his captain through too many fights to have an exaggerated idea of his strength.

"Well enough, thank you."

"If this breeze holds, sir," said Bush, realizing that this was one of the rare occasions when he was expected to make small talk with his captain, "we'll be up to the fleet in the morning."

"I hope so," said Hornblower.

"By God, sir," said Bush, "what will they say of this in England?"

Bush's expression was rapt. He was dreaming of fame, of promotion, for his captain as much as for himself.

"In England?" said Hornblower vaguely.

He had been too busy to dream any dreams himself, to think about what the British public, sentimental as always, would think of an escaping British captain retaking almost single-handed a captured ship of war and returning in her in triumph. And he had seized the *Witch of Endor* in the first place merely because the opportunity had presented itself, and because it was the most damaging blow he could deal the enemy; since the seizure he had been at first too busy, and latterly too tired, to appreciate the dramatic quality of his action. His distrust of himself, and his perennial pessimism regarding his career, would not allow him to think of himself as dramatically successful. The unimaginative Bush could appreciate the potentialities better than he could.

"Yes, sir," said Bush, eagerly — even with tiller and compass and wind claiming so much of his attention he could be loquacious at this point — "It'll look fine in the *Gazette*, this recapture of the *Witch*. Even the *Morning Chronicle*, sir —"

The *Morning Chronicle* was a thorn in the side of the government, ever ready to decry a victory or make capital of a defeat. Hornblower remembered how during the bitter early days of his captivity at Rosas he had worried about what the *Morning Chronicle* would say regarding his surrender of the *Sutherland*.

He felt sick now, suddenly. His mind was active enough now. Most of its vagueness must have been due, he told himself, because he had been refusing in cowardly fashion to contemplate the future. Until this night everything had been uncertain — he might have been recaptured at any moment, but now, as sure as anything could be at sea, he would see England again. He would have to stand his trial for the loss of the *Sutherland*, and face a court martial, after eighteen years of service. The court might find him guilty of not having done his utmost in the presence of the enemy, and for that there was only one penalty, death — that Article of War did not end, as others did, with the mitigating words 'or such less penalty —'. Byng had been shot fifty years before under that Article of War.

Absolved on that account, the wisdom of his actions in command of the *Sutherland* might still be called into question. He might be found guilty of errors of judgement in hazarding his ship in a battle against quadruple odds, and be punished by anything from dismissal from the service, which would make him an outcast and a beggar, down to a simple reprimand which would merely wreck his career. A court martial was always a hazardous ordeal from which few emerged unscathed — Cochrane, Sydney Smith, half a dozen brilliant captains had suffered damage at the hands of a court martial, and the friendless Captain Hornblower might be the next.

And a court martial was only one of the ordeals that awaited him. The child must be three months old now; until this moment he had never been able to think clearly about the child — boy or girl, healthy or feeble. He was torn with anxiety for Maria — and yet, gulping at the pill of reality, he forced himself to admit that he did not want to go back to Maria. He did not want to. It had been in mad jealousy of the moment, when he heard of Lady Barbara's marriage to Admiral Leighton, that the child had been conceived. Maria in England, Marie in France — his conscience was in a turmoil about both of them, and underlying the turmoil was an unregenerate hunger for Lady Barbara which had remained quiescent during his preoccupation but which he knew would grow into an unrelenting ache, an internal cancer, the moment his other troubles ceased, if ever they did. Bush was still babbling away happily beside him at the tiller. Hornblower heard the words, and attached no meaning to them.

"Ha-h'm," he said. "Quite so."

He could find no satisfaction in the simple pleasures Bush had been in ecstasy about — the breath of the sea, the feeling of a ship's deck underfoot — not now, not with all these bitter thoughts thronging his mind. The harshness of his tone checked Bush in the full career of his artless and unwonted chatter, and the lieutenant pulled himself up abruptly. Hornblower thought it was absurd that Bush should still cherish any affection for him after the cutting cruelty with which he sometimes used him. Bush was like a dog, thought Hornblower bitterly — too cynical for the moment to credit Bush with any perspicacity at all — like a dog, coming fawning to the hand that beat him. Hornblower despised himself as he walked forward again to the mainsheet, to a long, long, period of a solitary black hell of his own.

There was just the faintest beginning of daylight, the barest pearly softening of the sombreness of night, a greyness instead of a blackness in the haze, when Brown came aft to Hornblower.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but I fancy I see the loom of something out there just now. On the port bow, sir — there, d'you see it, sir?"

Hornblower strained his eyes through the darkness. Perhaps there was a more solid nucleus to the black mist out there, a tiny something. It came and went as his eyes grew tired.

"What d'you make of it, Brown?"

"I thought it was a ship, sir, when I first saw it, but in this haze, sir —"

There was a faint chance she might be a French ship of war — it was about as likely as to find the king unguarded when leading from a suit of four to an ace. Much the most likely chance was that she was an English ship of war, and the next most likely that she was a merchantman. The safest course was to creep down upon her from the windward, because the cutter, lying nearer the wind than any square-rigged ship could do, could escape if necessary the way she came, trusting to the mist and darkness and surprise to avoid being disabled before she got out of range.

"Mr Bush, I fancy there's a sail to leeward. Put the cutter before the wind and run down to her, if you please. Be ready to go about if I give the word. Jib-sheet, Brown."

Hornblower's head was clear again now, in the face of a possible emergency. He regretted the quickening of his pulse — uncertainty always had that effect. The cutter steadied upon her new course, creeping before the wind over the misty water, mainsail boom far out to port. Hornblower experienced a moment's doubt in case Bush was sailing her by the lee, but he would not allow himself to call a warning — he knew he could trust a sailor of Bush's ability not to risk a gibe in an emergency of this sort. He strained his eyes through the darkness; the mist was patchy, coming and going as he looked, but that was a ship without any doubt. She was under topsails alone — that made it almost certain that she was an English ship of war, one of the fleet which maintained unceasing watch over Brest. Another patch of mist obscured her again, and by the time they had run through it she was appreciably nearer, and dawn was at hand — her sails were faint grey in the growing light. Now they were close upon her.

Suddenly the stillness was rent by a hail, high-pitched, penetrating, its purity of quality almost unspoiled by the speaking trumpet — the voice which uttered it was trained in clarity in Atlantic gales.

"Cutter ahoy! What cutter's that?"

At the sound of the English speech Hornblower relaxed. There was no need now to go about, to claw to windward, to seek shelter in the mist. But on the other hand all the unpleasantness of the future which he had been visualizing were certain now. He swallowed hard, words failing him for the moment.

"What cutter's that?" repeated the hail, impatiently.

Unpleasant the future might be; he would fly his colours to the last, and if his career were ending, he would end it with a joke.

"His Britannic Majesty's armed cutter *Witch of Endor*, Captain Horatio Hornblower. What ship's that?"

"*Triumph*, Captain Sir Thomas Hardy — what did you say that cutter was?"

Hornblower grinned to himself. The officer of the watch in the strange sail had begun his reply automatically; it was only after he had stated the names of his ship and captain that it had suddenly dawned upon him that the cutter's statement was quite incredible. The *Witch of Endor* had been a prize to the French for nearly a year, and Captain Horatio Hornblower had been dead six months.

Hornblower repeated what he had said before; both Bush and Brown were chuckling audibly at a joke which appealed to them forcibly indeed.

"Come under my lee, and no tricks, or I'll sink you," hailed the voice.

From the cutter they could hear the guns being run out in the *Triumph*; Hornblower could picture the bustle on board, hands being turned up, the captain being called — Sir Thomas Hardy must be Nelson's late flag captain at Trafalgar, two years Hornblower's senior in the captains' list. Hornblower had known him as a lieutenant, although since then their paths had hardly crossed. Bush eased the cutter under the stern of the two-decker, and brought her to the wind under her lee. Dawn was coming up fast now, and they could see the details of the ship, as she lay hove to, rolling in the swell, and a long shuddering sigh burst from Hornblower's breast. The sturdy beauty of the ship, the two yellow streaks along her sides, checkered with black gunports, the pendant at the main, the hands on the deck, the red coats of the marines, the boatswain's voice roaring at

dilatory seamen — all the familiar sights and sounds of the Navy in which he had grown up moved him inexpressibly at this moment, the end of his long captivity and flight.

The *Triumph* had launched a boat, which came dancing rapidly over to them, and a young midshipman swung himself dexterously on board, dirk at his hip, arrogant suspicion on his face, four seamen at his back with pistols and cutlasses.

"What's all this?" demanded the midshipman. His glance swept the cutter's deck, observing the sleepy prisoners rubbing their eyes, the wooden-legged civilian at the tiller, the bare-headed man in a King's coat awaiting him.

"You call me 'sir'," barked Hornblower, as he had done to midshipmen ever since he became a lieutenant.

The midshipman eyed the gold laced coat — undoubtedly it was trimmed in the fashion of the coat of a captain of more than three years' seniority, and the man who wore it carried himself as though he expected deference.

"Yes, sir," said the midshipman, a little abashed.

"That is Lieutenant Bush at the tiller. You will remain here with these men under his orders, while I go to interview your captain."

"Aye aye, sir," said the midshipman, stiffening to attention.

The boat bore Hornblower to the *Triumph's* side; the coxswain made the four-finger gesture which indicated the arrival of a captain, but marines and side-boys were not in attendance as Hornblower went up the side — the Navy could not risk wasting her cherished compliments on possible impostors. But Hardy was there on deck, his huge bulk towering over everyone round him; Hornblower saw the expression of his beefy face alter as he saw him.

"Good God, it's Hornblower all right," said Hardy, striding forward, with his hand outstretched. "Welcome back, sir. How do you come here, sir? How did you retake the *Witch*? How —"

What Hardy wanted to say was "How have you risen from the grave?" but such a question seemed to savour of impoliteness. Hornblower shook hands, and trod gratefully the quarterdeck of a ship of the line once more. His heart was too full for speech, or his brain was too numb with fatigue, and he could make no reply to Hardy's questioning.

"Come below to my cabin," said Hardy, kindly — phlegmatic though he was, he still could just appreciate the other's difficulty.

There was more ease in the cabin, sitting on the cushioned locker under the portrait of Nelson that hung on the bulkhead, and with the timbers groaning faintly all round, and the blue sea visible through the great stern window. Hornblower told a little of what happened to him — not much, and not in detail; only half a dozen brief sentences, for Hardy was not a man with much use for words. He listened with attention, pulling at his whiskers, and nodding at each point.

"There was a whole *Gazette*," he remarked, "about the attack in Rosas Bay. They brought Leighton's body back for burial in St Paul's."

The cabin swam round Hornblower; Hardy's homely face and magnificent whiskers vanished in a mist.

"He was killed, then?" Hornblower asked.

"He died of his wounds at Gibraltar."

So Barbara was a widow — had been one for six months now.

"Have you heard anything of my wife?" asked Hornblower. The question was a natural one to Hardy, little use though he himself had for women; and he could see no connexion between it and the preceding conversation.

"I remember reading that she was awarded a Civil List pension by the government when the news of — of your death arrived."

"No other news? There was a child coming."

"None that I know of. I have been four months in this ship."

Hornblower's head sunk on his breast. The news of Leighton's death added to the confusion of his mind. He did not know whether to be pleased or sorry about it. Barbara would be as unattainable to him as ever, and perhaps there would be all the jealous misery to endure of her re-marriage.

"Now," said Hardy. "Breakfast?"

"There's Bush and my coxswain in the cutter," said Hornblower. "I must see that all is well with them first."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A midshipman came into the cabin as they ate breakfast.

"The fleet's in sight from the masthead, sir," he reported to Hardy.

"Very good." As the midshipman went out again Hardy turned back to Hornblower. "I must report your arrival to His Lordship."

"Is he still in command?" asked Hornblower, startled. It was a surprise to him that the government had left Admiral Lord Gambier in command of the Channel Fleet for three years, despite the disastrous waste of opportunity at the Basque Roads.

"He hauls down his flag next month," said Hardy, gloomily. Most officers turned gloomy when discussing 'Dismal Jimmy'. "They whitewashed him at the court martial, and had to leave him his full three years."

A shade of embarrassment appeared in Hardy's expression; he had let slip the mention of a court martial to a man who soon would endure the same ordeal.

"I suppose they had to," said Hornblower, his train of thought following that of his fellow captain as he wondered if there would be any whitewash employed at his trial.

Hardy broke the embarrassed silence which followed.

"Would you care to come on deck with me?" he asked.

Over the horizon to leeward was appearing a long line of ships, closehauled. They were in rigid, regular line, and as Hornblower watched they went about in succession in perfect order, as if they were chained together. The Channel Fleet was at drill — eighteen years of drill at sea had given them their unquestioned superiority over any other fleet in the world.

"*Victory's* in the van," said Hardy, handing his glass to Hornblower. "Signal midshipman! I '*Triumph* to flag. Have on board —'."

Hornblower looked through the glass while Hardy dictated his message. The three-decker with her admiral's flag at the main was leading the long line of ships, the broad stripes on her side glistening in the sunlight. She had been Jervis's flagship at St Vincent, Hood's in the Mediterranean, Nelson's at Trafalgar. Now she was Dismal Jimmy's — a tragedy if ever there was one. Signal-hoists were soaring up to her yard-arms; Hardy was busy dictating replies.

"The Admiral is signalling for you to go on board, sir," he said at last, turning back to Hornblower. "I trust you will do me the honour of making use of my barge?"

The *Triumph's* barge was painted primrose yellow picked out with black, and so were the oarblades; her crew wore primrose-coloured jumpers with black neckcloths. As Hornblower took his seat, his hand still tingling with Hardy's handclasp, he reminded himself gloomily that he had never been able to afford to dress his barge's crew in a fancy rig-out; he always felt sore on the point. Hardy must be a wealthy man with his Trafalgar prize money and his pension as Colonel of Marines. He contrasted their situations — Hardy, a baronet, moneyed, famous, and he himself poor, undistinguished, and awaiting trial.

They piped the side for him in the *Victory*, as Admiralty regulations laid down — the marine guard at the present, the side-boys in white gloves to hand him up, the pipes of the boatswain's mates all a-twittering; and there was a captain on the quarterdeck ready to shake hands with him — odd, that was to Hornblower, seeing that soon he would be on trial for his life.

"I'm Calendar, Captain of the Fleet," he said. "His Lordship is below, waiting for you."

He led the way below, extraordinarily affable.

"I was first of the *Amazon*," he volunteered, "when you were in *Indefatigable*. Do you remember me?"

"Yes," said Hornblower. He had not risked a snub by saying so first.

"I remember you plainly," said Calendar. "I remember hearing what Pellew had to say about you."

Whatever Pellew said about him would be favourable — he had owed his promotion to Pellew's enthusiastic recommendation — and it was pleasant of Calendar to remind him of it at this crisis of his career.

Lord Gambier's cabin was not nearly as ornate as Captain Hardy's had been — the most conspicuous item of furniture therein was the big brass-bound Bible lying on the table. Gambier himself, heavy-jowled, gloomy, was sitting by the stern window dictating to a clerk who withdrew on the arrival of the two captains.

"You can make your report verbally, sir, for the present," said the Admiral.

Hornblower drew a deep breath and made the plunge. He sketched out the strategic situation at the moment when he took the *Sutherland* into action against the French squadron off Rosas. Only a sentence or two had to be devoted to the battle itself — these men had fought in battles themselves and could fill in the gaps. He described the whole crippled mass of ships drifting helpless up Rosas Bay to where the guns of the fortress awaited them, and the gunboats creeping out under oars.

"One hundred and seventeen killed," said Hornblower. "One hundred and forty-five wounded, of whom forty-four died before I was removed from Rosas."

"My God!" said Calendar. It was not the deaths in hospital which called forth the exclamation — that was a usual proportion — but the total casualty list. Far more than half the crew of the *Sutherland* had been put out of action before surrendering.

"Thompson in the *Leander* lost ninety-two out of three hundred, my lord," he said. Thompson had surrendered the *Leander* to a French ship of the line off Crete after a defence which had excited the admiration of all England.

"I was aware of it," answered Gambier. "Please go on, Captain."

Hornblower told of how he witnessed the destruction of the French squadron, of how Caillard arrived to take him to Paris, of his escape, first from his escort and then from drowning. He made only a slight mention of Count de Graçay and of his voyage down the Loire — that was not an admiral's business — but he descended to fuller details when he told of his recapture of the *Witch of Endor*. Details here were of importance, because in the course of the manifold activities of the British Navy it might easily happen that a knowledge of harbour arrangements at Nantes and of the navigational difficulties of the lower Loire might be useful.

"Good God Almighty, man," said Calendar, "how can you be so cold-blooded about it? Weren't you —"

"Captain Calendar," interrupted Gambier, "I have requested you before not to allude to the Deity in that blasphemous fashion. Any repetition will incur my serious displeasure. Kindly continue, Captain Hornblower." There was only the brush with the boats from Noirmoutier to be described now. Hornblower continued, formally, but this time Gambier himself interrupted him.

"You say you opened fire with a six-pounder," he said. "The prisoners were at the sweeps, and the ship had to be steered. Who laid the gun?"

"I did, my lord. The French pilot helped me."

"M'm. And you frightened 'em off?"

Hornblower confessed that he had succeeded in sinking two out of the three boats sent against him. Calendar whistled his surprise and admiration, but the hard lines in Gambier's face only set harder still.

"Yes?" he said. "And then?"

"We went on under sweeps until midnight, my lord, and then we picked up a breeze. We sighted *Triumph* at dawn."

There was silence in the cabin, only broken by the noises on deck, until Gambier stirred in his chair.

"I trust, Captain," he said, "that you have given thanks to the Almighty for these miraculous preservations of yours. In all these adventures I can see the finger of God. I shall direct my chaplain at prayers this evening to make a special mention of your gratitude and thankfulness."

"Yes, my lord."

"Now you will make your report in writing. You can have it ready by dinner time — I trust you will give me the pleasure of your company at dinner? I will then be able to enclose it in the packet I am about to despatch to Their Lordships."

"Yes, my lord."

Gambier was still thinking deeply.

"*Witch of Endor* can carry the despatches," he said. Like every admiral the world over, his most irritating and continuous problem was how to collect and disseminate information without weakening his main body by

detachments; it must have been an immense relief to him to have the cutter drop from the clouds as it were, to carry these despatches. He went on thinking.

"I will promote this lieutenant of yours, Bush, into her as Commander," he announced.

Hornblower gave a little gasp. Promotion to Commander meant almost certain post rank within the year, and it was this power of promotion which constituted the most prized source of patronage an Admiral in command possessed. Bush deserved the step, but it was surprising that Gambier should give it to him — Admirals generally had some favourite lieutenant, or some nephew or some old friend's son awaiting the first vacancy. Hornblower could imagine Bush's delight at the news that he was at last on his way to becoming an admiral himself if he lived long enough.

But that was not all, by no means all. Promotion of a captain's first lieutenant was a high compliment to the captain himself. It set the seal of official approval on the captain's proceedings. This decision of Gambier's was a public — not merely a private — announcement that Hornblower had acted correctly.

"Thank you, my lord, thank you," said Hornblower.

"She is your prise, of course," went on Gambier. "Government will have to buy her on her arrival."

Hornblower had not thought of that. It meant at least a thousand pounds in his pocket.

"That coxswain of yours will be in clover," chuckled Calendar. "He'll take all the lower deck's share."

That was true, too. Brown would have a quarter of the value of the *Witch of Endor* for himself. He could buy a cottage or land and set up in business on his own account if he wished to.

"*Witch of Endor* will wait until your report is ready," announced Gambier. "I will send my secretary in to you. Captain Calendar will provide you with a cabin and the necessities you lack. I hope you will continue to be my guest until I sail for Portsmouth next week. It would be best, I think."

The last words were a delicate allusion to that aspect of the matter which had occupied most of Hornblower's thoughts on his arrival, and which had not as yet been touched upon — the fact that he must undergo court martial for the loss of the *Sutherland*, and was of necessity under arrest until that time. By old established custom he must be under the supervision of an officer of equal rank while under arrest; there could be no question of sending him home in the *Witch of Endor*.

"Yes, my lord," said Hornblower.

Despite all Gambier's courtesy and indulgence towards him, despite Calendar's open admiration, he still felt a constriction of the throat and a dryness of the mouth at the thought of that court martial; they were symptoms which persisted even when he tried to settle down and compose his report with the aid of the competent young clergyman who made his appearance in the cabin to which Calendar conducted him.

"Arma virumque cano," quoted the Admiral's secretary after the first halting sentences — Hornblower's report naturally began with the battle of Rosas. "You begin in medias res, sir, as every good epic should."

"This is an official report," snapped Hornblower. "It continues the last report I made to Admiral Leighton."

His tiny cabin only allowed him to walk three paces each way, and crouching nearly double at that — some unfortunate lieutenant had been turned out to make room for him. In a flagship, even in a big three-decker like the *Victory*, the demand for cabins always greatly exceeded the supply, what with the Admiral, and the Captain of the Fleet, and the flag lieutenant, and the secretary, and the chaplain, and the rest of the staff. He sat down on the breech of the twelve-pounder beside the cot.

"Continue, if you please," he ordered. "'Having regard to these conditions, I therefore proceeded —'"

It was finished in the end — it was the third time that morning that Hornblower had recounted his adventures, and they had lost all their savour for him now. He was dreadfully tired — his head drooped forward at his breast as he squatted on the gun, and then he woke with a snort. He was actually falling asleep while he sat.

"You are tired, sir," said the secretary.

"Yes."

He forced himself to wake up again. The secretary was looking at him with eyes shining with admiration, positive hero-worship. It made him feel uncomfortable.

"If you will just sign this, sir, I will attend to the seal and the superscription."

The secretary slipped out of the chair and Hornblower took the pen and dashed off his signature to the document on whose evidence he was soon to be tried for his life.

"Thank you, sir," said the secretary, gathering the papers together.

Hornblower had no more attention to spare for him. He threw himself face downward on to the cot, careless of appearances. He went rushing giddily down a tremendous slope into blackness — he was snoring before the secretary had reached the door, and he never felt the touch of the blanket with which the secretary returned, five minutes later, tiptoeing up to the cot to spread it over him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Something enormously painful was recalling Hornblower to life. He did not want to return. It was agony to wake up, it was torture to feel unconsciousness slipping away from him. He clung to it, tried to recapture it, unavailingly. Remorselessly it eluded him. Somebody was gently shaking his shoulder, and he came back to complete consciousness with a start, and wriggled over to see the Admiral's secretary bending over him.

"The Admiral will dine within the hour, sir," he said. "Captain Calendar thought you might prefer to have a little time in which to prepare."

"Yes," grunted Hornblower. He fingered instinctively the long stubble on his unshaven chin. "Yes."

The secretary was standing very stiff and still, and Hornblower looked up at him curiously. There was an odd, set expression on the secretary's face, and he held a newspaper imperfectly concealed behind his back.

"What's the matter?" demanded Hornblower.

"It is bad news for you, sir," said the secretary.

"What news?"

Hornblower's spirits fell down into the depths of despair. Perhaps Gambier had changed his mind. Perhaps he was going to be kept under strict arrest, tried, condemned, and shot. Perhaps —

"I remembered having seen this paragraph in the *Morning Chronicle* of three months ago, sir," said the secretary. "I showed it to his Lordship, and to Captain Calendar. They decided it ought to be shown to you as early as possible. His Lordship says —"

"What is the paragraph?" demanded Hornblower, holding out his hand for the paper.

"It is bad news, sir," repeated the secretary, hesitatingly.

"Let me see it, damn you."

The secretary handed over the newspaper, one finger indicating the paragraph.

"The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away," he said. "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

It was a very short paragraph.

We regret to announce the death in childbed, on the seventh of this month, of Mrs Maria Hornblower, widow of the late Captain Horatio Hornblower, Bonaparte's martyred victim. The tragedy occurred in Mrs Hornblower's lodgings at Southsea, and we are given to understand that the child, a fine boy, is healthy.

Hornblower read it twice, and he began on it a third time. Maria was dead, Maria the tender, the loving.

"You can find consolation in prayer, sir —" said the secretary, but Hornblower paid no attention to what the secretary said.

He had lost Maria. She had died in childbed, and having regard to the circumstances in which the child had been engendered, he had as good as killed her. Maria was dead. There would be no one, no one at all, to welcome him now on his return to England. Maria would have stood by him during the court martial, and whatever the verdict, she would never have believed him to be at fault. Hornblower remembered the tears wetting her coarse red cheeks when she had last put her arms round him to say goodbye. He had been a little bored by the formality of an affectionate goodbye, then. He was free now — the realization came creeping over him like cold water in a warm bath. But it was not fair to Maria. He would not have bought his freedom at such a price. She had earned by her own devotion his attention, his kindness, and he would have given them to her uncomplainingly for the rest of his life. He was desperately sorry that she was dead.

"His Lordship instructed me, sir," said the secretary, "to inform you of his sympathy in your bereavement. He told me to say that he would not take it amiss if you decided not to join him and his guests at dinner but sought instead the consolation of religion in your cabin."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"Any help which I can give, sir —"

"None," said Hornblower.

He continued to sit on the edge of the cot, his head bowed, and the secretary shuffled his feet.

"Get out of here," said Hornblower, without looking up.

He sat there for some time, but there was no order in his thoughts; his mind was muddled. There was a continuous undercurrent of sadness, a hurt feeling indistinguishable from physical pain, but fatigue and excitement and lack of sleep deprived him of any ability to think clearly. Finally, with a desperate effort he pulled himself together. He felt as if he was stifling in the stuffy cabin; he hated his stubbly beard and the feelings of dried sweat.

"Pass the word for my servant," he ordered the sentry at his door.

It was good to shave off the filthy beard, to wash his body in cold water, to put on clean linen. He went up on deck, the clean sea air rushing into his lungs as he breathed. It was good, too, to have a deck to pace, up and down, up and down, between the slides of the quarterdeck carronades and the line of ringbolts in the deck, with all the familiar sounds of shipboard life as a kind of lullaby to his tired mind. Up and down he walked, up and down, as he had walked so many hours before, in the *Indefatigable*, and the *Lydia*, and the *Sutherland*. They left him alone; the officers of the watch collected on the other side of the ship and only stared at him unobtrusively, politely concealing their curiosity about this man who had just heard of the death of his wife, who had escaped from a French prison, who was waiting his trial for surrendering his ship — the first captain to strike his colours in a British ship of the line since Captain Ferris in the *Hannibal* at Algecira. Up and down he walked, the goodly fatigue closing in upon him again until his mind was stupefied with it, until he found that he could hardly drag one foot past the other. Then he went below to the certainty of sleep and oblivion. But even in his sleep tumultuous dreams came to harass him — dreams of Maria, against which he struggled, sweating, knowing that Maria's body was now only a liquid mass of corruption; nightmares of death and imprisonment; and, ever-recurring, dreams of Barbara smiling to him on the farther side of the horrors that encompassed him.

From one point of view the death of his wife was of benefit to Hornblower during those days of waiting. It provided him with a good excuse for being silent and unapproachable. Without being thought impolite he could find a strip of deck and walk by himself in the sunshine. Gambier could walk with the captain of the fleet or the flag captain, little groups of lieutenants and warrant officers could walk together, chatting lightly, but they all kept out of his way; and it was not taken amiss that he should sit silent at the Admiral's dinner table and hold himself aloof at the Admiral's prayer meetings.

Had it not been so he would have been forced to mingle in the busy social life of the flagship, talking to officers who would studiously avoid all reference to the fact that shortly they would be sitting as judges on him at his court martial. He did not have to join in the eternal technical discussions which went on round him, stoically pretending that the responsibility of having surrendered a British ship of the line sat lightly on his shoulders. Despite all the kindness with which he was treated, he felt a pariah. Calendar could voice open admiration for him, Gambier could treat him with distinction, the young lieutenants could regard him with wide-eyed hero-worship, but they had never hauled down their colours. More than once during his long wait Hornblower found himself wishing that a cannonball had killed him on the quarterdeck of the *Sutherland*. There was no one in the world who cared for him now — the little son in England, in the arms of some unknown foster-mother, might grow up ashamed of the name he bore.

Suspecting, morbidly, that the others would treat him like an outcast if they could, he anticipated them and made an outcast of himself, bitterly proud. He went through all that period of black reaction by himself, without companionship, during those last days of Gambier's tenure of command, until Hood came out in the *Britannia* to take over the command, and, amid the thunder of salutes, the *Victory* sailed for Portsmouth. There were headwinds to delay her passage; she had to beat up the Channel for seven long days before at last she glided into Spithead and the cable roared out through the hawse-hole.

Hornblower sat in his cabin — he felt no interest in the green hills of the Isle of Wight nor in the busy prospect of Portsmouth. The tap which came at his cabin door heralded, he supposed, the arrival of the orders regarding his court martial.

"Come in!" he said, but it was Bush who entered, stumping along on his wooden leg, his face wreathed in smiles, his arms burdened with packages and parcels.

At the sight of that homely face Hornblower's depression evaporated like mist. He found himself grinning as delightedly as Bush, he wrung his hand over and over again, sat him down in the only chair, offered to send for drinks for him, all trace of self-consciousness and reserve disappearing in the violence of his reaction.

"Oh, I'm well enough, sir, thank you," said Bush, in reply to Hornblower's questions. "And this is the first chance I've had of thanking you for my promotion."

"Don't thank me," said Hornblower, a trace of bitterness creeping back into his voice. "You must thank his Lordship."

"I know who I owe it to, all the same," said Bush, sturdily. "They're going to post me as captain this week. They won't give me a ship — not with this leg of mine — but there's the dockyard job at Sheerness waiting for me. I should never be captain if it weren't for you, sir."

"Rubbish," said Hornblower. The pathetic gratitude in Bush's voice and expression made him feel uncomfortable.

"And how is it with you, sir?" asked Bush, regarding him with anxious blue eyes.

Hornblower shrugged his shoulders.

"Fit and well," he said.

"I was sorry to hear about Mrs Hornblower, sir," said Bush.

That was all he needed to say on that subject. They knew each other too well to have to enlarge on it.

"I took the liberty, sir," said Bush, hastily, "of bringing you out your letters — there was a good deal waiting for you."

"Yes?" said Hornblower.

"This big package is a sword, I'm sure, sir," said Bush. He was cunning enough to think of ways of capturing Hornblower's interest.

"Let's open it, then," said Hornblower, indulgently.

A sword it was, sure enough, with a gold-mounted scabbard and a gold hilt, and when Hornblower drew it the blue steel blade bore an inscription in gold inlay. It was the sword 'of one hundred guineas' value' which had been presented to him by the Patriotic Fund for his defeat of the *Natividad* in the *Lydia*, and which he had left in pawn with Duddingstone the ship's chandler at Plymouth, as a pledge for payment for captain's stores when he was commissioning the *Sutherland*.

"A sight too much writing on this for me," Duddingstone had complained at the time.

"Let's see what Duddingstone has to say," said Hornblower, tearing open the note enclosed in the package.

Sir,

It was with great emotion that I read to-day of your escape from the Corsican's clutches and I cannot find words to express my relief that the reports of your untimely death were unfounded, nor my admiration of your exploits during your last commission. I cannot reconcile it with my conscience to retain the sword of an officer so distinguished, and have therefore taken the liberty of forwarding the enclosed to you, hoping that in consequence you will wear it when next you enforce Britannia's dominion of the seas.

Your obedient and humble servant to command.

J. DUDDINGSTONE.

"God bless my soul!" said Hornblower.

He let Bush read the note; Bush was a captain and his equal now, as well as his friend, and there was no disciplinary objection to allowing him to know to what shifts he had been put when commissioning the *Sutherland*. Hornblower laughed a little self-consciously when Bush looked up at him after reading the note.

"Our friend Duddingstone," said Hornblower, "must have been very moved to allow a pledge for forty guineas to slip out of his fingers." He spoke cynically to keep the pride out of his voice, but he was genuinely moved. His eyes would have grown moist if he had allowed them.

"I'm not surprised, sir," said Bush, fumbling among the newspapers beside him. "Look at this, sir, and at this. Here's the *Morning Chronicle*, and *The Times*. I saved them to show you, hoping you'd be interested." Hornblower glanced at the columns indicated; somehow the gist of them seemed to leap out at him without his having to read them. The British press had let itself go thoroughly. As even Bush had foreseen, the fancy of the British public had been caught by the news that a captain whom they had imagined to be foully done to death by the Corsican tyrant had succeeded in escaping, and not merely in escaping, but in carrying off a British ship of war which had been for months a prize to the Corsicans. There were columns in praise of Hornblower's daring and ability. A passage in *The Times* caught Hornblower's attention and he read it more carefully. 'Captain Hornblower still has to stand his trial for the loss of the *Sutherland*, but, as we pointed out in our examination of the news of the battle of Rosas Bay, his conduct was so well advised and his behaviour so exemplary on that occasion, whether he was acting under the orders of the late Admiral Leighton or not, that although the case is still *sub judice*, we have no hesitation in predicting his speedy reappointment.'

"Here's what the *Anti-Gallican* has to say, sir," said Bush.

What the *Anti-Gallican* had to say was very like what the other newspapers had said; it was beginning to dawn upon Hornblower that he was famous. He laughed uncomfortably again. All this was a most curious experience and he was not at all sure that he liked it. Cold-bloodedly he could see the reason for it. Lately there had been no naval officer prominent in the affections of the public — Cochrane had wrecked himself by his intemperate wrath after the Basque Roads, while six years had passed since Hardy had kissed the dying Nelson; Collingwood was dead and Leighton too, for that matter — and the public always demanded an idol. Like the Israelites in the desert, they were not satisfied with an invisible object for their devotion. Chance had made him the public's idol, and presumably Government were not sorry, seeing how much it would strengthen their position to have one of their own men suddenly popular. But somehow he did not like it; he was not used to fame, he distrusted it, and his ever-present personal modesty made him feel it was all a sham.

"I hope you're pleased, sir," said Bush, looking wonderingly at the struggle on Hornblower's face.

"Yes. I suppose I am," said Hornblower.

"The Navy bought the *Witch of Endor* yesterday at the Prize Court!" said Bush, searching wildly for news which might delight this odd captain of his. "Four thousand pounds was the price, sir. And the division of the prize money where the prize has been taken by an incomplete crew is governed by an old regulation — I didn't know about it, sir, until they told me. It was made after that boat's crew from *Squirrel*, after she foundered, captured the Spanish plate ship in '97. Two thirds to you, sir — that's two thousand six hundred pounds. And a thousand to me and four hundred for Brown."

"H'm," said Hornblower.

Two thousand six hundred pounds was a substantial bit of money — a far more concrete reward than the acclamation of a capricious public.

"And there's all these letters and packets, sir," went on Bush, anxious to exploit the propitious moment. The first dozen letters were all from people unknown to him, writing to congratulate him on his success and escape. Two at least were from madmen, apparently — but on the other hand two were from peers; even Hornblower was a little impressed by the signatures and the coroneted notepaper. Bush was more impressed still when they were passed over to him to read.

"That's very good indeed, sir, isn't it?" he said. "There are some more here."

Hornblower's hand shot out and picked one letter out of the mass offered him the moment he saw the handwriting, and then when he had taken it he stood for a second holding it in his hand, hesitating before opening. The anxious Bush saw the hardening of his mouth and the waning of the colour in his cheeks; watched him while he read, but Hornblower had regained his self-control and his expression altered no farther.

3rd June 1811

DEAR CAPTAIN HORNBLOWER,

It is hard for me to write this letter, so overwhelmed am I with pleasure and surprise at hearing at this moment from the Admiralty that you are free and well. I hasten to let you know that I have your son here in my care. When he was left orphaned after the lamented death of your wife I ventured to take charge of him and make myself responsible for his upbringing, while my brothers Lords Wellesley and Wellington consented to act as his godfathers at his baptism, whereat he was consequently given the names Richard Arthur Horatio. Richard is a fine healthy boy with a wonderful resemblance to his father and he has already endeared himself greatly to me, to such an extent that I shall be conscious of a great loss when the time comes for you to take him away from me. Let me assure you that I shall look upon it as a pleasure to continue to have charge of Richard until that time, as I can easily guess that you will be much occupied with affairs on your arrival in England. You will be very welcome should you care to call here to see your son, who grows in intelligence every day. It will give pleasure not only to Richard, but to

Your firm friend,
BARBARA LEIGHTON

Hornblower nervously cleared his throat and re-read the letter. There was too much crowded in it for him to have any emotion left. Richard Arthur Horatio Hornblower, with two Wellesleys as godfathers, and growing in intelligence every day. There would be a great future ahead of him, perhaps. Up to that moment Hornblower had hardly thought about the child — his paternal instincts had hardly been touched by any consideration of a child he had never seen; and they further were warped by memories of the little Horatio who had died of smallpox in his arms so many years ago. But now he felt a great wave of affection for the unknown little brat in London who had managed to endear himself to Barbara.

And Barbara had taken him in charge; possibly because, widowed and childless, she had sought for a convenient orphan to adopt — and yet it might be because she still cherished memories of Captain Hornblower, whom at the time she had believed to be dead at Bonaparte's hands.

He could not bear to think about it any more. He thrust the letter into his pocket — all the others he had dropped on the deck — and with immobile face he met Bush's gaze again.

"There are all these other letters, sir," said Bush, with masterly tact.

They were letters from great men and from madmen — one contained an ounce of snuff as a token of some eccentric squire's esteem and regard — but there was only one which caught Hornblower's attention. It was from some Chancery Lane lawyer — the name was unfamiliar — who wrote, it appeared, on hearing from Lady Barbara Leighton that the presumption of Captain Hornblower's death was unfounded. Previously he had been acting under the instructions of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to settle Captain Hornblower's estate, and working in conjunction with the Prize Agent at Port Mahon. With the consent of the Lord Chancellor, upon the death intestate of Mrs Maria Hornblower, he had been acting as trustee to the heir, Richard Arthur Horatio Hornblower, and had invested for the latter in the Funds the proceeds of the sale of Captain Hornblower's prizes after the deduction of expenses. As Captain Hornblower would see from the enclosed account, there was the sum of three thousand two hundred and ninety-one pounds six and fourpence invested in the Consolidated Fund, which would naturally revert to him. The lawyer awaited his esteemed instructions.

The enclosed accounts, which Hornblower was about to thrust aside, had among the innumerable six and eightpences and three and fourpences one set of items which caught his eye — they dealt with the funeral expenses of the late Mrs Hornblower, and a grave in the cemetery of the church of St Thomas à Beckett, and a headstone, and fees for grave-watchers; it was a ghoulish list which made Hornblower's blood run a little colder. It was hateful. More than anything else it accentuated his loss of Maria — he would only have to go on deck to see the tower of the church where she lay.

He fought down the depression which threatened to overmaster him once more. It was at least a distraction to think about the news in that lawyer's letter, to contemplate the fact that he owned three thousand odd pounds in the Funds. He had forgotten all about those prizes he had made in the Mediterranean before he came under Leighton's command. Altogether that made his total fortune nearly six thousand pounds — not

nearly as large as some captains had contrived to acquire, but handsome enough. Even on half-pay he would be able to live in comfort now, and educate Richard Arthur Horatio properly, and take his place in a modest way in society.

"The captain's list has changed a lot since we saw it last, sir," said Bush, and he was echoing Hornblower's train of thought rather than breaking into it.

"Have you been studying it?" grinned Hornblower.

"Of course, sir."

Upon the position of their names in that list depended the date of their promotion to flag rank — year by year they would climb it as death or promotion eliminated their seniors, until one day, if they lived long enough, they would find themselves admirals, with admirals' pay and privileges.

"It's the top half of the list which has changed most, sir," said Bush. "Leighton was killed, and Ball died at Malta, and Troubridge was lost at sea — in Indian waters, sir — and there's seven or eight others who've gone. You're more than halfway up now."

Hornblower had held his present rank eleven years, but with each coming year he would mount more slowly, in proportion to the decrease in number of his seniors, and it would be 1825 or so before he could fly his flag. Hornblower remembered the Count de Graçay's prediction that the war would end in 1814 — promotion would be slower in peace time. And Bush was ten years older than he, and only just beginning the climb. Probably he would never live to be an admiral, but then Bush was perfectly content with being a captain. Clearly his ambition had never soared higher than that; he was fortunate.

"We're both of us very lucky men, Bush," said Hornblower.

"Yes, sir," agreed Bush, and hesitated before going on. "I'm giving evidence at the court martial, sir, but of course you know what my evidence'll be. They asked me about it at Whitehall, and they told me that what I was going to say agreed with everything they knew. You've nothing to fear from the court martial, sir."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hornblower told himself often during the next twenty-four hours that he had nothing to fear from the court martial, and yet it was nervous work waiting for it — to hear the repeated twitter of pipes and stamping of marines' boots overhead as the compliments were given to the captains and admirals who came on board to try him, to hear silence close down on the ship as the court assembled, and to hear the sullen boom of the court martial gun as the court opened, and the click of the cabin door latch as Calendar came to escort him before his judges.

Hornblower remembered little enough afterwards of the details of the trial — only a few impressions stood out clearly in his memory. He could always recall the flash and glitter of the gold lace on the coats of the semicircle of officers sitting round the table in the great cabin of the *Victory*, and the expression on Bush's anxious, honest face as he declared that no captain could have handled a ship with more skill and determination than Hornblower had handled *Sutherland* at Rosas Bay. It was a neat point which Hornblower's 'friend' — the officer the Admiralty had sent to conduct his defence — made when his question brought out the fact that just before the surrender Bush had been completely incapacitated by the loss of his foot, so that he bore no responsibility whatever for the surrender and had no interest in presenting as good a case as possible. There was an officer who read, seemingly for an eternity, long extracts from depositions and official reports, in a spiritless mumble — the greatness of the occasion apparently made him nervous and affected his articulation, much to the annoyance of the President of the Court. At one point the President actually took the paper from him, and himself read, in his nasal tenor, Admiral Martin's pronouncement that the *Sutherland's* engagement had certainly made the eventual destruction of the French squadron more easy, and in his opinion was all that had made it possible. There was an awkward moment when a discrepancy was detected between the signal logs of the *Pluto* and *Caligula*, but it passed away in smiles when someone reminded the Court that signal midshipmen sometimes made mistakes.

During the adjournment there was an elegant civilian in buff and blue, with a neat silk cravat, who came into Hornblower with a good many questions. Frere, his name was, Hookham Frere — Hornblower had a vague acquaintance with the name. He was one of the wits who wrote in the *Anti-Gallican*, a friend of Canning's, who for a time had acted as ambassador to the patriot government of Spain. Hornblower was a little intrigued by the presence of someone deep in cabinet secrets, but he was too preoccupied, waiting for the trial to re-open, to pay much attention to him or to answer his questions in detail.

And it was worse when all the evidence had been given, and he was waiting with Calendar while the Court considered its decision. Hornblower knew real fear, then. It was hard to sit apparently unmoved, while the minutes dragged by, waiting for the summons to the great cabin, to hear what his fate would be. His heart was beating hard as he went in, and he knew himself to be pale. He jerked his head erect to meet his judges' eyes, but the judges in their panoply of blue and gold were veiled in a mist which obscured the whole cabin, so that nothing was visible to Hornblower's eyes save for one little space in the centre — the cleared area in the middle of the table before the President's seat, where lay his sword, the hundred-guinea sword presented by the Patriotic Fund. That was all Hornblower could see — the sword seemed to hang there in space, unsupported. And the hilt was towards him; he was not guilty.

"Captain Hornblower," said the President of the Court — that nasal tenor of his had a pleasant tone — "This Court is of the unanimous opinion that your gallant and unprecedented defence of His Majesty's ship *Sutherland*, against a force so superior, is deserving of every praise the country and this Court can give. Your conduct, together with that of the officers and men under your command, reflects not only the highest honour on you, but on the country at large. You are therefore most honourably acquitted."

There was a little confirmatory buzz from the other members of the Court, and a general bustle in the cabin. Somebody was buckling the hundred-guinea sword to his waist; someone else was patting his shoulder.

Hookham Frere was there, too, speaking insistently.

"Congratulations, sir. And now, are you ready to accompany me to London? I have had a post chaise horsed and waiting this last six hours."

The mists were only clearing slowly; everything was still vague about him as he allowed himself to be led away, to be escorted on deck, to be handed down into the barge alongside. Somebody was cheering. Hundreds of voices were cheering. The *Victory's* crew had manned the yards and were yelling themselves hoarse. All the other ships at anchor there were cheering him. This was fame. This was success. Precious few other captains had ever been cheered by all the ships in a fleet like this.

"I would suggest that you take off your hat, sir," said Frere's voice in his ear, "and show how much you appreciate the compliment."

He took off his hat and sat there in the afternoon sun, awkwardly in the sternsheets of the barge. He tried to smile, but he knew his smile to be wooden — he was nearer tears than smiles. The mists were closing round him again, and the deep-chested bellowing was like the shrill piping of children in his ears.

The boat rasped against the wall. There was more cheering here, as they handed him up. People were thumping him on the shoulder, wringing his hand, while a blaspheming party of marines forced a passage for him to the post chaise with its horses restless amid the din. Then a clatter of hoofs and a grinding of wheels, and they were flying out of the yard, the postillion cracking his whip.

"A highly satisfactory demonstration of sentiment, on the part of the public and of the armed forces of the Crown," said Frere, mopping his face.

Hornblower suddenly remembered something, which made him sit up, tense.

"Stop at the church!" he yelled to the postillion.

"Indeed, sir, and might I ask why you gave that order? I have the express commands of His Royal Highness to escort you to London without losing a moment."

"My wife is buried there," snapped Hornblower.

But the visit to the grave was unsatisfactory — was bound to be with Frere fidgeting and fuming at his elbow, and looking at his watch. Hornblower pulled off his hat and bowed his head by the grave with its carved headstone, but he was too much in a whirl to think clearly. He tried to murmur a prayer — Maria would have liked that, for she was always pained by his free thinking. Frere clucked with impatience.

"Come along then," said Hornblower, turning on his heel and leading the way back to the post chaise.

The sun shone gloriously over the countryside as they left the town behind them, lighting up the lovely green of the trees and the majestic rolling Downs. Hornblower found himself swallowing hard. This was the England for which he had fought for eighteen long years, and as he breathed its air and gazed round him he felt that England was worth it.

"Damned lucky for the Ministry," said Frere, "this escape of yours. Something like that was needed. Even though Wellington's just captured Almeida the mob was growing restive. We had a ministry of all the talents once — now it's a ministry of no talent. I can't imagine why Castlereagh and Canning fought that duel. It nearly wrecked us. So did Gambier's affair at the Basque Roads. Cochrane's been making a thorough nuisance of himself in the House ever since. Has it ever occurred to you that you might enter parliament? Well, it will be time enough to discuss that when you've been to Downing Street. It's sufficient at present that you've given the mob something to cheer about."

Mr Frere seemed to take much for granted — for instance, that Hornblower was wholeheartedly on the government side, and that Hornblower had fought at Rosas Bay and had escaped from France solely to maintain a dozen politicians in office. It rather damped Hornblower's spirits. He sat silent, listening to the rattle of the wheels.

"H.R.H. is none too helpful," said Frere. "He didn't turn us out when he assumed the Regency, but he bears us no love — the Regency Bill didn't please him. Remember that, when you see him to-morrow. He likes a bit of flattery, too. If you can make him believe that you owe your success to the inspiring examples both of H.R.H. *and* of Mr Spencer Perceval you will be taking the right line. What's this? Horndean?"

The postillion drew the horses to a halt outside the inn, and ostlers came running with a fresh pair.

"Sixty miles from London," commented Mr Frere. "We've just time."

The inn servants had been eagerly questioning the postillion, and a knot of loungers — smocked agricultural workers and a travelling tinker — joined them, looking eagerly at Hornblower in his blue and gold. Someone else came hastening out of the inn; his red face and silk cravat and leather leggings seemed to indicate him as the local squire.

"Acquitted, sir?" he asked.

"Naturally, sir," replied Frere at once. "Most honourably acquitted."

"Hooray for Hornblower!" yelled the tinker, throwing his hat into the air. The squire waved his arms and stamped with joy, and the farm hands echoed the cheer.

"Down with Boney!" said Frere. "Drive on."

"It is surprising how much interest has been aroused in your case," said Frere a minute later. "Although naturally one would expect it to be greatest along the Portsmouth Road."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"I can remember," said Frere, "when the mob were howling for Wellington to be hanged, drawn, and quartered — that was after the news of Cintra. I thought we were gone then. It was his court of inquiry which saved us as it happened, just as yours is going to do now. Do you remember Cintra?"

"I was commanding a frigate in the Pacific at the time," said Hornblower, curtly.

He was vaguely irritated — and he was surprised at himself at finding that he neither liked being cheered by tinkers nor flattered by politicians.

"All the same," said Frere, "it's just as well that Leighton was hit at Rosas. Not that I wished him harm, but it drew the teeth of that gang. It would have been them or us otherwise, I fancy. His friends counted twenty votes on a division. You know his widow, I've heard?"

"I have that honour."

"A charming woman for those who are partial to that type. And most influential as a link between the Wellesley party and her late husband's."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

All the pleasure was evaporating from his success. The radiant afternoon sunshine seemed to have lost its brightness.

"Petersfield is just over the hill," said Frere. "I expect there'll be a crowd there."

Frere was right. There were twenty or thirty people waiting at the Red Lion, and more came hurrying up, all agog to hear the result of the court martial. There was wild cheering at the news, and Mr Frere took the opportunity to slip in a good word for the government.

"It's the newspapers," grumbled Frere, as they drove on with fresh horses. "I wish we could take a lead out of Boney's book and only allow 'em to publish what we think they ought to know. Emancipation — Reform — naval policy — the mob wants a finger in every pie nowadays."

Even the marvellous beauty of the Devil's Punch Bowl was lost on Hornblower as they drove past it. All the savour was gone from life. He was wishing he was still an unnoticed naval captain battling with Atlantic storms. Every stride the horses were taking was carrying him nearer to Barbara, and yet he was conscious of a sick, vague desire that he was returning to Maria, dull and uninteresting and undisturbing. The crowd that cheered him at Guildford — market day was just over — stank of sweat and beer. He was glad that with the approach of evening Frere ceased talking and left him to his thoughts, depressing though they were.

It was growing dark when they changed horses again at Esher.

"It is satisfactory to think that no footpad or highwayman will rob us," laughed Frere. "We have only to mention the name of the hero of the hour to escape scot free."

No footpad or highwayman interfered with them at all, as it happened. Unmolested they crossed the river at Putney and drove on past the more frequent houses and along the dark streets.

"Number Ten Downing Street, postie," said Frere.

What Hornblower remembered most vividly of the interview that followed was Frere's first sotto voce whisper to Perceval — "He's safe" — which he overheard. The interview lasted no more than ten minutes, formal on the one side, reserved on the other. The Prime Minister was not in talkative mood apparently — his main wish seemed to be to inspect this man who might perhaps do him an ill turn with the Prince Regent or with the public. Hornblower formed no very favourable impression either of his ability or of his personal charm.

"Pall Mall and the War Office next," said Frere. "God, how we have to work!"

London smelt of horses — it always did, Hornblower remembered, to men fresh from the sea. The lights of Whitehall seemed astonishingly bright. At the War Office there was a young Lord to see him, someone whom Hornblower liked at first sight. Palmerston was his name, the Under Secretary of State. He asked a great many intelligent questions regarding the state of opinion in France, the success of the last harvest, the manner of Hornblower's escape. He nodded approvingly when Hornblower hesitated to answer when asked the name of the man who had given him shelter.

"Quite right," he said. "You're afraid some damned fool'll blab it out and get him shot. Some damned fool probably would. I'll ask you for it if ever we need it badly, and you will be able to rely on us then. And what happened to these galley slaves?"

"The first lieutenant in the *Triumph* pressed them for the service, my lord."

"So they've been hands in a King's ship for the last three weeks? I'd rather be a galley slave myself."

Hornblower was of the same opinion. He was glad to find someone in high position with no illusions regarding the hardships of the service.

"I'll have them traced and brought home if I can persuade your superiors at the Admiralty to give 'em up. I can find a better use for 'em."

A footman brought in a note which Palmerston opened.

"His Royal Highness commands your presence," he announced. "Thank you, Captain. I hope I shall again have the pleasure of meeting you shortly. This discussion of ours has been most profitable. And the Luddites have been smashing machinery in the north, and Sam Whitbread has been raising Cain in the House, so that your arrival is most opportune. Good evening, Captain."

It was those last words which spoilt the whole effect. Lord Palmerston planning a new campaign against Bonaparte won Hornblower's respect, but Lord Palmerston echoing Frere's estimate of the political results of Hornblower's return lost it again.

"What does His Royal Highness want of me?" he asked of Frere, as they went down the stairs together.

"That's to be a surprise for you," replied Frere archly.

"You may even have to wait until to-morrow's levee to find out. It isn't often Prinny's sober enough for business at this time in the evening. Probably he's not. You may find tact necessary in your interview with him."

It was only this morning, thought Hornblower, his head whirling, that he had been sitting listening to the evidence at his court martial. So much had already happened to-day. He was surfeited with new experiences. He was sick and depressed. And Lady Barbara and his little son were in Bond Street, not a quarter of a mile away.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Ten o'clock. Young Pam keeps late hours at the War Office. He's a glutton for work."

"Oh," said Hornblower.

God only knew at what hour he would escape from the palace. He would certainly have to wait until to-morrow before he called at Bond Street. At the door a coach was waiting, coachmen and footmen in the royal red liveries.

"Sent by the Lord Chamberlain," explained Frere. "Kind of him."

He handed Hornblower in through the door and climbed after him.

"Ever met His Royal Highness?" he went on.

"No."

"But you've been to Court?"

"I have attended two levees. I was presented to King George in 98."

"Ah! Prinny's not like his father. And you know Clarence, I suppose?"

"Yes."

The carriage had stopped at a doorway brightly lit with lanterns; the door was opened, and a little group of footmen were awaiting to hand them out. There was a glittering entrance hall, where somebody in uniform and powder and with a white staff ran his eyes keenly over Hornblower.

"Hat under your arm," he whispered. "This way, please."

"Captain Hornblower. Mr Hookham Frere," somebody announced.

It was an immense room, dazzling with the light of its candles; a wide expanse of polished floor, and at the far end a group of people bright with gold lace and jewels. Somebody came over to them, dressed in naval uniform — it was the Duke of Clarence, pop-eyed and pineapple-headed.

"Ah, Hornblower," he said, hand held out, "welcome home."

Hornblower bowed over the hand.

"Come and be presented. This is Captain Hornblower, sir."

"Evenin', Captain."

Corpulent, handsome, and dissipated, weak and sly, was the sequence of impressions Hornblower received as he made his bow. The thinning curls were obviously dyed; the moist eyes and the ruddy pendulous cheeks seemed to hint that His Royal Highness had dined well, which was more than Hornblower had.

"Everyone's been talkin' about you, Captain, ever since your cutter — what's its name, now? — came in to Portsmouth."

"Indeed, sir?" Hornblower was standing stiffly at attention.

"Yes. And, damme, so they ought to. So they ought to, damme, Captain. Best piece of work I ever heard of — good as I could have done myself. Here, Conyngham, make the presentations."

Hornblower bowed to Lady This and Lady That, to Lord Somebody and to Sir John Somebody-else. Bold eyes and bare arms, exquisite clothes and blue Garter-ribbons, were all the impressions Hornblower received. He was conscious that the uniform made for him by the *Victory's* tailor was a bad fit.

"Now let's get the business done with," said the Prince. "Call those fellows in."

Someone was spreading a carpet on the floor, someone else was bearing in a cushion on which something winked and sparkled. There was a little procession of three solemn men in red cloaks. Someone dropped on one knee to present the Prince with a sword.

"Kneel, sir," said Lord Conyngham to Hornblower.

He felt the accolade and heard the formal words which dubbed him knight. But when he rose, a little dazed, the ceremony was by no means over. There was a ribbon to be hung over his shoulder, a star to be pinned on

his breast, a red cloak to be draped about him, a vow to be repeated and signatures written. He was being invested as a Knight of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, as someone loudly proclaimed. He was Sir Horatio Hornblower, with a ribbon and star to wear for the rest of his life. At last they took the cloak from his shoulders again and the officials of the order withdrew.

"Let me be the first to congratulate you, Sir Horatio," said the Duke of Clarence, coming forward, his kindly imbecile face wreathed in smiles.

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower. The broad star thumped his chest as he bowed again.

"My best wishes, Colonel," said the Prince Regent.

Hornblower was conscious of all the eyes turned on him at that speech; it was that which warned him that the Prince was not making a slip regarding his rank.

"Sir?" he said, inquiringly, as seemed to be expected of him.

"His Royal Highness," explained the Duke, "has been pleased to appoint you one of his Colonels of Marines."

A Colonel of Marines received pay to the amount of twelve hundred pounds a year, and did no duty for it. It was an appointment given as a reward to successful captains, to be held until they reach flag rank. Six thousand pounds he had already, Hornblower remembered. Now he had twelve hundred a year in addition to his captain's half pay at least. He had attained financial security at last, for the first time in his life. He had a title, a ribbon and star. He had everything he had ever dreamed of having, in fact.

"The poor man's dazed," laughed the Regent loudly, delighted.

"I am overwhelmed, sir," said Hornblower, trying to concentrate again on the business in hand. "I hardly know how to thank your Royal Highness."

"Thank me by joining us at hazard. Your arrival interrupted a damned interesting game. Ring that bell, Sir John and let's have some wine. Sit here beside Lady Jane, Captain. Surely you want to play? Yes, I know about you, Hookham. You want to slip away and tell John Walter that I've done my duty. You might suggest at the same time that he writes one of his damned leaders and has my Civil List raised — I work hard enough for it, God knows. But I don't see why you should take the captain away. Oh, very well then, damn it. You can go if you want to."

"I didn't imagine," said Frere, when they were safely in the coach again, "that you'd care to play hazard. I wouldn't, not with Prinny, if he were using his own dice. Well, how does it feel to be Sir Horatio?"

"Very well," said Hornblower.

He was digesting the Regent's allusion to John Walter. This was the editor of *The Times*, he knew. It was beginning to dawn upon him that his investiture as Knight of the Bath and appointment as Colonel of Marines were useful pieces of news. Presumably their announcement would have some influence politically, too — that was the reason for haste. They would convince doubting people that the government's naval officers were achieving great things — it was almost as much a political move to make him a knight as was Bonaparte's scheme to shoot him for violating the laws of war. The thought took a great deal of the pleasure out of it.

"I took the liberty," said Frere, "of engaging a room for you at the Golden Cross. You'll find them expecting you; I had your baggage sent round. Shall I stop the coach there? Or do you want to visit Fladong's first?"

Hornblower wanted to be alone; the idea of visiting the naval coffee house to-night — for the first time in five years — had no appeal for him, especially as he felt suddenly self-conscious in his ribbon and star. Even at the hotel it was bad enough, with host and boots and chambermaid all unctuously deferential with their "Yes, Sir Horatio" and "No, Sir Horatio", making a procession out of Lighting him up to his room, and fluttering round him to see that he had all he wanted, when all he wanted now was to be left in peace.

There was little enough peace for him, all the same, when he climbed into bed. Resolutely as he put out of his mind all recollection of the wild doings of the day, he could not stop himself thinking about the fact that to-morrow he would be seeing his son and Lady Barbara. He spent a restless night.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Sir Horatio Hornblower," announced the butler, holding open the door for him.

Lady Barbara was there; it was a surprise to see her in black — Hornblower had been visualizing her as dressed in the blue gown she had worn when last he had seen her, the grey-blue which matched her eyes. She was in mourning now, of course, for Leighton had been dead less than a year still. But the black dress suited her well — her skin was creamy white against it. Hornblower remembered with a strange pang the golden tang of her cheeks in those old days on board the *Lydia*.

"Welcome," she said, her hands outstretched to him. They were smooth and cool and delicious — he remembered their touch of old. "The nurse will bring Richard directly. Meanwhile, my heartiest congratulations on your success."

"Thank you," said Hornblower. "I was extremely lucky, ma'am."

"The lucky man," said Lady Barbara, "is usually the man who knows how much to leave to chance."

While he digested this statement he stood awkwardly looking at her. Until this moment he had forgotten how Olympian she was, what self-assurance — kindly self-assurance — she had, which raised her to inaccessible heights and made him feel like a loutish schoolboy. His knighthood must appear ridiculously unimportant to her, the daughter of an earl, the sister of a marquis and of a viscount who was well on his way towards a dukedom. He was suddenly acutely conscious of his elbows and hands.

His awkwardness only ended with the opening of the door and the entrance of the nurse, plump and rosy in her ribboned cap, the baby held to her shoulder. She dropped a curtsy.

"Hullo, son," said Hornblower, gently.

He did not seem to have much hair yet, under his little cap, but there were two startling brown eyes looking out at his father; nose and chin and forehead might be as indeterminate as one would expect in a baby, but there was no ignoring those eyes.

"Hullo, baby," said Hornblower, gently, again.

He was unconscious of the caress in his voice. He was speaking to Richard as years before he had spoken to little Horatio and little Maria. He held up his hands to the child.

"Come to your father," he said.

Richard made no objections. It was a little shock to Hornblower to feel how tiny and light he was — Hornblower, years ago, had grown used to older children — but the feeling passed immediately.

"There, baby, there," said Hornblower.

Richard wriggled in his arms, stretching out his hands to the shining gold fringe of his epaulette.

"Pretty?" asked Hornblower.

"Da!" said Richard, touching the threads of bullion.

"That's a man!" said Hornblower.

His old skill with babies had not deserted him. Richard gurgled happily in his arms, smiled seraphically as he played with him, kicked his chest with tiny kicks through his dress. That good old trick of bowing the head and pretending to butt Richard in the stomach had its never-failing success. Richard gurgled and waved his arms in ecstasy.

"What a joke!" said Hornblower. "Oh, what a joke!"

Suddenly remembering, he looked round at Lady Barbara. She had eyes only for the baby, her serenity strangely exalted, her smile tender. He thought then that she was moved by her love for the child. Richard noticed her too.

"Goo!" he said, with a jab of an arm in her direction.

She came nearer, and Richard reached over his father's shoulder to touch her face.

"He's a fine baby," said Hornblower.

"O' course he's a fine babby," said the wet nurse, reaching for him. She took it for granted that godlike fathers in glittering uniforms would only condescend to notice their children for ten seconds consecutively, and would need to be instantly relieved of them at the end of that time.

"He's a saucy one," said the wet nurse, the baby back in her arms. He wriggled there, those big brown eyes of his looking from Hornblower to Barbara.

"Say 'bye bye'," said the nurse. She held up his wrist and waved his fat fist at them. "Bye bye."

"Do you think he's like you?" asked Barbara, as the door closed behind the nurse and baby.

"Well —" said Hornblower, with a doubtful grin.

He had been happy during those few seconds with the baby, happier than he had been for a long long time. The morning up to now had been one of black despondency for him. He had told himself that he had everything heart could desire, and some inner man within him had replied that he wanted none of it. In the morning light his ribbon and star had appeared gaudy gew-gaws. He never could contrive to feel proud of himself; there was something vaguely ridiculous about the name 'Sir Horatio Hornblower', just as he always felt there was something vaguely ridiculous about himself.

He had tried to comfort himself with the thought of all the money he had. There was a life of ease and security before him; he would never again have to pawn his gold-hilted sword, nor feel self-conscious in good society about the pinchbeck buckles on his shoes. And yet the prospect was frightening now that it was certain. There was something of confinement about it, something reminiscent of these weary weeks in the Château de Graçay — how well he remembered how he fretted there. Unease and insecurity, which had appeared such vast evils when he suffered under them, had something attractive about them now, hard though that was to believe.

He had envied brother captains who had columns about themselves in the newspapers. Surfeit in that way was attained instantaneously, he had discovered. Bush and Brown would love him neither more nor less on account of what *The Times* had to say about him; he would scorn the love of those who loved him more — and he had good reason to fear that there would be rivals who would love him less. He had received the adulation of crowds yesterday; that did not heighten his good opinion of crowds, and he was filled with a bitter contempt for the upper circle that rules those crowds. Within him the fighting man and the humanitarian both seethed with discontent.

Happiness was a Dead Sea fruit that turned to ashes in the mouth, decided Hornblower, generalizing recklessly from his own particular experience. Prospect, and not possession, was what gave pleasure, and his cross-grainedness would deprive him, now that he had made that discovery, even of the pleasure in prospect. He misdoubted everything so much. Freedom that could only be bought by Maria's death was not a freedom worth having; honours granted by those that had the granting of them were no honours at all; and no security was really worth the loss of insecurity. What life gave with one hand she took back with the other. The political career of which he had once dreamed was open to him now, especially with the alliance of the Wellesley faction, but he could see with morbid clarity how often he would hate it; and he had been happy for thirty seconds with his son, and now, more morbidly still, he asked himself cynically if that happiness could endure for thirty years.

His eyes met Barbara's again, and he knew she was his for the asking. To those who did not know and understand, who thought there was romance in his life when really it was the most prosaic of lives, that would be a romantic climax. She was smiling at him, and then he saw her lips tremble as she smiled. He remembered how Marie had said he was a man whom women loved easily, and he felt uncomfortable at being reminded of her.



COMMODORE
HORNBLOWER



FORESTER

LITTLE, BROWN

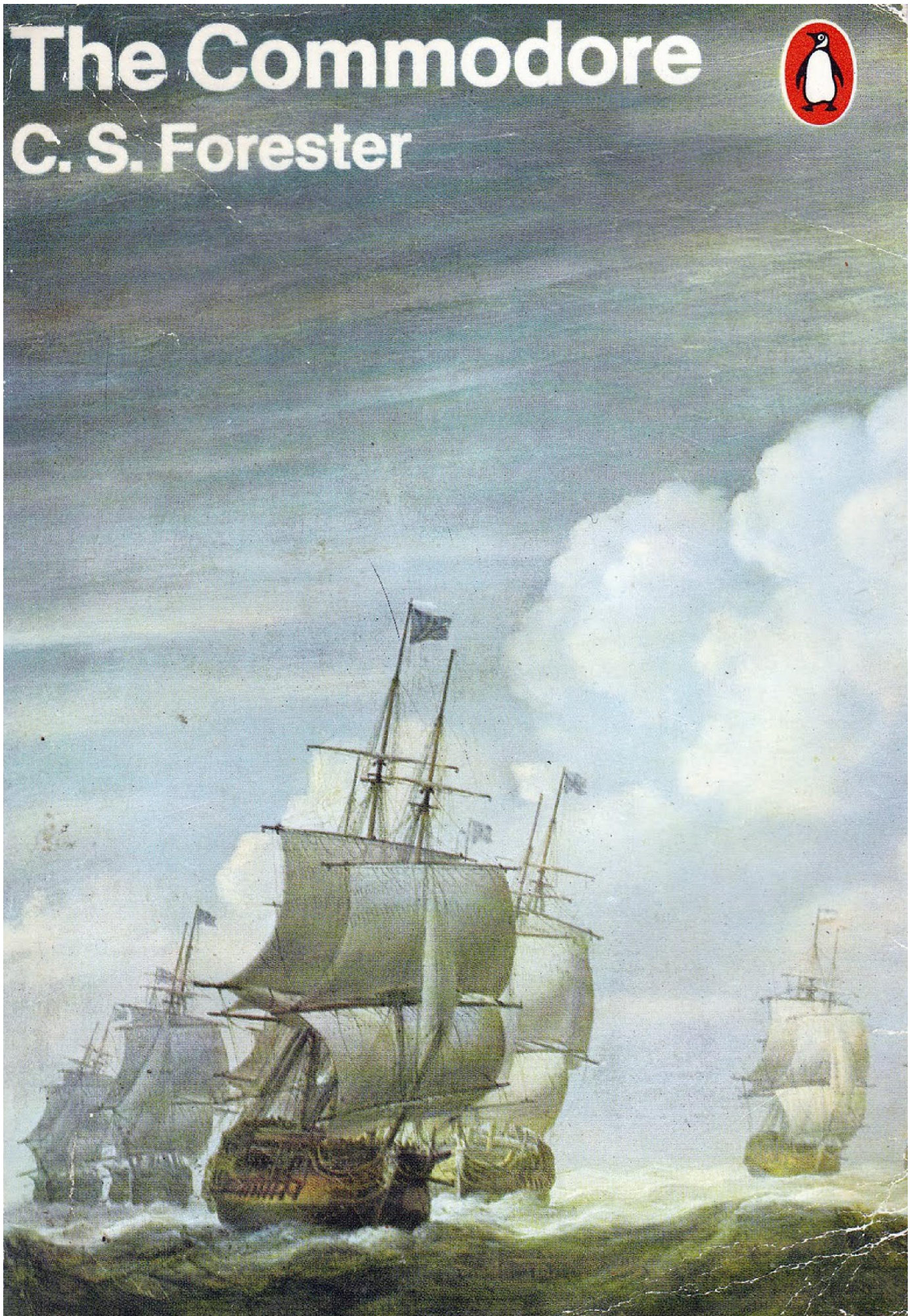
COMMODORE HORNBLOWER

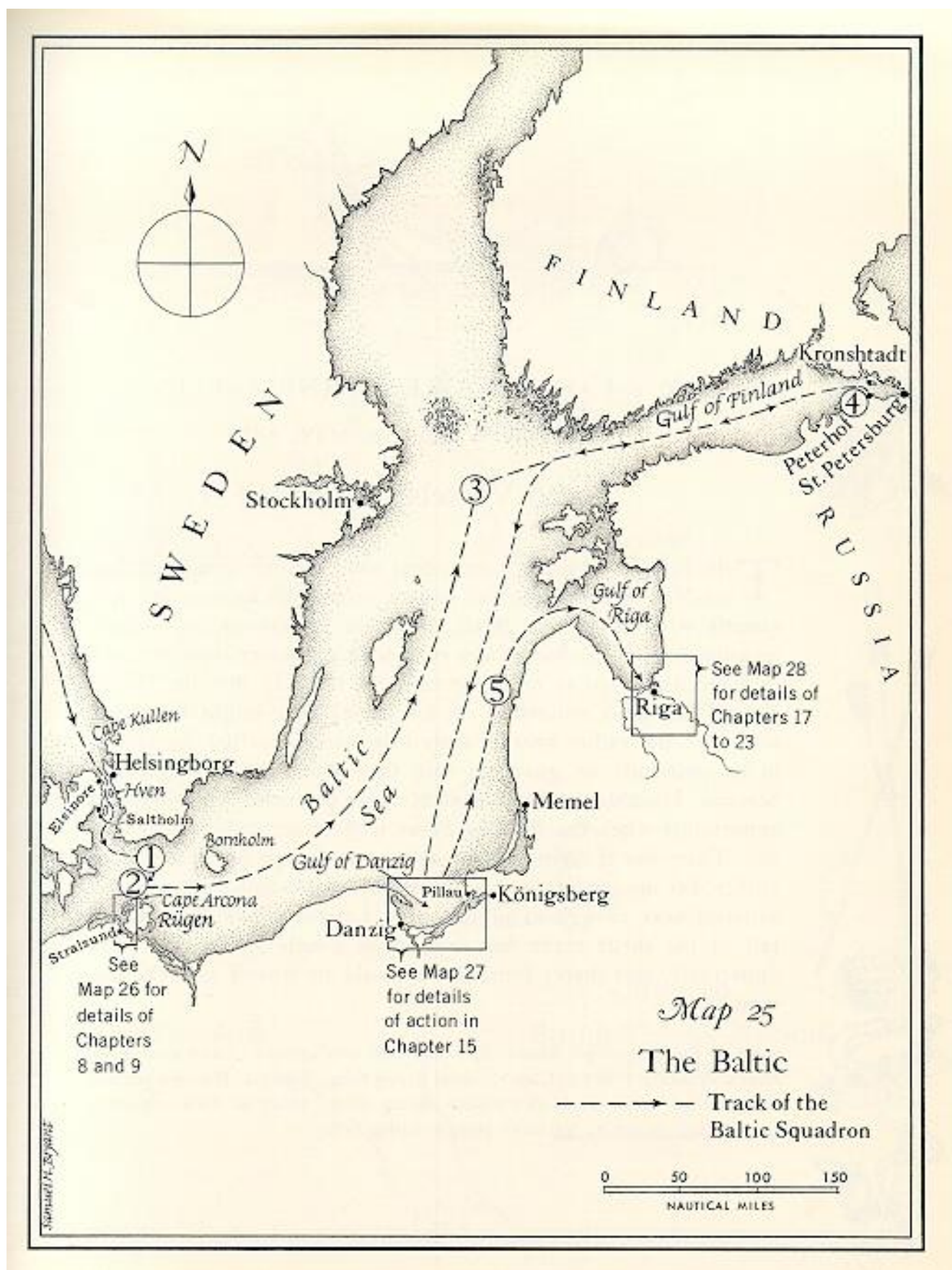
BY C.S. FORESTER



The Commodore

C. S. Forester





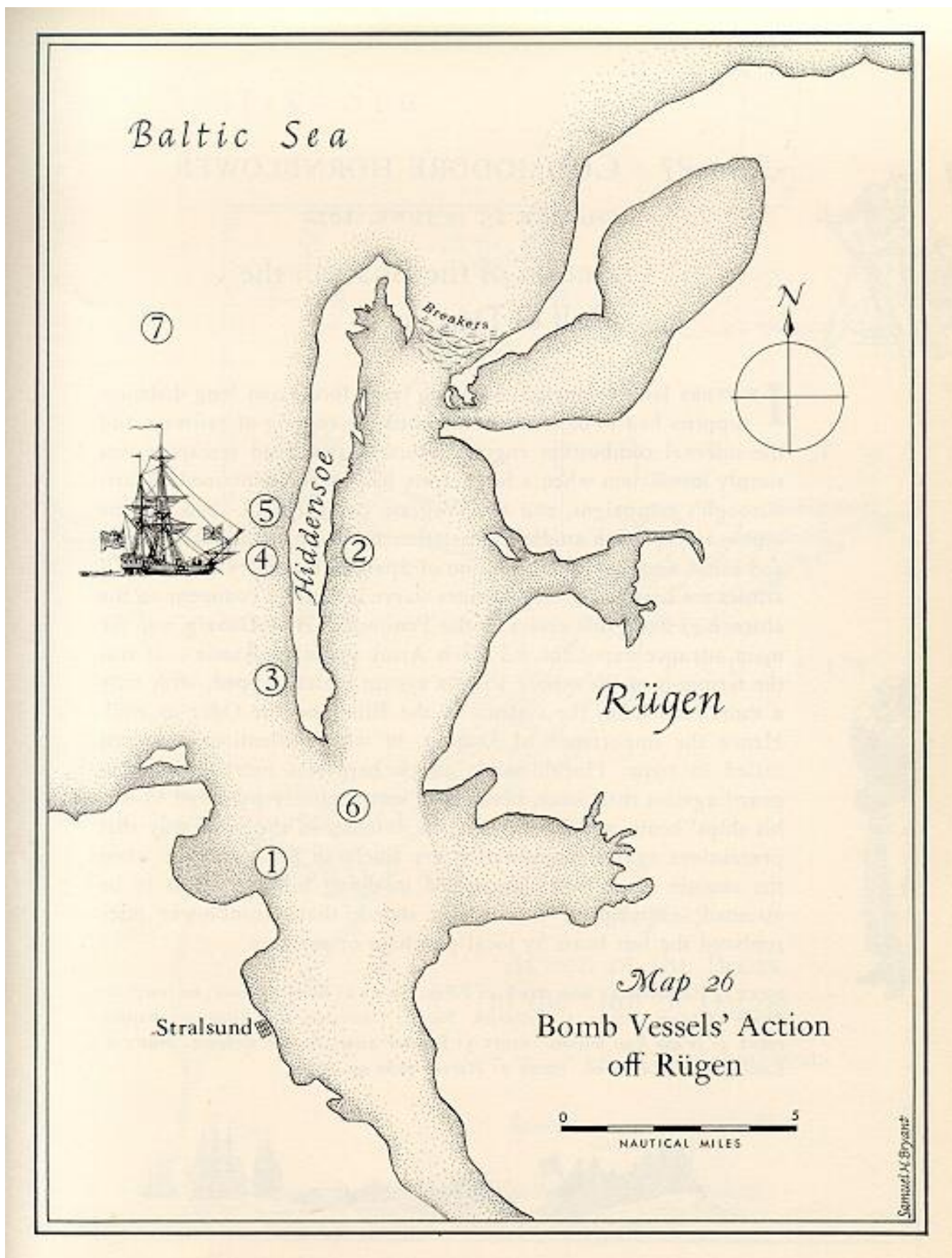
Commodore Hornblower

Chapters 6 to 16 May to July, 1812

Map 25 - The Baltic

- ① Sighting of the *Maggie Jones*.
- ③ Meeting with Lord Wynchwood.
- ⑤ Meeting with *Clam*.

- ② *Lotus* sights *Blanche Fleur*.
- ④ Interview with the Czar.

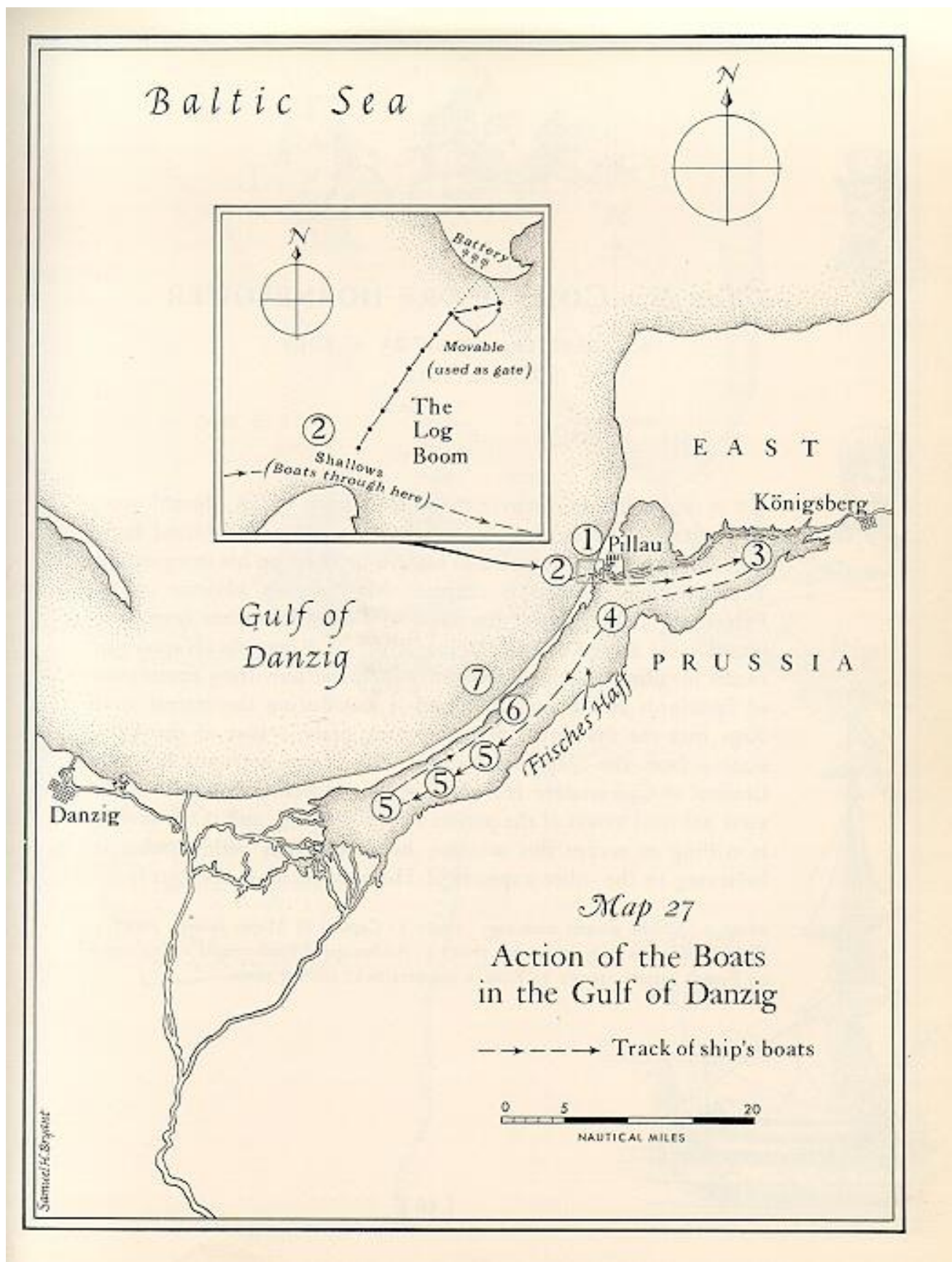


Commodore Hornblower

Chapters 8 and 9 May, 1812

Map 26 - Bomb Vessels' Action off Rügen

- ① *Raven* intercepts *Blanche Fleur* and then runs aground.
- ② *Blanche Fleur*'s anchorage.
- ③ *Clam*'s position during firing.
- ④ *Harvey*'s position during firing.
- ⑤ *Moth*'s position during firing.
- ⑥ *Lotus*'s position during firing.
- ⑦ *Nonsuch*'s position during firing.



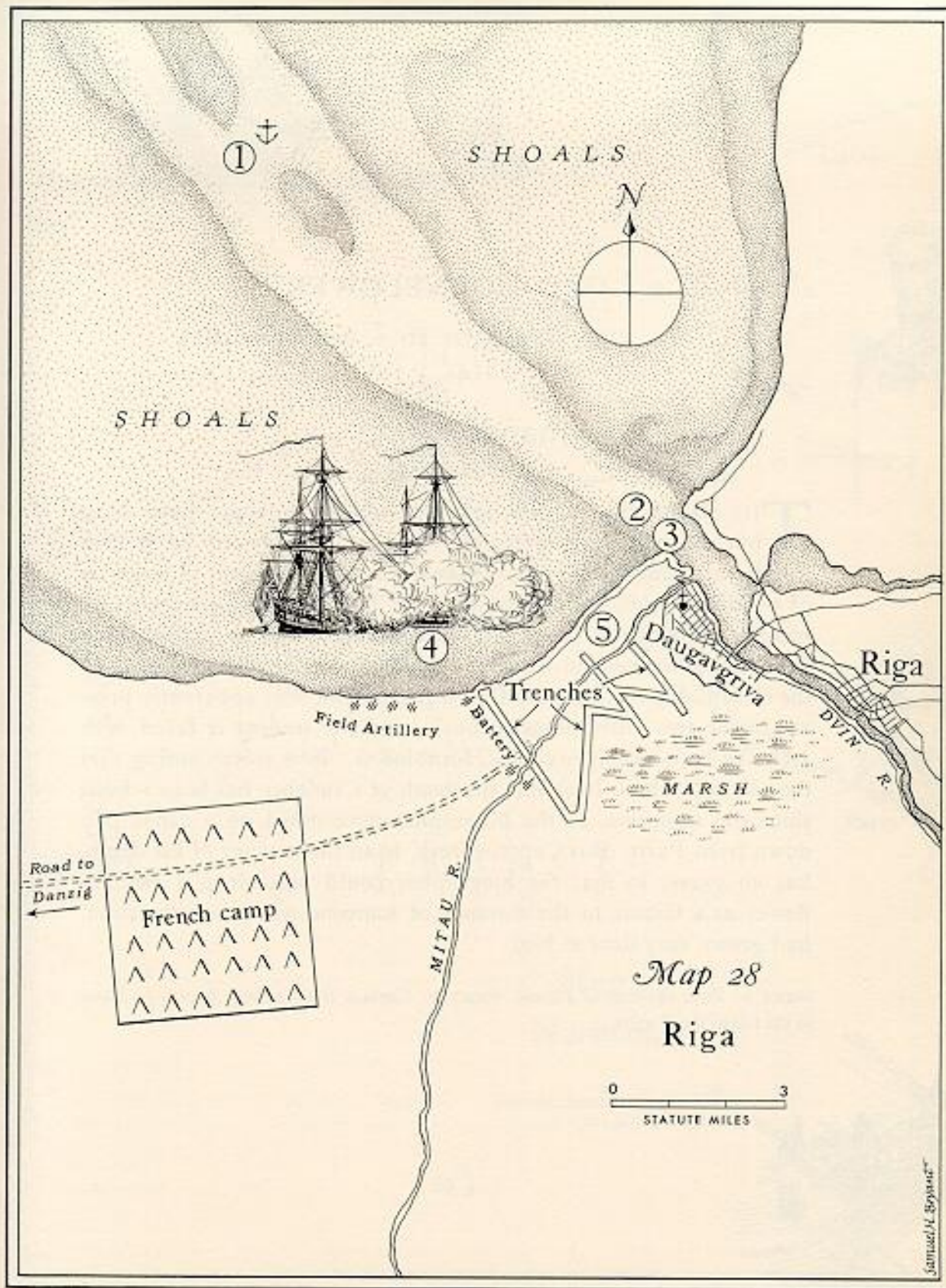
Commodore Hornblower

Chapter 15

June, 1812

Map 27 - Action of the Boats in the Gulf of Danzig.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ① Hornblower's false attack on Pillau. | ② Entry of boats; see insert for details of boom. |
| ③ <i>Friedrich, Blitzler, Charlotte, and Ritterhaus</i> burned. | ④ <i>Weiss Ross</i> burned. |
| ⑤ Further destruction of shipping. | ⑥ Raiding boats abandoned. |
| ⑦ <i>Harvey</i> picks up crew. | |



Commodore Hornblower

Chapters 17 to 23 July to October, 1812

Map 28 - Riga

- ① Middle bound anchorage.
- ② Capture of Major Jussey.
- ③ Fight with barges carrying troops.
- ④ Anchorage of bomb vessels during attack on French battery.
- ⑤ Russian counterattack: landing place.

The Commodore

(Published in the US as: "Commodore Hornblower")

C. S. Forester

(1945)

Chapter One

Captain Sir Horatio Hornblower sat in his bath, regarding with distaste his legs dangling over the end. They were thin and hairy, and recalled to his mind the legs of the spiders he had seen in Central America. It was hard to think about anything except his legs, seeing how much they were forced upon his attention by their position under his nose as he sat in this ridiculous bath; they hung out at one end while his body protruded from the water at the other. It was only the middle portion of him, from his waist to above his knees, which was submerged, and that was bent almost double. Hornblower found it irritating to have to take a bath in this fashion, although he tried not to allow it to irritate him, and he strove desperately to dismiss from his mind recollections of thousands of more comfortable baths taken on the deck of a ship, under a wash-deck pump which threw over him unlimited quantities of stimulating sea-water. He seized his soap and flannel, and began viciously to wash those parts of himself above the surface, and as he did so water slopped in quantities over the side on to the polished oak floor of his dressing-room. That meant trouble for a housemaid, and in Hornblower's present mood he was glad to cause trouble.

He rose awkwardly to his feet in the bath, water flying in all directions, soaped and washed off the middle of himself, and yelled for Brown. Brown came in at once from the bedroom, although a good servant would have sensed his master's mood and delayed for a second or two so as to be sworn at. He hung a warm towel over Hornblower's shoulders, dexterously preventing the ends from dipping into the water as Hornblower stepped out of the soapy mess and walked across the floor leaving upon it a trail of drops and wet footprints.

Hornblower towelled himself and stared gloomily through the door into the bedroom at the clothes which Brown had laid out for him there.

"It's a lovely morning, sir," said Brown.

"God damn your eyes," said Hornblower.

He would have to put on that damned suit of buff and blue, the varnished boots and the gold fob; he had never worn that suit before, and he had hated it when the tailor tried it on him, hated it when his wife admired it, and he supposed he would go on hating it for the rest of his days and still have to wear it. His hatred was a double one, firstly a simple, blind, unreasoning hatred, and secondly a hatred for a suit which he was quite sure did not properly set off his looks, making him appear absurd instead of merely plain. He pulled the two-guinea linen shirt over his head, and then with infinite trouble dragged the tight buff trousers up over his legs. They fitted him like a skin, and it was only when they were fully on, and Brown had slipped behind him and hauled the waistband taut, that he realized that he had not yet put on his stockings. To take the trousers off again would be to admit a mistake, and he refused to do so, ripping out another oath at Brown's suggestion. Philosophically Brown knelt and rolled up the tight trouser legs, but they would not roll even as far as the knee, making it hopeless to try to put on the long stockings.

"Cut the tops off the damned things!" spluttered Hornblower.

Brown, kneeling on the floor, rolled a protesting eye up at him, but what he saw in Hornblower's face cut short anything he had in mind to say. In disciplined silence Brown obeyed orders, bringing the scissors from the dressing-table. Snip, snip, snip! The tops of the stockings fell to the floor, and Hornblower put his feet into the mutilated ends and felt the first satisfaction of the day as Brown rolled down the trousers over them. The fates might be against him, by God, but he would show them that he still had a will of his own. He crammed his feet into the varnished boots and refrained from swearing at their tightness — he remembered guiltily that he had

been weak with the fashionable bootmaker and had not insisted on comfort, not with his wife standing by to see that the dictates of fashion were obeyed.

He stumped across to the dressing-table and tied his neckcloth, and Brown buckled his stock. The ridiculous thing brushed his ears as he turned his head and his neck felt as if it were being stretched to double its length. He had never been more uncomfortable in his life; he would never draw an easy breath while wearing this damned choker which Brummell and the Prince Regent had made fashionable. He slipped on the flowered waistcoat — blue sprigged with pink — and then the broadcloth coat, buff, with big blue buttons; the inside of the pocket flaps and the reverse of the lapels and collar were of a matching blue. For twenty years Hornblower had worn nothing except uniform, and the image that the mirror reflected back to his jaundiced eyes was unnatural, grotesque, ridiculous. Uniform was comforting — no one could blame him if it did not suit him, because he had to wear it. But with civilian clothes he was presumed to display his own taste and choice — even though he was a married man — and people could laugh at him for what he wore. Brown attached the gold watch to the fob, and forced it into the pocket. It made an unsightly bulge there, over his belly, but Hornblower furiously put aside the idea of going without a watch so as to allow his clothes to fit better. He stuffed into his sleeve the linen handkerchief which Brown handed him after shaking scent on to it, and then he was ready.

"That's a beautiful suit, sir," said Brown.

"Beautiful rubbish!" said Hornblower.

He stumped back across the dressing-room and knocked on the farther door.

"Come in," said his wife's voice.

Barbara was still sitting in her bath, her legs dangling over the edge just as his own had done.

"How handsome you look, dear," said Barbara. "It's a refreshing change to see you out of uniform."

Even Barbara, the nicest woman in the world, was not free of the besetting sin of womankind, approving of change merely because it was change; but Hornblower did not answer her as he answered Brown.

"Thank you," he said, trying desperately to sound gracious as he said it.

"My towel, Hebe," said Barbara. The little Negro maid came gliding forward, and wrapped her up as she stepped out of the hip-bath.

"Venus rises from the waves," said Hornblower gallantly. He was doing his best to fight down the feeling of awkwardness which possessed him when he saw his wife naked in the presence of another woman, even though Hebe was a mere servant, and coloured.

"I expect," said Barbara, standing while Hebe patted the towel to her skin to dry her, "the village has already heard of this strange habit of ours of taking baths every day. I can hardly imagine what they think of it."

Hornblower could imagine; he had been a village boy himself, once. Barbara threw off the towel and stood naked again for a moment as Hebe passed her silk shift over her head. Women, once the barriers were down, really had no sense of decency, and Barbara in that transparent shift was even more shocking than when she was naked. She sat at the dressing-table and set to work to cream her face while Hebe brushed her hair; there were a myriad pots and jars on the dressing-table and Barbara took ingredients from one after the other as though compounding a witches' brew.

"I'm glad to see," said Barbara, inspecting her reflection closely, "that the sun is shining. It is well to have a fine day for this morning's ceremony."

The thought of the ceremony had been in Hornblower's mind ever since he woke up; it could not be said that he disliked the prospect, but he was not comfortable about it. It would be the first landmark in a new way of life, and Hornblower felt a not unnatural distrust of his own reactions to the change. Barbara was studying the reflection of his face in her mirror.

"Welcome to the new Squire of Smallbridge," she said, and smiled, turning towards him.

The smile transformed not only her expression but Hornblower's whole mental outlook as well. Barbara ceased to be the great lady, the earl's daughter with the bluest blood of the aristocracy in her veins, whose perfect poise and aplomb always afflicted Hornblower with the diffidence he detested; instead she became the woman who had stood unfrightened beside him upon the shot-torn decks of the *Lydia* in the Pacific, the woman who throbbed with love in his arms, the beloved companion and the companionable lover.

Hornblower's heart went out to her on the instant. He would have taken her in his arms and kissed her if it had

not been that Hebe was in the room. But Barbara's eyes met his and read in them what was in his mind. She smiled another smile at him; they were in perfect accord, with secrets shared between them, and the world was a brighter place for both of them.

Barbara pulled on a pair of white silk stockings, and knotted above her knees the scarlet silk garters. Hebe stood ready with her gown, and Barbara dived into it. The gown flapped and billowed as Barbara made her way into it, and then at last she emerged, her arms waving as they pushed into the sleeves, and her hair tousled. No one could be a great lady in those conditions, and Hornblower loved her more dearly than ever. Hebe settled the gown about her mistress, and hung a lace cape over her shoulders ready for the final adjustment of her hair. When the last pin had been inserted, the last curl fixed in place, the shoes eased upon her feet by a grovelling Hebe with a shoehorn, Barbara devoted her attention to settling on her head the vast hat with the roses and ribbons.

"And what is the time, my dear?" she asked.

"Nine o'clock," said Hornblower, hauling his watch with an effort from out of the tense fob-pocket in the front of his trousers.

"Excellent," said Barbara, reaching for the long white silk gloves which had come to her by devious smugglers' routes from Paris. "Hebe, Master Richard will be ready now. Tell nurse to bring him to me. And I think, dear, that your ribbon and star would be in the spirit of this morning's occasion."

"At my own front door?" protested Hornblower.

"I fear so," said Barbara. She wagged her head with its pyramid of roses, and this time it was not so much a smile that she bestowed upon him as a grin, and all Hornblower's objections to wearing his star evaporated on the spot. It was a tacit admission that she attached no more importance, as far as he and she were concerned, to the ceremony of welcoming him as the new Squire of Smallbridge, than Hornblower himself. It was as if an augur winked.

In his bedroom Hornblower took the red ribbon of the Bath and the Star from the drawer in his wardrobe, and Brown found for him the dogskin gloves which he tugged on as he walked down the stairs. A scared housemaid dropped him a curtsy; in the hall stood Wiggins the butler with Hornblower's tall beaver hat, and beside him John the footman in the new livery which Barbara had chosen. And here came Barbara with Richard in his nurse's arms, Richard's curls were pomaded into stiff decorum. The nurse set him down and twitched his petticoats and his lace collar into position, and Hornblower hastened to take one of his hands while Barbara took the other; Richard was not yet sufficiently accustomed to standing on his feet and was liable to go down on all fours in a way which might not suit the dignity of this morning's ceremony. Wiggins and John threw open the door, and the three of them, Barbara and Hornblower with Richard between them, walked out to the head of the steps above the driveway, Hornblower remembering just in time to clap the tall hat on his head before crossing the threshold.

It seemed as if every inhabitant of Smallbridge were formed up below them. On one side was the parson with a herd of children; in front the four tenant farmers in ill-fitting broadcloth with their labourers in their smocks, and on the other side a cluster of women in aprons and bonnets. Behind the children the ostler at the Coach and Horses stuck a fiddle under his chin and played a note; the parson waved a hand and the children burst into shrill piping —

"See-ee the *conk*-ring he-ee-ee-ero comes,
Sow-ow-ow-ound the *trum*-pets, be-ee-ee-eat the drums!"

Obviously this was meant for Hornblower, and he took off his hat and stood awkwardly; the tune meant nothing to his tone-deaf ear, but he could distinguish some of the words. The chorus came to a ragged end, and the parson took a step forward.

"Your Ladyship," he began, "Sir Horatio. Welcome in the name of the village. Welcome, Sir Horatio, with all the glory you have won in the war against the Corsican tyrant. Welcome, Your Ladyship, wife of the hero before us, sister of the hero commanding our valiant army now in Spain, daughter of the highest nobility in the land! Welcome —"

"Man!" yelled Richard unexpectedly. "Da-da!"

The parson took the interruption without flinching; already well in his stride, he continued to mouth out his fulsome sentences, telling of the joy the village of Smallbridge felt at finding itself in the ownership of a famous sailor. Hornblower was distracted from the discourse by the necessity of holding on tight to Richard's hand — if Richard once got loose he evidently would go down on all fours and throw himself down the steps to make a closer acquaintance with the village children. Hornblower looked out over the lush green of the park; beyond it rose the massive curves of the Downs, and to one side the tower of Smallbridge church rose above the trees. On that side, too, an orchard was in full bloom, exquisitely lovely. Park and orchard and church were all his; he was the Squire, a landed gentleman, owner of many acres, being welcomed by his tenantry. Behind him was his house, full of his servants; on his breast the ribbon and star of an order of chivalry; and in London Coutts & Company had in their vaults a store of golden guineas which were his as well. This was the climax of a man's ambition. Fame, wealth, security, love, a child — he had all that heart could desire. Hornblower, standing at the head of the steps while the parson droned on, was puzzled to find that he was still not happy. He was irritated with himself in consequence. He ought to be running over with pride and joy and happiness, and yet here he was contemplating the future with faint dismay; dismay at thought of living on here, and positive distaste at the thought of spending the fashionable season in London, even though Barbara would be beside him all the time.

These disorderly thoughts of Hornblower's were suddenly broken into. Something had been said which should not have been said, and as the parson was the only person speaking, he must have said it, although he was still droning along in obvious ignorance of any blunder. Hornblower stole a glance at Barbara; her white teeth showed for a moment against her lower lip, clear proof of her vexation to anyone who knew her well.

Otherwise she was exhibiting the stoical calm of the British upper classes. What was it that had been said to upset her? Hornblower raked through his subconscious memory to recall the words the parson had been using, and which he had heard without attending. Yes, that was it. The stupid fool had spoken about Richard as though he were the child of both of them. It irritated Barbara unbearably to have her stepson taken to be her own child, and the more fond she grew of him the more it irritated her, curiously enough. But it was hard to blame the parson for his mistake; when a married pair arrives with a sixteen-months-old baby it is only natural to assume it to be their child.

The parson had finished now, and an awkward pause had already begun. Clearly something must be said in reply, and it was Hornblower's business to say it.

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower — he had still not been married long enough to Barbara to have completely mastered that old habit — while he groped wildly for something to say. He ought to have been ready for this, of course; he ought to have been preparing a speech instead of standing day-dreaming. "Ha-h'm. It is with pride that I look over this English countryside —"

He managed to say all that was necessary. The Corsican tyrant. The yeomen stock of England. The King and the Prince Regent. Lady Barbara. Richard. When he finished there was another awkward pause while people looked at each other, before one of the farmers stepped forward.

"Three cheers for 'Er Ladyship!"

Everyone cheered, to Richard's astonishment, expressed in a loud yell.

"Three cheers for Sir Horatio! One, two, three, an' a tiger!"

There was nothing left to do now, except to withdraw gracefully into the house again and leave the tenantry to disperse. Thank God it was all over, anyway. John, the footman, stood at what obviously he thought was attention in the hall. Hornblower made a weary mental note to teach him to keep his elbows into his sides. If he were going to employ a footman he would make a good footman out of him. Here came the nurse, swooping down to find out how wet Richard had made himself. And here came the butler, hobbling along with a letter on a salver. Hornblower felt a rush of blood into his face as he saw the seal; that seal and that thick linen paper were only used by the Admiralty, as far as he knew. It was months, and it seemed like years, since he had last received any letter from the Admiralty. He snatched the letter from the salver, and only by the mercy of Providence remembered to glance at Barbara in apology, before breaking the seal.

The Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty,
Whitehall,

10th April, 1812

Sir,

I am commanded by the Lords Commissioners to inform you that their Lordships desire to employ you immediately as Commodore with a Captain under you on a service which their Lordships consider worthy of an officer of your seniority and standing. You are hereby directed and required, therefore, to inform their Lordships through me as speedily as possible as to whether or not you will accept this appointment, and in the event of your accepting it you are further directed and required to present yourself in person at this office without delay in order to receive verbally their Lordships' instructions and also those of any other Minister of State whom it may be judged necessary you should address.

Your obed't servant,

E. NEPEAN, *Secy to the Lords Commissioners
of the Admiralty*

Hornblower had to read the letter twice — the first time it conveyed no meaning to him at all. But at the second reading the glorious import of the letter burst in upon him. The first thing he was conscious of was that this life here in Smallbridge or in Bond Street need not continue. He was free of all that; he could take a bath under a wash-deck pump instead of in a damned hip-bath with a kettleful of water in it; he could walk his own deck, breathe the sea air, take off these damned tight trousers and never put them on again, receive no deputations, speak to no damned tenants, never smell another pigsty or smack another horse's back, And that was only the first thing; the second was that he was being offered appointment as Commodore — a Commodore of the first class, too, with a captain under him, so that he would be like an Admiral. He would have a broad pennant flying at the mainmast-head, compliments and honours — not that they mattered, but they would be outward signs of the trust reposed in him, of the promotion that was his. Louis at the Admiralty must have a good opinion of him, clearly, to appoint him Commodore when he was hardly more than half-way up the Captains' list. Of course, that phrase about 'worthy of his seniority and standing' was merely formula, justifying the Admiralty in anticipation in putting him on half-pay should he decline; but — those last words, about consulting with Ministers of State, had enormous import. They meant that the mission to be entrusted to him would be one of responsibility, of international importance. Waves of excitement broke over him. He hauled out his watch. Ten-fifteen — the day was still young by civilian standards.

"Where's Brown?" he snapped at Wiggins.

Brown materialized miraculously in the background — not too miraculously, perhaps; the whole house must be aware, of course, that the master had received a letter from the Admiralty.

"Get out my best uniform and my sword. Have the horses put-to in the chariot. You had better come with me, Brown — I shall want you to drive. Have my things for the night ready and yours too."

The servants scattered in all directions, for not merely must the weighty orders of the master be obeyed, but this was an affair of State and doubly important in consequence. So that as Hornblower came out of his preoccupation Barbara was standing there alone.

God, he had forgotten all about her in his excitement, and she was aware of it. She was drooping a little, and one corner of her mouth was down. Their eyes met then, and that corner of her mouth went up for a moment, but then it went down again.

"It's the Admiralty," explained Hornblower lamely. "They'll appoint me Commodore with a captain under me." It was a pity that Hornblower could see her try to appear pleased.

"That's a high compliment," she said. "No more than you deserve, my dear, all the same. You must be pleased, and I am too."

"It will take me away from you," said Hornblower.

"Darling, I have had six months with you. Six months of the kind of happiness you have given me is more than any woman deserves. And you will come back to me."

"Of course I will," said Hornblower.

Chapter Two

This was typical April weather. It had been miraculously sunny during the ceremony at the foot of the steps of Smallbridge House, but it had rained torrentially once already during the twenty-mile drive to London. Then the sun had reappeared, had warmed and dried them; but now as they crossed Wimbledon Common the sky was black again, and the first drops began to drive into their faces. Hornblower pulled his cloak about him and rebuttoned the collar. His cocked hat with its gold lace and button lay on his knees under the sheltering tent of the cloak; cocked hats worn for long in the rain accumulated pools of water in both crown and brim and were pulled out of shape.

Now it came, wind and rain, shrieking down from the west in unbelievable contrast with the delightful weather of only half an hour before. The near-side horse had the full brunt of it and was inclined to shirk its work in consequence. Brown laid the whiplash on its glistening haunch and it threw itself into the collar in a fresh spasm of energy. Brown was a good whip — he was good at everything. He had been the best captain's coxswain Hornblower had ever known, he had been a loyal subordinate during the escape from France, and he had made himself into the best manservant heart could desire. Now he sat here, tolerant of the driving rain, the slippery leather of the reins grasped in a big brown hand; hand and wrist and forearm acted like a spring to maintain that subtle pressure upon the horses' mouths — not enough pressure to interfere in the least with their work, but enough to give them confidence on the slippery road, and to have them under control in any emergency. They were pulling the chariot over the muddy macadam up the steep ascent of Wimbledon Common with a wholeheartedness they never displayed for Hornblower.

"Would you like to go to sea again, Brown?" asked Hornblower. The mere fact that he allowed himself to make this unnecessary speech was proof of how much Hornblower was lifted out of himself with excitement.

"I'd like it main well, sir," said Brown shortly.

Hornblower was left to guess what Brown really meant — whether his curtness was just the English way of concealing enthusiasm, or whether Brown was merely being in polite agreement with his master's mood. The rain from Hornblower's wet hair was trickling down his neck now inside his collar. He ought to have brought a sou'wester with him. He hunched himself together on the padded leather seat, resting his two hands on the hilt of the sword belted round his waist — the hundred-guinea sword given him by the Patriotic Fund. With the sword vertical his hands held the heavy wet cloak away from the cocked hat on his knees. Another little rivulet coursed down inside his clothes and made him squirm. By the time the shower had passed he was thoroughly damp and uncomfortable, but here once more came the glorious sun. The raindrops in the gorse and the brambles shone like diamonds; the horses steamed; larks resumed their song far overhead, and Hornblower threw open his cloak and wiped his damp hair and neck with his handkerchief. Brown eased the horses to a walk at the crest of the hill to breathe them before the brisk descent.

"London, sir," he said.

And there it was. The rain had washed the smoke and dust out of the air so that even at that distance the gilt cross and bell over St Paul's gleamed in the sunshine. The church spires, dwarfed by the dome, stood out with unnatural clarity. The very roof-tops were distinct. Brown clicked his tongue at the horses and they broke once more into a trot, rattling the chariot down the steep descent into Wandsworth, and Hornblower pulled out his watch. It was no more than two o'clock, ample time to do business. Even though his shirt was damp inside his coat this was a far better day than he had anticipated when he sat in his bath that morning.

Brown drew the horses to a halt outside the Admiralty, and a ragged urchin appeared who guarded the wheel so that it did not muddy Hornblower's cloak and uniform as he climbed down from the chariot.

"At the Golden Cross, then, Brown," said Hornblower, fumbling for a copper for the urchin.

"Aye aye, sir," said Brown, wheeling the horses round.

Hornblower carefully put on his cocked hat, settled his coat more smoothly, and centred the buckle of his sword-belt. At Smallbridge House he was Sir Horatio, master of the house, lord of the manor, autocrat undisputed, but now he was just Captain Hornblower going in to see the Lords of the Admiralty. But Admiral Louis was all cordiality. He left Hornblower waiting no more than three minutes in the anteroom — no longer than would be necessary to get rid of his visitor of the moment — and he shook hands with obvious pleasure at the sight of him; he rang the bell for a clerk to take Hornblower's wet cloak away, and with his own hands

he pulled up a chair for him beside the vast fire which Louis maintained summer and winter since his return from the command of the East Indian Station.

"Lady Barbara is well, I trust?" he asked.

"Very well, thank you, sir," said Hornblower.

"And Master Hornblower?"

"Very well too, sir."

Hornblower was mastering his shyness rapidly. He sat farther back in his chair and welcomed the heat of the fire. That was a new portrait of Collingwood on the wall; it must have replaced the old one of Lord Barharn. It was pleasant to note the red ribbon and the star and to look down at his own breast and to see that he wore the same decoration.

"And yet you left domestic bliss at the first moment you received our letter?"

"Of course, sir."

Hornblower realized that perhaps it might be more profitable not to be natural; it might be better to adopt a pose, to appear reluctant to take up his professional duties, or to make it look as if he were making a great personal sacrifice for his country, but for the life of him he could not do it. He was too pleased with his promotion, too full of curiosity regarding the mission the Admiralty had in mind for him. Louis' keen eyes were studying him closely, and he met their gaze frankly.

"What is it you plan for me, sir?" he asked; he would not even wait for Louis to make the first move.

"The Baltic," said Louis.

So that was it. The two words terminated a morning of wild speculation, tore up a wide cobweb of possibilities. It might have been anywhere in the world; Java or Jamaica, Cape Horne or the Cape of Good Hope, the Indian Ocean or the Mediterranean, anywhere within the 25,000-mile circuit of the world where the British flag flew. And it was going to be the Baltic; Hornblower tried to sort out in his mind what he knew about the Baltic. He had not sailed in northern waters since he was a junior lieutenant.

"Admiral Keats is commanding there, isn't he?"

"At the moment, yes. But Saumarez is replacing him. His orders will be to give you the widest latitude of discretion."

That was a curious thing to say. It hinted at division of command, and that was inherently vicious. Better a bad commander-in-chief than a divided command. To tell a subordinate that his superior was under orders to grant him wide discretion was a dangerous thing to do, unless the subordinate was a man of superlative loyalty and common sense. Hornblower gulped at that moment — he had honestly forgotten temporarily that he was the subordinate under consideration; maybe the Admiralty credited him with 'superlative loyalty and common sense'.

Louis was eyeing him curiously.

"Don't you want to hear the size of your command?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," answered Hornblower, but he did not mind very much. The fact that he was going to command something was much more important than what he was going to command.

"You'll have the *Nonsuch*, seventy-four," said Louis. "That will give you a ship of force should you need one. For the rest you'll have all the small stuff we can scrape together for you — *Lotus* and *Raven*, sloops; two bomb-ketches, *Moth* and *Harvey*, and the cutter *Clam*. That's all so far, but by the time you sail we might have some more ready for you. We want you to be ready for all the inshore work that may come your way. There's likely to be plenty."

"I expect so," said Hornblower.

"Don't know whether you'll be fighting for the Russians or against them," mused Louis. "Same with the Swedes. God knows what's building up, up there. But His Nibs'll tell you all about that."

Hornblower looked a question.

"Your revered brother-in-law, the most noble the Marquis Wellesley, K.P., His Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. We call him His Nibs for short. We'll walk across and see him in a minute. But there's something else important to settle. Who d'you want for captain in *Nonsuch*?"

Hornblower gasped at that. This was patronage on a grand scale. He had sometimes appointed midshipmen and surgeon's mates; a parson of shady record had once hungrily solicited him for nomination as chaplain in

his ship, but to have a say in the appointment of a captain of a ship of the line was something infinitely more important than any of these. There were 120 captains junior to Hornblower, men of most distinguished record, whose achievements were talked of with bated breath in the four quarters of the world, and who had won their way to that rank at the cost of their blood and by the performance of feats of skill and daring unparalleled in history. Certainly half of these, perhaps more, would jump at the suggestion of the command of a seventy-four. Hornblower remembered his own joy at his appointment to *Sutherland* two years ago. Captains on half-pay, captains with shore appointments eating out their hearts with wailing for a sea command, it was in his power to change the whole life and career of one of these. Yet there was no hesitation about his decision. There might be more brilliant captains available, captains with more brains, but there was only one man that he wanted.

"I'll have Bush," he said, "if he's available."

"You can have him," said Louis, with a nod. "I was expecting you to ask for him. That wooden leg of his won't be too serious a handicap, you think."

"I don't think so," said Hornblower. It would have been irksome in the extreme to go to sea with any other captain than Bush.

"Very well, then," said Louis, looking round at the clock on the wall. "Let's walk across and see His Nibs, if you've no objection."

CHAPTER THREE

Hornblower sat in his private sitting-room in the Golden Cross inn. There was a fire burning, and on the table at which he sat there were no fewer than four wax candles lighted. All this luxury — the private sitting-room, the fire, the wax candles — gave Hornblower uneasy delight. He had been poor for so long, he had had to scrape and economize so carefully all his life, that recklessness with money gave him this queer dubious pleasure, this guilty joy. His bill to-morrow would contain an item of at least half a crown for light, and if he had been content with rush dips the charge would not have been more than twopence. The fire would be a shilling, too. And you could trust an innkeeper to make the maximum charges to a guest who obviously could afford them, a Knight of the Bath, with a servant, and a two-horse chariot. To-morrow's bill would be nearer two guineas than one, Hornblower touched his breast pocket to reassure himself that his thick wad of one-pound notes was still there. He could afford to spend two guineas a day.

Reassured, he bent again to the notes which he had made during his interview with the Foreign Secretary. They were in irregular order, jotted down as first one thing and then another had come into Wellesley's mind. It was quite clear that not even the Cabinet knew for certain whether the Russians were going to fight Bonaparte or not. No, that was the wrong way to put it. Nobody knew whether Bonaparte was going to fight the Russians or not. However much ill will the Tsar bore towards the French — and obviously it was great — he would not fight unless he had to, unless Bonaparte deliberately attacked him. Certainly the Tsar would make every possible concession rather than fight, at least at present while he was still trying to build up and reorganize his army.

"It's hard to think Boney will be mad enough to pick a quarrel," Wellesley had said, "when he can get practically all he wants without fighting."

But if there was going to be war it was desirable that England should have a striking force in the Baltic.

"If Boney chases Alexander out of Russia, I want you to be on hand to pick him up," said Wellesley. "We can always find a use for him."

Kings in exile were at least useful figureheads for any resistance that might still be maintained by countries which Bonaparte had overrun. Under her protecting wing England had the rulers of Sicily and Sardinia, the Netherlands and Portugal and Hesse, all of them helping to keep alive hope in the bosoms of their former subjects now ground beneath the tyrant's heel.

"So much depends on Sweden," was another remark of Wellesley's. "No one can guess what Bernadotte will do. Russia's conquest of Finland has irritated the Swedes, too. We try and point out to them that of the two

Bonaparte's the worse menace to 'em. He's at the mouth of the Baltic, while Russia's only at the top. But it can't be comfortable for Sweden, having to choose between Russia and Bonaparte."

That was a pretty tangle, one way and the other — Sweden ruled by a Crown Prince who only three years before had been a French general, and some sort of connexion by marriage with Bonaparte at that; Denmark and Norway in the tyrant's hands, Finland newly conquered by Russia, and the south shore of the Baltic swarming with Bonaparte's troops.

"He has army camps at Danzig and Stettin," Wellesley had said, "and South German troops echeloned all the way back to Berlin, to say nothing of the Prussians and the Austrians and the other allies."

With Europe at his feet Bonaparte was able to drag in his train the armies of his late enemies; if he were to make war upon Russia it seemed as though a substantial part of his army would be foreigners — Italians and South Germans, Prussians and Austrians, Dutchmen and Danes.

"There are even Spaniards and Portuguese, they tell me," said Wellesley. "I hope they have enjoyed the recent winter in Poland. You speak Spanish, I understand?"

Hornblower had said "Yes".

"And French too?"

"Yes."

"Russian?"

"No."

"German?"

"No."

"Swedish? Polish? Lithuanian?"

"No."

"A pity. But most of the educated Russians speak French better than Russian, they tell me — although in that case, judging by the Russians I have met, they must be very ignorant of their own language. And we have a Swedish interpreter for you — you will have to arrange with the Admiralty how he will be rated in the ship's books — I believe that is the correct nautical expression."

It was typical of Wellesley to put in that little sneer. He was an ex-Governor-General of India, and the present Foreign Secretary, a man of blue blood and of the height of fashion. In those few words he had been able to convey all his sublime ignorance and his consequent sublime contempt for matters nautical, as well as the man of fashion's feeling of lordly superiority over the uncouth seadog, even when the seadog in question happened to be his own brother-in-law. Hornblower had been a little nettled, and was still feeling sufficiently above himself to endeavour to irritate Wellesley in return.

"You are a master of all trades, Richard," he said, evenly.

It was just as well to remind the man of fashion that the seadog was closely enough related to be entitled to use the Christian name, and, in addition to that, it might annoy the Marquis to suggest he had anything to do with a trade.

"Not of yours, Hornblower, I'm afraid. Never could learn all those ports and starboards and back-your-lees and things of that sort. One has to learn those as a schoolboy, like *hic, haec, hoc*."

It was hard to prick the Marquis's sublime complacency; Hornblower turned away from that memory back to serious business. The Russians had a fair navy, as many as fourteen ships of the line, perhaps, at Reval and Kronstadt; Sweden nearly as many. The German and Pomeranian ports swarmed with French privateers, and an important part of Hornblower's duty would be to help protect British shipping from these wolves of the sea, for the Swedish trade was vital to England. From the Baltic came the naval stores that enabled England to rule the sea — the tar and the turpentine, the pine trees for masts, cordage and timber, rosin and oil. If Sweden were to ally herself with Bonaparte against Russia, the Swedish contribution to the trade — far more than half — would be lost, and England would have to struggle along with the little that could be gleaned from Finland and Estonia, convoyed through the Baltic in the teeth of the Swedish Navy, and somehow got out through the Sound even though Bonaparte was master of Denmark. Russia would want those stores for her own navy, and she must be persuaded, one way or another, to part with enough to maintain the British Navy at sea.

It was as well that England had not come to the rescue of Finland when Russia had attacked her; if she had, there would be far less chance of Russia going to war with Bonaparte. Diplomacy backed by force might

perhaps protect Sweden from allying herself with Bonaparte, and might make the Baltic trade safe and might open the North German coastline to raids against Bonaparte's communications — under that sort of pressure, if by any miracle Bonaparte should sustain a reverse, even Prussia might be persuaded to change sides. That would be another of Hornblower's tasks, to help woo Sweden from her hereditary distrust of Russia, and to woo Prussia from her enforced alliance with France, while at the same time he must do nothing to imperil the Baltic trade. A false step could mean ruin.

Hornblower laid his notes down on the table and stared unseeing at the wall across the room. Fog and ice and shoals in the Baltic; the Russian Navy and the Swedish Navy and the French privateers; the Baltic trade and the Russian alliance and the attitude of Prussia; high politics and vital commerce; during the next few months the fate of Europe, the history of the world, would be balanced on a knife-edge, and the responsibility would be his. Hornblower felt the quickening of his pulses, the tensing of his muscles, which he had known of old at the prospect of danger. Nearly a year had gone by since the last time he had experienced those symptoms, when he had entered the great cabin of the *Victory* to hear the verdict of the court martial which might have condemned him to death. He felt he did not like this promise of peril, this prospect of enormous responsibility; he had visualized nothing like this when he drove up at noon that day so gaily to receive his orders. It would be for this that he would be leaving Barbara's love and friendship, the life of a country squire, the tranquillity and peace of his newly-won home.

Yet even while he sat there, almost despairing, almost disconsolate, the lure of the problems of the future began to make itself felt. He was being given a free hand by the Admiralty — he could not complain on that score. Reval froze in December; Kronstadt often in November. While the ice lasted he would have to base himself farther down the Baltic. Did Lubeck ever freeze? In any case it would be better to — Hornblower abruptly pushed his chair back from the table, quite unconscious of what he was doing. For him to think imaginatively while sitting still was quite impossible; he could do it for no longer than he could hold his breath; such a comparison was the more apt because if he was compelled to sit still when his brain was active he exhibited some of the characteristic symptoms of slow strangulation — his blood pressure mounted, and he thrashed about restlessly.

To-night there was no question of having to sit still; having pushed back his chair he was able to pace up and down the room, from the table to the window and back again, a walk quite as long and perhaps more free from obstacles than he had known on many a quarter-deck. He had hardly begun when the sitting-room door opened quietly and Brown peered in through the crack, his attention attracted by the sound of the chair scraping on the floor. For Brown one glance was enough. The Captain had begun to walk, which meant that he would not be going to bed for a very long time.

Brown was an intelligent man who used his brains on this job of looking after the Captain. He closed the door again quietly, and waited a full ten minutes before entering the room. In ten minutes Hornblower had got well into the swing of his walk and his thoughts were pursuing a torrential course from which they could not easily be diverted. Brown was able to creep into the room without distracting his master — indeed, it would be very hard to say if Hornblower knew he entered or not. Brown, timing his moves accurately against the Captain's crossings of the room, was able to reach the candles and snuff them — they had begun to gutter and to smell horribly — and then to reach the fireplace and put more coal on the fire, which had died down to red embers. Then he was able to make his way out of the room and settle down to a long wait; usually the Captain was a considerate master who would not dream of keeping his servant up late merely eventually to put his master to bed. It was because Brown was aware of this that he did not resent the fact that to-night Hornblower had forgotten for once to tell him that he might go to bed.

Up and down the room walked Hornblower, with a regular, measured stride, turning with his foot two inches from the wainscoting under the window on one side, and on the other with his hip just brushing the end of the table as he turned. Russians and Swedes, convoys and privateers, Stockholm and Danzig, all these gave him plenty to think about. It would be cold in the Baltic, too, and he would have to make plans for conserving his crews' health in cold weather. And the first thing he must do the moment his flotilla was assembled must be to see that in every vessel there was an officer who could be relied upon to read and transmit signals correctly. Unless communications were good all discipline and organization was wasted and he might as well not try to make any plans at all. Bomb-ketches had the disadvantage of —

At this point Hornblower was distracted by a knocking at the door.

"Come in," he rasped.

The door opened slowly, and revealed to his gaze both Brown and a scared innkeeper in a green baize apron.

"What is it?" snapped Hornblower. Now that he had halted in his quarter-deck walk he was suddenly aware that he was tired; much had happened since the Squire of Smallbridge had been welcomed by his tenants that morning, and the feeling in his legs told him that he must have been doing a fair amount of walking.

Brown and the innkeeper exchanged glances, and then the innkeeper took the plunge.

"It's like this, sir," he began, nervously. "His Lordship is in number four just under this sitting-room, sir. His Lordship's a man of hasty temper, sir, beggin' your pardon, sir. He says — beggin' your pardon again, sir — he says that two in the morning's late enough for anyone to walk up and down over his head. He says —"

"Two in the morning?" demanded Hornblower.

"It's nearer three, sir," interposed Brown, tactfully.

"Yes, sir, it struck the half-hour just when he rang for me the second time. He says if only you'd knock something over, or sing a song, it wouldn't be so bad. But just to hear you walking up and down, sir — His Lordship says it makes him think about death and Judgement Day. It's too regular, like. I told him who you was, sir, the first time he rang. And now —"

Hornblower had come to the surface by now, fully emerged from the wave of thought that had engulfed him. He saw the nervous gesticulations of the innkeeper, caught between the devil of this unknown Lordship downstairs and the deep sea of Captain Sir Horatio Hornblower upstairs, and he could not help smiling — in fact it was only with an effort that he prevented himself from laughing outright. He could visualize the whole ludicrous business, the irascible unknown peer down below, the innkeeper terrified of offending one or other of his two wealthy and influential guests, and as a crowning complication Brown stubbornly refusing to allow until the last possible moment any intrusion upon his master's deliberations. Hornblower saw the obvious relief in the two men's faces when he smiled, and that really made him laugh this time. His temper had been short of late and Brown had expected an explosion, while the wretched innkeeper never expected anything else — innkeepers never looked for anything better than tantrums from the people fate compelled them to entertain. Hornblower remembered damning Brown's eyes without provocation only that very morning: Brown was not quite as clever as he might be, for this morning Hornblower had been fretting as an unemployed naval officer doomed to country life, while this evening he was a Commodore with a flotilla awaiting him and nothing in the world could upset his temper — Brown had not allowed for that.

"My respects to His Lordship," he said. "Tell him that the march of doom will cease from this moment. Brown, I shall go to bed."

The innkeeper fled in huge relief down the stairs, while Brown seized a candlestick — the candle in it was burned down to a stump — and lit his master through into the bedroom. Hornblower peeled off his coat with the epaulettes of heavy bullion, and Brown caught it just in time to save it falling to the floor. Shoes and shirt and trousers followed, and Hornblower pulled on the magnificent nightshirt which was laid out on the bed; a nightshirt of solid China silk, brocaded, with faggoting at the cuffs and neck, for which Barbara had sent a special order all the way to the East through her friends in the East India Company. The blanket-wrapped brick in the bed had cooled a good deal, but had diffused its warmth gratefully over much of the area; Hornblower snuggled down into its mild welcome.

"Good night, sir," said Brown, and darkness rushed into the room from out of the corners as he extinguished the candle. Tumultuous dreams rushed with it. Whether asleep or awake — next morning Hornblower could not decide which — his mind was turning over all through the rest of the night the endless implications of this coming campaign in the Baltic, where his life and his reputation and his self-respect would be once more at stake.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hornblower sat forward on the seat of the coach and peered out of the window.

"Wind's veering nor'ard a little," he said. "West-by-north now, I should say."

"Yes, dear," said Barbara patiently.

"I beg your pardon, dear," said Hornblower. "I interrupted you. You were telling me about my shirts."

"No. I had finished telling you about those, dear. What I was saying was that you must not let anyone unpack the flat sea-chest until the cold weather comes. Your sheepskin coat and your big fur cloak are in it, with plenty of camphor, and they'll be safe from moth just as they are. Have the chest put straight below when you go on board."

"Yes, dear."

The coach was clattering over the cobbles of Upper Deal. Barbara stirred a little and took Hornblower's hand in hers again.

"I don't like talking about furs," she said. "I hope — oh, I hope so much — that you'll be back before the cold weather comes."

"So do I, dear," said Hornblower, with perfect truth.

It was gloomy and dark inside the coach, but the light from the window shone on Barbara's face, illuminating it like a saint's in church. The mouth beneath the keen aquiline nose was set firm; there was nothing soft about the grey-blue eyes. No one could tell from Lady Barbara's expression that her heart was breaking; but she had slipped off her glove, and her hand was twining feverishly in Hornblower's.

"Come back to me, dear. Come back to me!" said Barbara softly.

"Of course I will," said Hornblower.

For all her patrician birth, for all her keen wit, for all her iron self-control, Barbara could say foolish things just like any blowsy wife of any ordinary seaman. It made Hornblower love her more dearly than ever that she should say pathetically 'come back to me' as if he had power over the French or Russian cannon-balls that would be aimed at him. Yet in that moment a horrible thought shot up in Hornblower's mind, like a bloated corpse rising to the surface from the ooze at the bottom of the sea. Lady Barbara had seen a husband off to war once before, and he had not returned. He had died under the surgeon's knife at Gibraltar after a splinter had torn open his groin in the battle of Rosas Bay. Was Barbara thinking of that dead husband now, at this moment? Hornblower shuddered a little at the thought, and Barbara, despite the close sympathy that always existed between them, misinterpreted the movement.

"My darling," she said, "my sweet."

She brought her other hand up and touched his cheek, and her lips sought his. He kissed her, fighting down the dreadful doubt that assailed him. He had contrived for months not to be jealous of the past — he was annoyed with himself for allowing it to happen at this time of all times, and his annoyance added to the devil's brew of emotions within him. The touch of her lips won him over; his heart came out to her, and he kissed her with all the passion of his love, while the coach lurched unstably over the cobbles. Barbara's monumental hat threatened to come adrift; she had to withdraw from his arms to set it straight and to restore herself to her normal dignity. She was aware of, even if she had misinterpreted, the turmoil in Hornblower's soul, and she deliberately began a new line of conversation which would help them both to recover their composure ready for their imminent appearance in public again.

"I am pleased," she said, "whenever I think of the high compliment the government is paying you in giving you this new appointment."

"I am pleased that you are pleased, dear," said Hornblower.

"Hardly more than half-way up the Captains' list, and yet they are giving you this command. You will be an admiral *in petto*."

She could have said nothing that could calm Hornblower more effectively. He grinned to himself at Barbara's mistake. She was trying to say that he would be an admiral on a small scale, in miniature, *en petit* as it would be phrased in French. But *en petit* meant nothing like *in petto*, all the same. *In petto* was Italian for 'in the breast'; when the Pope appointed a cardinal *in petto* it meant that he intended to keep the appointment to himself for a time without making it public. It tickled Hornblower hugely to hear Barbara guilty of a solecism of that sort. And it made her human again in his eyes, of the same clay as his own. He warmed to her afresh, with tenderness and affection supplementing passion and love.

The coach came to a stop with a lurch and a squeaking of brakes, and the door opened. Hornblower jumped out and handed Barbara down before looking round him. It was blowing half a gale, west-by-north, undoubtedly. This morning it had been a strong breeze, southwesterly, so that it was both veering and strengthening. A little more northing in the wind and they would be weather-bound in the Downs until it backed again. The loss of an hour might mean the loss of days. Sky and sea were grey, and there were whitecaps a-plenty. The East India convoy was visible at anchor some way out — as far as they were concerned the wind had only to veer a trifle for them to up-anchor and start down-Channel. There was other shipping to the northward, and presumably the *Nonsuch* and the flotilla were there, but without a glass it was too far to tell ship from ship. The wind whipped round his ears and forced him to hold his hat on tightly. Across the cobbled street was the jetty with a dozen Deal luggers riding to it.

Brown stood waiting for orders while the coachman and footman were hauling the baggage out of the boot. "I'll have a hoveller take me out to the ship, Brown," said Hornblower. "Make a bargain for me."

He could have had a signal sent from the castle to the *Nonsuch* for a boat, but that would consume precious time. Barbara was standing beside him, holding on to her hat; the wind flapped her skirt round her like a flag. Her eyes were grey this morning — if sea and sky had been blue her eyes would have been blue too. And she was making herself smile at him.

"If you are going out to the ship in a lugger, dear," she said, "I could come too. The lugger could bring me back."

"You will be wet and cold," said Hornblower. "Close-hauled and with this wind it will be a rough passage."

"Do you think I mind?" said Barbara, and the thought of leaving her tore at his heartstrings again.

Brown was back again already, and with him a couple of Deal boatmen, handkerchiefs bound round their heads and ear-rings in their ears; their faces, burned by the wind and pickled by the salt, a solid brown like wood. They laid hold of Hornblower's sea-chests and began to carry them as if they were feathers towards the jetty; in nineteen years of war innumerable officers had had their chests carried down to Deal jetty. Brown followed them, and Hornblower and Lady Barbara brought up the rear, Hornblower clutching tenaciously the leather portfolio containing his 'most secret' orders.

"Morning, Captain," The captain of the lugger knuckled his forehead to Hornblower. "Morning, Your Ladyship. All the breeze anyone wants to-day. Still, you'll be able to weather the Goodwins, Captain, even with those unweatherly bombs of yours. Wind's fair for the Skaw once you're dear of the Downs."

So that was military secrecy in this England; this Deal hoveller knew just what force he had and whither he was bound — and to-morrow, as likely as not, he would have a rendezvous in mid-Channel with a French chasse-marée, exchanging tobacco for brandy and news for news. In three days Bonaparte in Paris would know that Hornblower had sailed for the Baltic with a ship of the line and a flotilla.

"Easy with them cases!" roared the lugger captain suddenly. "Them bottles ain't made o' iron!"

They were lowering down into the lugger the rest of his baggage from the jetty; the additional cabin stores which Barbara had ordered for him and whose quality she had checked so carefully, a case of wine, a case of provisions, and the parcel of books which was her special present to him.

"Won't you take a seat in the cabin, Your Ladyship?" asked the lugger captain with queer untutored politeness.

"'Twill be a wet run out to *Nonsuch*."

Barbara caught Hornblower's eye and refused politely; Hornblower knew those stuffy, smelly cabins of old.

"A tarpauling for Your Ladyship, then."

The tarpaulin was fastened round Barbara's shoulders, and hung round her to the deck like a candle extinguisher. The wind was still pulling at her hat, and she put up her hand and with a single gesture snatched it from her head and drew it inside the tarpaulin. The brisk wind blew her hair instantly into streamers, and she laughed, and with a shake of her head set her whole mane flying in the wind. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkled, just as Hornblower could remember her in the old days when they rounded the Horn in *Lydia*. Hornblower wanted to kiss her.

"Cast off, there! Hands to the halliard!" roared the captain, coming aft and casually holding the tiller against his hip. The hands strained at the tackle, and the mainsail rose foot by foot; the lugger made a sternboard away from the jetty.

"Lively with that sheet now, Ge-arge!"

The captain hauled the tiller over, and the lugger checked herself, spun on her keel, and dashed forward, as handy as a horse in the hands of a skilful rider. As she came out from the lee of the jetty the wind took hold of her and laid her over, but the captain put down the tiller and Ge-arge hauled aft on the sheet until the sail was like a board, and the lugger, close-hauled — dramatically so to anyone unfamiliar with her type — plunged forward into the teeth of the gale, with the spray flying aft from her port bow in sheets. Even in the sheltered Downs there was enough of a sea running to make the lugger lively enough as she met it, pitch following roll as each wave passed under her from port bow to starboard quarter.

Hornblower suddenly realized that this was the moment when he should be seasick. He could not remember the start of any previous voyage when he had not been sick, and the motion of this lively little lugger should find him out if anything would. It was interesting that nothing of the sort was happening; Hornblower noticed with deep amazement that the horizon forward showed up above the boat's bow, and then disappeared as the lugger stood up on her stern, without his feeling any qualm at all. It was not so surprising that he had retained his sea-legs; after twenty years at sea it was not easy to lose them, and he stood swaying easily with the boat's quick motion; he only lost his sea-legs when he was really dizzy with seasickness, and that dread plague showed no sign of appearing. At the start of previous voyages he had always been worn out with the fatigues of fitting out and commissioning, of course short of sleep and worn down with anxieties and worries and ready to be sick even without going to sea. As Commodore he had had none of these worries; the Admiralty and the Foreign Office and the Treasury had heaped orders and advice upon him, but orders and responsibility were not nearly as harassing as the petty worries of finding a crew and dealing with dockyard authorities. He was perfectly at ease.

Barbara was having to hold on tightly, and now that she looked up at him she was obviously not quite as comfortable inside as she might be; she was filled with doubts if with nothing else. Hornblower felt both amusement and pride; it was pleasant to be newly at sea and yet not sick, and it was more pleasant still to be doing something better than Barbara, who was so good at everything. He was on the point of teasing her, of vaunting his own immunity, when common sense and his tenderness for his wife saved him from such an incredible blunder. She would hate him if he did anything of the sort — he could remember with enormous clarity how much he hated the whole world when he was being seasick. He did his best for her.

"You're fortunate not to be sick, my dear," he said. "This motion is lively, but then you always had a good stomach."

She looked at him, with the wind whipping her tousled hair; she looked a trifle dubious, but Hornblower's words had heartened her. He made a very considerable sacrifice for her, one she would never know about.

"I envy you, dear," he said. "I'm feeling the gravest doubts about myself, as I always do at the beginning of a voyage. But you are your usual happy self."

Surely no man could give a better proof of his love for his wife than that he should not only conceal his feeling of superiority, but that he should even for her sake pretend to be seasick when he was not. Barbara was all concern at once.

"I am sorry, dearest," she said, her hand on his shoulder. "I hope so much you do not have to give way. It would be most inconvenient for you at this moment of taking up your command."

The stratagem was working; with something important to think about other than the condition of her stomach Barbara was forgetting her own qualms.

"I hope I shall last out," said Hornblower; he tried to grin a brave reluctant grin, and although he was no actor Barbara's wits were sufficiently dulled not to see through him. Hornblower's conscience pricked him when he saw that this stolid mock-heroism of his was making her fonder of him than ever. Her eyes were soft for him. "Stand by to go about!" bellowed the captain of the lugger, and Hornblower looked up in surprise to see that they were close up under the stern of the *Nonsuch*. She had some canvas showing forward and her mizzen-topsail backed so as to set her across the wind a trifle and give the lugger a lee on her starboard side.

Hornblower flung back his boat cloak and stood clear so that he could be seen from the quarter-deck of the *Nonsuch*; for Bush's sake, if for no other reason, he did not want to come on board without due warning. Then he turned to Barbara.

"It's time to say good-bye, dear," he said.

Her face was without expression, like that of a marine under inspection.

"Good-bye, dearest!" she said. Her lips were cold, and she did not incline towards him to offer them, but stood stiffly upright. It was like kissing a marble statue. Then she melted suddenly. "I'll cherish Richard, darling. Our child."

Barbara could have said nothing to endear her more to Hornblower. He crushed her hands in his.

The lugger came up into the wind, her canvas volleying, and then she shot into the two-decker's lee.

Hornblower glanced up; there was a bos'un's chair dangling ready to lower to the lugger.

"Belay that chair!" he yelled, and then to the captain, "Lay us alongside."

Hornblower had no intention of being swung up to the deck in a bos'un's chair; it was too undignified a way of taking up his new command to be swung aboard legs dangling. The lugger surged beside the big ship; the painted ports were level with his shoulder, and beneath him boiled the green water confined between the two vessels. This was a nervous moment. If he were to miss his footing and fall into the sea so that he would have to be hauled in wet and dripping it would be far more undignified than any entrance in a bos'un's chair. He let fall his cloak, pulled his hat firmly on to his head, and hitched his sword round out of his way. Then he leaped across the yard-wide gap, scrambling upwards the moment fingers and toes made contact. It was only the first three feet which were difficult; after that the tumble-home of the *Nonsuch's* side made it easy. He was even able to pause to collect himself before making the final ascent to the entry-port and to step down to the deck with all the dignity to be expected of a Commodore.

Professionally speaking, this was the highest moment of his career up to now. As a captain he had grown accustomed to a captain's honours, the bos'un's mates twittering on their pipes, the four side-boys and the marine sentries. But now he was a Commodore taking up his command; there were six side-boys with their white gloves, there was the whole marine guard and the marine band, a long double lane of bos'un's mates with their pipes, and at the end of the lane a crowd of officers in full dress. As he set his foot on the deck the drums beat a ruffle in competition with the bos'un's calls, and then the fifes of the band struck up 'Heart of oak are our ships, Jolly tars are our men —' With his hand at the salute Hornblower strode up the lane of bos'un's mates and side-boys; all this was peculiarly exhilarating despite his efforts to tell himself that these outward signs of the dignity of his position were mere childish baubles. He had to check himself, or his face would have borne a stupid ecstatic grin; it was with difficulty that he forced himself to assume the stern composure a Commodore should display. There was Bush at the end of the lane, saluting stiffly, and standing effortlessly despite his wooden leg, and it was so pleasant to see Bush that he had to fight down his grin all over again.

"Good morning, Captain Bush," he said, as gruffly as he knew how, and offering his hand with all he could manage of formal cordiality.

"Good morning, sir."

Bush brought down his hand from the salute and grasped Hornblower's, trying hard to act his part, as if there was no friendship in this handshake but mere professional esteem. Hornblower noted that his hand was as hard as ever — promotion to captain's rank had not softened it. And try as he would Bush could not keep his face expressionless. The blue eyes were alight with pleasure, and the craggy features kept softening into a smile as they escaped from his control. It made it harder than ever for Hornblower to remain dignified.

Out of the tail of his eye Hornblower saw a seaman hauling briskly at the main signal halyards. A black ball was soaring up the mast, and as it reached the block a twitch of the seaman's wrist broke it out. It was the Commodore's broad pendant, hoisted to distinguish the ship he was in, and as the pendant broke out a puff of smoke forward and a loud bang marked the first gun of the salute which welcomed it. This was the highest, the greatest moment of all — thousands upon thousands of naval officers could serve all their lives and never have a distinguishing pendant hoisted for them, never hear a single gun fired in their honour. Hornblower could not help smiling now. His last reserve was broken down; he met Bush's eye and he laughed outright, and Bush laughed with him. They were like a pair of schoolboys exulting over a successful bit of mischief. It was extraordinarily pleasant to be aware that Bush was not only pleased at serving with him again, but was also pleased just because Hornblower was pleased.

Bush glanced over the port-side rail, and Hornblower looked across with him. There was the rest of the squadron, the two ugly bomb-ketches, the two big ship-rigged sloops, and the graceful little cutter. There were puffs of smoke showing at the sides of each of them, blown to nothingness almost instantly by the wind, and

then the boom of the shots as each ship saluted the pendant, firing gun for gun, taking the time from the Commodore. Bush's eyes narrowed as he looked them over, observing whether everything was being done decently and in order, but his face lapsed into a grin again as soon as he was sure. The last shot of the salute was fired; eleven rounds from each ship. It was interesting to work out that the mere ceremony of hoisting his pendant had cost his country fifty pounds or so, at a time when she was fighting for her life against a tyrant who dominated all Europe. The twitter of the pipes brought the ceremony to an end; the ship's company took up their duties again, and the marines sloped arms and marched off, their boots sounding loud on the deck.

"A happy moment, Bush," said Hornblower.

"A happy moment indeed, sir."

There were presentations to be made; Bush brought forward the ship's officers one by one. At this first sight one face was like another, but Hornblower knew that in a short period of crowded living each individual would become distinct, his peculiarities known to the limit of boredom.

"We shall come to know each other better, I hope, gentlemen," said Hornblower, phrasing his thought politely. A whip at the main yard-arm was bringing up his baggage from the lugger, with Brown standing by to supervise — he must have come on board by an unobtrusive route, through a gun-port presumably. So the lugger and Barbara must still be alongside. Hornblower walked to the rail and peered over. True enough. And Barbara was standing just as he had left her, still, like a statue. But that must have been the last parcel swung up by the ship; Hornblower had hardly reached the side when the lugger cast off from the *Nonsuch's* chains, hoisted her big mainsail and wheeled away as effortlessly as a gull.

"Captain Bush," said Hornblower, "we shall get under way immediately, if you please. Make a signal to the flotilla to that effect."

CHAPTER FIVE

"I'll put the pistols in this locker, sir," said Brown, completing the unpacking.

"Pistols?" said Hornblower.

Brown brought the case over to him; he had only mentioned them because he knew that Hornblower was not aware of the pistols' existence. It was a beautiful mahogany case, velvet-lined; the first thing to catch the eye inside was a white card. It bore some words in Barbara's handwriting — 'To my dear husband. May he never need to use them, but if he must then may they serve him well, and at least may they remind him of his loving wife, who will pray every day for his safety, for his happiness, and for his success.' Hornblower read the words twice before he put the card down to examine the pistols. They were beautiful weapons, of bright steel inlaid with silver, double-barrelled, the butts of ebony, giving them perfect balance in the hand. There were two copper tubes in the case to open next; they merely contained pistol bullets, each one cast flawlessly, a perfect sphere. The fact that the makers had gone to the trouble of casting special bullets and including them in the case recalled Hornblower's attention to the pistols. Inside the barrels were bright spiral lanes; they were rifled pistols, then. The next copper box in the case contained a number of discs of thin leather impregnated with oil; these would be for wrapping up the bullet before inserting it into the barrel, so as to ensure a perfect fit. The brass rod and the little brass mallet would be for hammering the bullets home. The little brass cup must be a measure of the powder charge. It was small, but that was the way to ensure accuracy — a small powder charge, a heavy ball, and a true barrel. With these pistols he could rely on himself to hit a small bull's-eye at fifty yards, as long as he held true.

But there was one more copper box to open. It was full of little square bits of copper sheet, very thin indeed. He was puzzled at the sight of them; each bit of copper had a bulge in the centre, where the metal was especially thin, making the black contents just visible through it. It dawned slowly upon Hornblower that these must be the percussion caps he had heard vaguely about recently. To prove it he laid one on his desk and tapped it sharply with the brass mallet. There was a sharp crack, a puff of smoke from under the mallet, and when he lifted up the latter he could see that the cap was rent open, and the desk was marked with the stain of the explosion.

He looked at the pistols again. He must have been blind, not to have noticed the absence of flint and priming pan. The hammer rested on what appeared at first sight to be a simple block of metal, but this pivoted at a touch, revealing a shallow cavity below it clearly intended to receive a cap. At the base of the cavity was a small hole which must communicate with the breech end of the barrel. Put a charge in the pistol, put a cap in the cavity, and fix it firm with the metal block. Now snap the hammer down upon the block. The cap explodes; the flame passes through the hole into the charge and the pistol is fired. No haphazard arrangement of flint and priming: rain or spray could never put these pistols out of action. Hornblower guessed there would not be a misfire once in a hundred shots. It was a wonderful present — it was very thoughtful indeed of Barbara to buy them for him, Heaven only knew what they must have cost; some skilled workman must have laboured for months over the rifling of those four barrels, and the copper caps — five hundred of them, every one hand-made — must have cost a pretty penny of themselves. But with those two pistols loaded he would have four men's lives in his hands; on a fine day with two flint-lock double-barrelled pistols he would expect one misfire, if not two, and if it were raining or there was spray flying it would be remarkable if he could fire a single shot. To Hornblower's mind the rifling was not as important as the percussion caps; in the usual ship-board scuffle when pistols were likely to be used accuracy was not important, for one generally pressed the muzzle against one's adversary's stomach before pulling the trigger.

Hornblower laid the pistols in their velvet nests and mused on. Dear Barbara. She was always thinking for him, trying to anticipate his wants, but something more than that as well. These pistols were an example of the way she tried to satisfy wants of his that he was not aware of. She had lifted her eyebrows when he had said that Gibbon would be all the reading material he would need on this commission, and she had bought and packed a score of other books for him; one of them, he could see from here, was this new poem in the Spenser stanza, *Childe Harold* (whatever that might mean) by the mad peer Lord Byron. Everyone had been talking about it just before his departure; he must admit he was glad of the chance to read it, although he would never have dreamed of buying it for himself. Hornblower looked back over a life of Spartan self-denial with a twinge of queer regret that it should have ended, and then he got angrily out of his chair. In another moment he would be wishing he were not married to Barbara, and that was perfect nonsense.

He could tell, down here in his cabin, that the *Nonsuch* was still close-hauled to the strong northwesterly breeze; she was lying over to it so steadily that there was little roll in her motion, although she was pitching deeply as she met the short North Sea rollers. The tell-tale compass over his head showed that she was making good her course for the Skaw; and the whole cabin was resonant with the harping of the taut rigging transmitted through the timbers of the ship, while she creaked positively thunderously as she pitched, loud enough to make conversation difficult. There was one frame that made a noise like a pistol shot at one particular moment of each pitch, and he had already grown so used to the sound as to be able to anticipate it exactly, judging it by the ship's motion.

He had been puzzled for a space by a peculiar irregular thud over his head; in fact, he had been so piqued at his inability to account for it that he had put on his hat and gone up on the quarter-deck to find out. There was nothing in sight on the deck which seemed likely to have made that rhythmical noise, no pump at work, nobody beating out oakum — even if it were conceivable that such a thing could be done on the quarter-deck of a ship of the line; there were only Bush and the officers of the watch, who immediately froze into inconspicuous immobility when the great man appeared on the companion. Heaven only knew what made that thumping; Hornblower began to wonder if his ears had deceived him and if the noise really came from a deck below. He had to make a pretence of having come on deck for a purpose — interesting to find that even a Commodore, First Class, still had to sink to such subterfuges — and he began to stride up and down the weather side of the quarter-deck, hands behind him, head bowed forward, in the old comfortable attitude. Enthusiasts had talked or written of pleasures innumerable, of gardens or women, wine or fishing; it was strange that no one had ever told of the pleasure of walking a quarter-deck.

But what was it that had made that slow thumping noise? He was forgetting why he had come upon deck. He darted covert glances from under his brows as he walked up and down and still saw nothing to account for it. The noise had not been audible since he came on deck, but still curiosity consumed him. He stood by the taffrail and looked back at the flotilla. The trim ship-rigged sloops were beating up against the strong breeze without difficulty, but the bomb-ketches were not so comfortable. The absence of a foremast, the huge

triangular foresail, made it hard to keep them from yawing, even in a wind. Every now and then they would put their stumpy bowsprits down and take the green sea in over their bows.

He was not interested in bomb-ketches. He wanted to know what had been thumping the deck over his head when he was in his cabin, and then common sense came to help him fight down his ridiculous self-consciousness. Why should not a Commodore ask a simple question about a simple subject? Why in the world had he even hesitated for a moment? He swung round with determination.

"Captain Bush?" he called.

"Sir!" Bush came hastening aft to him, his wooden leg thumping the deck.

That was the noise! With every second step Bush took, his wooden leg with its leather button came down with a thump on the planking. Hornblower certainly could not ask the question he had just been forming in his mind.

"I hope I shall have the pleasure of your company at dinner this evening," said Hornblower, thinking rapidly.

"Thank you, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, indeed," said Bush. He beamed with pleasure at the invitation so that Hornblower felt positively hypocritical as he made his way down into the cabin to supervise the last of his unpacking. Yet it was as well that he had been led by his own peculiar weaknesses to give that invitation instead of spending the evening, as he would otherwise have done, dreaming about Barbara, calling up in his mind the lovely drive through springtime England from Smallbridge to Deal, and making himself as miserable at sea as he had managed to make himself on land.

Bush would be able to tell him about the officers and men of the *Nonsuch*, who could be trusted and who must be watched, what was the material condition of the ship, if the stores were good or bad, and all the hundred other things he needed to know. And to-morrow, as soon as the weather moderated, he would signal for 'All Captains', and so make the acquaintance of his other subordinates, and size them up, and perhaps begin to convey to them his own particular viewpoints and theories, so that when the time came for action there would be need for few signals and there would be common action directed speedily at a common objective.

Meanwhile, there was one more job to be done immediately; the present would be the best time, he supposed with a sigh, but he was conscious of a faint distaste for it even as he applied himself to it.

"Pass the word for Mr Braun — for my clerk," he said to Brown, who was hanging up the last of the uniform coats behind the curtain against the bulkhead.

"Aye aye, sir," said Brown.

It was odd that his clerk and his coxswain should have names pronounced in identical fashion; it was that coincidence which had led him to add the unnecessary last three words to his order.

Mr Braun was tall and spare, fair, youngish, and prematurely bald, and Hornblower did not like him, although typically he was more cordial to him than he would have been if he had liked him. He offered him the cabin chair while he himself sat back on the locker, and when he saw Mr Braun's eyes resting curiously on the case of pistols — Barbara's gift — he condescended to discuss it with him as a conversational preliminary, pointing out the advantages of the percussion caps and the rifled barrels.

"Very good weapons indeed, sir," said Mr Braun, replacing them in their velvet case.

He looked across the cabin at Hornblower, the dying light which came through the stern windows shining on his face and reflected in curious fashion from his pale-green eyes.

"You speak good English," said Hornblower.

"Thank you, sir. My business before the war was largely with England. But I speak Russian and Swedish and Finnish and Polish and German and French just as well. Lithuanian a little. Estonian a little because it is so like Finnish."

"But Swedish is your native language, though?"

Mr Braun shrugged his thin shoulders.

"My father spoke Swedish. My mother spoke German, sir. I spoke Finnish with my nurse, and French with one tutor and English with another. In my office we spoke Russian when we did not speak Polish."

"But I thought you were a Swede?"

Mr Braun shrugged his shoulders again.

"A Swedish subject, sir, but I was born a Finn. I thought of myself as a Finn until three years ago."

So Mr Braun was one more of these stateless individuals with whom all Europe seemed to be peopled nowadays — men and women without a country, Frenchmen, Germans, Austrians, Poles who had been uprooted by the chances of war and who dragged out a dreary existence in the hope that some day another chance of war would re-establish them.

"When Russia took advantage of her pact with Bonaparte," explained Mr Braun, "to fall upon Finland, I was one of those who fought. What use was it? What could Finland do against all the might of Russia? I was one of the fortunate ones who escaped. My brothers are in Russian gaols at this very minute if they are alive, but I hope they are dead. Sweden was in revolution — there was no refuge for me there, even though it had been for Sweden that I was fighting. Germany, Denmark, Norway were in Bonaparte's hands, and Bonaparte would gladly have handed me back to oblige his new Russian ally. But I was in an English ship, one of those to which I sold timber, and so to England I came. One day I was the richest man in Finland where there are few rich men, and the next I was the poorest man in England where there are many poor."

The pale-green eyes reflected back the light again from the cabin window, and Hornblower realized anew that his clerk was a man of disquieting personality. It was not merely the fact that he was a refugee, and Hornblower, like everybody else, was surfeited with refugees and their tales of woe although his conscience pricked him about them — the first ones had begun to arrive twenty years ago from France, and ever since then there had been an increasing tide from Poland and Italy and Germany. Braun's being a refugee was likely to prejudice Hornblower against him from the start, and actually had done so, as Hornblower admitted to himself with his usual fussy sense of justice. But that was the reason that Hornblower did not like him. There was less reason even than that — there was no reason at all.

It was irksome to Hornblower to think that for the rest of this commission he would have to work in close contact with this man. Yet the Admiralty orders in his desk enjoined upon him to pay the closest attention to the advice and information which he would receive from Braun, 'a gentleman whose acquaintance with the Baltic countries is both extensive and intimate'. Even this evening it was a great relief when Bush's knock at the cabin door, heralding his arrival for dinner, freed Hornblower from the man's presence. Braun slid unobtrusively out of the cabin with a bow to Bush; every line of his body indicated the pose — whether forced or natural Hornblower could not guess — of the man who has seen better days resignedly doing menial duties.

"How do you find your Swedish clerk, sir?" asked Bush.

"He's a Finn, not a Swede."

"A Finn? You don't say, sir! It'd be better not to let the men know that."

Bush's own honest face indicated a disquietude against which he struggled in vain.

"Of course," said Hornblower.

He tried to keep his face expressionless, to conceal that he had completely left out of account the superstition that prevailed about Finns at sea. In a sailor's mind every Finn was a warlock who could conjure up storms by lifting his finger, but Hornblower had quite failed to think of the shabby-genteel Mr Braun as that kind of Finn, despite those unwholesome pale-green eyes.

CHAPTER SIX

"Eight bells, sir."

Hornblower came back to consciousness not very willingly; he suspected he was being dragged away from delightful dreams, although he could not remember what they were.

"Still dark, sir," went on Brown remorselessly, "but a clear night. Wind steady at west-by-north, a strong breeze. The sloops an' the flotilla in sight to looard, an' we're hove to, sir, under mizzen-t's'l, maint'mast stays'l an' jib. An' here's your shirt, sir."

Hornblower swung his legs out of his cot and sleepily pulled off his nightshirt. He was minded at first just to put on those few clothes which would keep him warm on deck, but he had his dignity as Commodore to remember, and he wanted to establish a reputation as a man who was never careless about any detail whatever. He had left orders to be called now, a quarter of an hour before it was really necessary, merely to

be able to do so. So he put on uniform coat and trousers and boots, parted his hair carefully in the flickering light of the lantern Brown held, and put aside the thought of shaving. If he came on deck at four in the morning newly shaved everyone would guess that he had been at pains regarding his appearance. He clapped on his cocked hat, and struggled into the pea-jacket which Brown held for him. Outside his cabin door the sentry snapped to attention as the great man appeared. On the half-deck a group of high-spirited youngsters coming off watch subsided into awed and apprehensive silence at the sight of the Commodore, which was a fit and proper thing to happen.

On the quarter-deck it was as raw and unfriendly as one might expect before dawn in the Kattegat on a spring morning. The bustle of calling the watch had just subsided; the figures which loomed up in the darkness and hurriedly moved over to the port side, leaving the starboard side clear for him, were unrecognizable. But the thump of Bush's wooden leg was unmistakable.

"Captain Bush!"

"Sir?"

"What time is sunrise this morning?"

"Er — about five-thirty, sir."

"I don't want to know about what time it will be. I asked 'What time is sunrise?'"

A second's silence while the crestfallen Bush absorbed this rebuke, and then another voice answered:

"Five-thirty-four, sir."

That was that fresh-faced lad, Carlin, the second lieutenant of the ship. Hornblower would have given something to be sure whether Carlin really knew when sunrise was, or whether he was merely guessing, taking a chance that his Commodore would not check his figures. As for Bush, it was bad luck on him that he should be rebuked publicly, but he should have known what time was sunrise, seeing that last night Hornblower had been making plans with him based on that very point. And it would do the discipline of the rest of the force no harm if it were known that the Commodore spared no one, not even the captain of a ship of the line, his best friend.

Hornblower took a turn or two up and down the deck. Seven days out from the Downs, and no news. With the wind steady from the westward, there could be no news — nothing could have got out from the Baltic, or even from Gothenburg. He had not seen a sail yesterday after rounding the Skaw and coming up the Kattegat. His last news from Sweden was fifteen days old, then, and in fifteen days anything could happen. Sweden might have easily changed from unfriendly neutrality to open hostility. Before him lay the passage of the Sound, three miles wide at its narrowest point; on the starboard side would be Denmark, undoubtedly hostile under Bonaparte's domination whether she wanted to be or not. On the port side would be Sweden, and the main channel up the Sound lay under the guns of Helsingborg. If Sweden were England's enemy the guns of Denmark and Sweden — of Elsinore and of Helsingborg — might easily cripple the squadron as they ran the gauntlet. And retreat would always be perilous and difficult, if not entirely cut off. It might be as well to delay, to send in a boat to discover how Sweden stood at the present moment.

But on the other hand, to send in a boat would warn Sweden of his presence. If he dashed in now, the moment there was light enough to see the channel, he might go scathless, taking the defences by surprise even if Sweden were hostile. His vessels might be knocked about, but with the wind west-by-north, in an ideal quarter, even a crippled ship could struggle along until the Sound widened and they would be out of range. If Sweden's neutrality were still wobbling it would do no harm to let her see a British squadron handled with boldness and decision, nor for her to know that a British force were loose in the Baltic able to threaten her shores and ravage her shipping. Should Sweden turn hostile he could maintain himself one way or the other in the Baltic through the summer — and in a summer anything might happen — and with good fortune might fight his way out again in the autumn. There certainly were arguments in favour of temporizing and delay and communicating with the shore, but there were more cogent arguments still in favour of prompt action. The ship's bell struck one sharp note; hardly more than an hour before dawn, and already over there to leeward there was a hint of grey in the sky. Hornblower opened his mouth to speak, and then checked himself. He had been about to issue a sharp order, consonant with the tenseness of the moment and with the accelerated beating of his pulse; but that was not the way he wanted to behave. While he had time to think and prepare himself he could still pose as a man of iron nerves.

"Captain Bush!" he managed to make himself drawl the words, and to give his orders with an air of complete indifference. "Signal all vessels to clear for action."

"Aye aye, sir."

Two red lights at the main yard-arm and a single gun; that was the night signal for danger from the enemy which would send all hands to quarters. It took several seconds to bring a light for the lanterns; by the time the signal was acknowledged the *Nonsuch* was well on the way to being cleared for action — the watch below turned up, the decks sanded and the fire-pumps manned, guns run out and bulkheads knocked down. It was still a pretty raw crew — Bush had been through purgatory trying to get his ship manned — but the job could have been worse done. Now the grey dawn had crept up over the eastern sky, and the rest of the squadron was just visible as vessels and not as solid nuclei in the gloom, but it was still not quite light enough to risk the passage. Hornblower turned to Bush and Hurst, the first lieutenant.

"If you please," he drawled, dragging out every word with all the nonchalance he could muster, "I will have the signal bent ready for hoisting, 'Proceed to leeward in the order of battle'."

"Aye aye, sir."

Everything was done now. This last two minutes of waiting in inactivity, with nothing left to do, were especially trying. Hornblower was about to walk up and down, when he remembered that he must stand still to maintain his pose of indifference. The batteries on shore might have their furnaces alight, to heat shot red-hot; there was a possibility that in a few minutes the whole force of which he was so proud might be no more than a chain of blazing wrecks. Now it was time.

"Hoist," said Hornblower. "Captain Bush, I'll trouble you to square away and follow the squadron."

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush.

Bush's voice hinted at suppressed excitement; and it came to Hornblower, with a blinding flash of revelation, that his pose was ineffective with Bush. The latter had learned, during years of experience, that when Hornblower stood still instead of walking about, and when he drawled out his words as he was doing at present, then in Hornblower's opinion there was danger ahead. It was an intensely interesting discovery, but there was no time to think about it, not with the squadron going up the Sound.

Lotus was leading. Vickery, her commander, was the man Hornblower had picked out as the captain with the steadiest nerves who could be trusted to lead without flinching. Hornblower would have liked to have led himself, but in this operation the rear would be the post of danger — the leading ships might well get through before the gunners on shore could get to their guns and find the range — and the *Nonsuch* as the most solidly built and best able to endure fire must come last so as to be able to succour and tow out of action any disabled ship. Hornblower watched *Lotus* set topsails and courses and square away. The cutter *Clam* followed — she was the feeblest of all; a single shot might sink her, and she must be given the best chance of getting through. Then the two ugly bomb-ketches, and then the other sloop, *Raven*, just ahead of *Nonsuch*; Hornblower was not sorry to have the opportunity to watch how her commander, Cole, would behave in action. *Nonsuch* followed, driving hard with the strong breeze on her starboard quarter. Hornblower watched Bush shaking the wind out of the mizzen-topsail so as to keep exact station astern of the *Raven*. The big two-decker seemed a lumbering clumsy thing compared with the grace and elegance of the sloops.

That was Sweden in sight now, Cape Kullen, now on the port bow.

"A cast of the log, if you please, Mr Hurst."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower thought Hurst looked a little sidelong at him, unable to conceive why any sane man should want a cast of the log at a moment when the ship was about to risk everything; but Hornblower wanted to know how long the strain was likely to endure, and what was the use of being a Commodore if one could not then indulge one's whims? A midshipman and a couple of quartermasters came running aft with log and glass; the speed of the ship was sufficient to make the quartermaster's arms vibrate as he held the reel above his head.

"Nigh on nine knots, sir," reported the midshipman to Hurst.

"Nigh on nine knots, sir," reported Hurst to Hornblower.

"Very good."

It would be a full eight hours, then, before they were beyond Saltholm and comparatively out of danger. There was the Danish coast on the starboard bow now, just visible in the half-light; the channel was narrowing fast.

Hornblower could imagine sleepy sentries and lookouts peering from their posts at the hardly visible sails, and calling to their sergeants, and the sergeants coming sleepily to see for themselves and then hastening away to tell their lieutenants and then the drums beating to arms and the gunners running to their places. On the Danish side they would make ready to fire, for there were the minions of Bonaparte, and any sail was likely to be an enemy. But on the Swedish side? What had Bernadotte decided during the last few days? Was Bonaparte's Marshal still neutral, or had he at last made up his mind to throw the weight of Sweden on the side of his native land?

There were the low cliffs of Elsinore, and there were the steeples of Helsingborg in plain view to port, and the fortress above the town. *Lotus*, nearly a mile head, must be into the narrows. Hornblower levelled his glass at her; her yards were bracing round for the turn, and still no shot had been fired. *Clam* was turning next — please God the clumsy bomb-ketches did not misbehave. Ah! There it was. The heavy dull boom of a gun, and then the sullen roar of a salvo. Hornblower turned his glass to the Swedish coast. He could see no smoke there. Then to the Danish side. Smoke was evident, although the brisk wind was dispersing it fast. Under Bush's orders the helmsman was putting the wheel over a spoke or two, in readiness for the turn; Elsinore and Helsingborg were suddenly surprisingly near. Three miles wide was the channel, and Vickery in *Lotus* was carrying out his orders correctly, and keeping well to the port side of the fairway, two miles from Denmark and only a mile from Sweden, with every vessel following exactly in his track. If the Swedish guns came into action and were well handled, they could deal the squadron some shrewd blows. Three jets of water from the surface of the sea on the starboard beam; although the eye could not see the ball that made them it was easy to imagine one could, as it skipped over the surface, but the last jet was a full cable's length from the side. The Swedish guns were still not firing; Hornblower wished he could tell whether it was because the Swedish gunners were taken by surprise or because they were under orders not to fire.

Elsinore was abaft the beam now, and the channel was opening wide. Hornblower shut his telescope with a snap, and a decided feeling of anticlimax. He could hardly imagine now what he had been worrying about. Calling up in his mind's eye the chart that he had so anxiously studied, he calculated that it would be an hour before they were in range of the shore again, where the fairway lay close in to the Swedish island of Hven — however that was pronounced in these barbarous northern tongues. This latter thought made him glance round. Braun was at his station on the quarter-deck, in attendance on the Commodore, as he should be. With his hands on the rail he was gazing over at the Swedish shore; Hornblower could not see his face, but every line of the man's figure disclosed rapt attention. The poor devil of an exile was looking longingly on the shores on which he could never hope to set foot. The world was full of exiles, but Hornblower felt sorry for this one. Here came the sun, peeping between two Swedish hills as they opened up the valley. It was full daylight, with every promise of a fine day. The minute warmth of the sun, as the shadow of the mizzen-rigging ran across the quarter-deck, suddenly awoke in Hornblower the knowledge that he was stiff and chilled with having made himself stand still so long. He took a turn or two along the quarter-deck, restoring his circulation, and the fresh knowledge was borne in upon him that he wanted his breakfast. Glamorous visions of steaming cups of coffee danced momentarily in his mind's eye, and it was with a sense of acute disappointment that he remembered that, with the ship cleared for action and all fires out, there was no chance of hot food at all. So acute was the disappointment that he realized guiltily that his six months ashore had made him soft and self-indulgent; it was with positive distaste that he contemplated the prospect of breakfasting off biscuit and cold meat, and washing them down with ship's water which already had obviously been kept a long time in cask.

The thought reminded him of the men standing patiently at their guns. He wished Bush would remember about them, too. Hornblower could not possibly interfere in the details of the internal management of the ship — he would do more harm than good if he were to try — but he yearned to give the orders which were running through his mind. He tried for a moment to convey his wishes to Bush telepathically, but Bush seemed unreceptive, just as Hornblower expected. He walked over to the lee side as though to get a better view of the Swedish coast, stopping within two yards of Bush.

"Sweden still seems to be neutral," he said, casually.

"Yes, sir."

"We shall know better when we reach Hven — God knows how one's supposed to pronounce that. We must pass close under the guns there; the fairway's that side."

"Yes, sir, I remember."

"But there's nearly an hour before we come to it. I shall have a bite of breakfast brought to me here. Will you join me, Captain?"

"Thank you, sir. I shall be delighted."

An invitation of that sort from a Commodore was as good as a command to a captain. But Bush was far too good an officer to dream of eating food when his men could not do so. Hornblower could see in his face his struggle against his nervous but impractical desire to have his crew at their guns every moment of this tense time; Bush, after all, was new to command and found his responsibility heavy. But good sense won him over in the end.

"Mr Hurst. Dismiss the watch below. Half an hour for them to get their breakfast."

That was exactly the order Hornblower had wanted him to give — but the pleasure at having brought it about did not in Hornblower's mind counterbalance the annoyance at having had to make a bit of casual conversation, and now there would have to be polite small talk over the breakfast. The tense silence of the ship at quarters changed to the bustle of dismissing the watch; Bush bawled orders for chairs and a table to be brought up to the quarter-deck, and fussed over having them set up just where the Commodore would like them. A glance from Hornblower to Brown sufficed to spread the table with the delicacies suitable for the occasion which Brown could select from the stores Barbara had sent on board — the best hard bread money could buy; butter in a stone crock, not nearly rancid yet; strawberry jam; a heavily smoked ham; a smoked mutton ham from an Exmoor farm; Cheddar and Stilton cheese; potted char. Brown had had a brilliant idea, and squeezed some of the dwindling store of lemons for lemonade in order to disguise the flavour of the ship's water; he knew that Hornblower was quite incapable of drinking beer, even small beer, at breakfast time — and beer was the only alternative.

Bush ran an appreciative eye over the loaded table, and at Hornblower's invitation sat down with appetite. Bush had been poor, too, most of his life, with a host of indigent female relations dependent on his pay. He was not yet surfeited with luxury. But Hornblower's characteristic cross-grainedness had got the better of him; he had wanted coffee, and he could not have coffee, and so he wanted nothing at all. Even lemonade was a mere mockery; he ate resentfully. It seemed to him that Bush, spreading potted char liberally on a biscuit and eating with all the appetite one might expect of him after a night on deck, was doing so deliberately to annoy him. Bush cocked an eye at him across the table and thought better of his first idea of making an appreciative comment on the food. If his queer Commodore chose to be in a bad mood it was best to leave him to it — Bush was better than a wife, thought Hornblower, his acute perceptions noting the gesture.

Hornblower pulled out his watch as a reminder to Bush of the next thing to be done.

"Call the watch below. Dismiss the watch on deck for breakfast," ordered Bush.

It was strange — dramatic, presumably, would be the right word — to be sitting here in this Baltic sunshine, breakfasting at leisure while no more than three miles away the hordes of the tyrant of Europe could only gaze at them impotently. Brown was offering cigars; Bush cut the end off his with the big sailor's clasp-knife which he brought out of a side pocket, and Brown brought the smouldering slow match from the tub beside the quarter-deck carronades to give them a light.

Hornblower breathed in the smoke luxuriously and found it impossible to maintain his evil humour, now with the sun shining, his cigar drawing well, and the advanced guard of a million French soldiers three miles distant. The table was whipped away from between them and he stretched his legs. Even Bush did the same — at least, he sat farther back instead of perching on the edge of his chair; his wooden leg stuck out straight before him although the other one remained decorously bent. The *Nonsuch* was still thrashing along gloriously under plain sail, heeling a little to the wind, with the green sea creaming joyously under her bows. Hornblower pulled at his cigar again in strange spiritual peace. After his recent discontent it was like the unbelievable cessation of toothache.

"Hven nearly within random shot, sir," reported the first lieutenant.

"Call all hands to quarters," ordered Bush, with a glance at Hornblower.

But Hornblower sat on tranquilly. He felt suddenly quite certain that the guns on Hven would not open fire, and he did not want to throw away ungratefully the cigar which had served him so well. Bush took a second glance at him and decided to sit still too. He hardly deigned to spare a glance for Hven as it came up under the

lee bow and passed away under the lee quarter. Hornblower thought of Saltholm and Amager lying ahead; that would be the time of greatest danger, for both islands were in Danish hands and the twelve-fathom channel passed between them and close to both of them. But there was plenty of time to finish this cigar. It was with sincere regret that he drew the last puff, rose slowly to his feet, and sauntered to the lee rail to pitch the end carefully overside.

The sudden swoop of his squadron in the grey dawn had taken the Elsinore garrison by surprise, but there could be no surprise for Saltholm and Amager. They could see his ships in this clear weather a dozen miles away, and the gunners would have ample time to make all preparations to receive them. He looked ahead down the line of vessels.

"Make a signal to *Moth*," he snapped over his shoulder. "'Keep better station'."

If the line were to straggle it would be the longer exposed to fire. The land was in plain sight through his glass; it was lucky that Saltholm was low-lying so that its guns had only poor command. Copenhagen must be only just out of sight, below the horizon to starboard. Vickery was taking *Lotus* exactly down the course Hornblower had laid down for him in his orders. There was the smoke bursting out from Saltholm. There was the boom of the guns — a very irregular salvo. He could see no sign of damage to the ships ahead. *Lotus* was firing back; he doubted if her popgun nine-pounders could hit at that range, but the smoke might help to screen her. All Saltholm was covered with smoke now, and the boom of the guns across the water was in one continuous roll like a drum. They were still out of range of Amager at present; Vickery was wearing ship now for the turn. Bush very sensibly had leadsmen in the chains.

"By the mark seven!"

Seven fathoms was ample, with the tide making. Brown against green — those were the batteries on Saltholm, dimly visible in the smoke; young Carlin on the main-deck was pointing out the target to the port-side twelve-pounders.

"By the deep six, and half six!"

A sudden tremendous crash, as the port-side battery fired all together. The *Nonsuch* heaved with the recoil, and as she did so came the leadsman's cry.

"And a half six!"

"Starboard your helm," said Bush. "Stand by, the starboard guns!"

Nonsuch poised herself for the turn; as far as Hornblower could tell, not a shot had been fired at her at present.

"By the mark five!"

They must be shaving the point of the shoal. There were the Amager batteries in plain sight — the starboard-side guns, with the additional elevation due to the heel of the ship, should be able to reach them. Both broadsides together, this time, an ear-splitting crash, and the smoke from the starboard guns billowed across the deck, bitter and irritant.

"And a half five!"

That was better. God, *Harvey* was hit. The bomb-ketch, two cables' length ahead of *Nonsuch*, changed in a moment from a fighting vessel to a wreck. Her towering mainmast, enormous for her size, had been cut through just above her deck; mast and shrouds, and the huge area of canvas she carried, were trailing over her quarter. Her stumpy mizzen-topmast had gone as well, hanging down from the cap. *Raven* as her orders dictated, swept past her, and *Harvey* lay helpless as *Nonsuch* hurtled down upon her.

"Back the main-tops'!" roared Bush.

"Stand by with the heaving-line, there!" said Hurst.

"And a half five!" called the leadsman.

"Helm-a-lee," said Bush, and then in the midst of the bustle the starboard broadside bellowed out again, as the guns bore on the Amager batteries, and the smoke swept across the decks. *Nonsuch* heaved over; her backed topsail caught the wind and checked her way as she recovered. She hovered with the battered *Harvey* close alongside. Hornblower could see Mound, her captain, directing the efforts of her crew from his station at the foot of her mizzenmast. Hornblower put his speaking-trumpet to his lips.

"Cut that wreckage away, smartly, now."

"Stand by for the line!" shouted Hurst.

The heaving-line, well thrown, dropped across her mizzen shrouds, and Mound himself seized it; Hurst dashed below to superintend the passing across of the towline, which lay on the lower gun-deck all ready to be passed out of an after gun-port. A splintering crash forward told that one shot at least from Amager had struck home on *Nonsuch*. Axes were cutting furiously at the tangle of shrouds over the *Harvey's* side; a group of seamen were furiously hauling in the three-inch line from *Nonsuch* which had been bent on the heaving-line. Another crash forward; Hornblower swung round to see that a couple of foremast shrouds had parted at the chains. With the *Nonsuch* lying nearly head to wind neither port-side nor starboard-side guns bore to make reply, but Carlin had a couple of guns' crews hard at work with hand-spikes heaving the two foremost guns round — it would be as well to keep the batteries under fire so as not to allow them to indulge in mere target practice. Hornblower turned back; *Nonsuch's* stern was almost against *Harvey's* quarter, but some capable officer already had two spars out from the stern gallery to boom her off. The big cable itself was on its way over now; as Hornblower watched he saw *Harvey's* men reach and grasp it.

"We'll take you out stern first, Mr Mound," yelled Hornblower through his speaking-trumpet — there was no time to waste while they took the cable forward. Mound waved acknowledgement.

"Quarter less five," came the voice of the leadsman; the leeway which the two vessels were making was carrying them down on the Saltholm shoals.

On the heels of the cry came the bang-bang of the two guns which Carlin had brought to bear on the Amager batteries, and following that came the howl of shot passing overhead. There were holes in main and mizzen-topsails — the enemy were trying to disable *Nonsuch*.

"Shall I square away, sir?" came Bush's voice at Hornblower's side.

Mound had taken a turn with the cable's end round the base of the *Harvey's* mizzenmast, which was stepped so far aft as to make a convenient point to tow from. He was waving his arms to show that all was secure, and his axemen were hacking at the last of the mainmast shrouds.

"Yes, Captain." Hornblower hesitated before dropping a word of advice on a matter which was strictly Bush's business. "Take the strain slowly, or you'll part the tow or pluck that mizzenmast clear out of her. Haul your headsails up to starboard, then get her slowly under way before you brace up your main-tops'l."

"Aye aye, sir."

Bush showed no resentment at Hornblower's telling him what to do, for he knew very well that Hornblower's advice was something more valuable than gold could ever buy.

"And if I were doing it I'd keep the towline short — stern first, with nothing to keep her under control, *Harvey*'ll tow better that way."

"Aye aye, sir."

Bush turned and began to bellow his orders. With the handling of the headsails the *Nonsuch* turned away from the wind, and instantly Carlin brought his guns into action again. The ship was wrapped in smoke and in the infernal din of the guns. Shots from Amager were still striking home or passing overhead, and in the next interval of comparative silence the voice of the leadsman made itself heard.

"And a half four!"

The sooner they were away from these shoals the better. Fore- and mizzen-topsails were filling slightly, and the head-sails were drawing. The towline tightened, and as the ears recovered from the shock of the next broadside they became aware of a vast creaking as the cable and the bitts took the strain — on the *Nonsuch's* quarter-deck they could overhear *Harvey's* mizzenmast creaking with the strain. The ketch came round slowly, to the accompaniment of fierce bellowsings at *Nonsuch's* helmsman, as the two-decker wavered at the pull across her stern. It was all satisfactory; Hornblower nodded to himself — if Bush were stealing glances at him (as he expected) and saw that nod it would do no harm.

"Hands to the braces!" bellowed Bush, echoing Hornblower's thoughts. With fore- and mizzen-topsails trimmed and drawing well *Nonsuch* began to increase her speed, and the ketch followed her with as much docility as could be expected of a vessel with no rudder to keep her straight. Then she sheered off in ugly fashion to starboard before the tug of the line pulled her straight again to a *feu de joie* of creaks. Hornblower shook his head at the sight, and Bush held back his order to brace up the main-topsail.

"Starboard your helm, Mr Mound!" shouted Hornblower through his speaking-trumpet. Putting *Harvey's* rudder over might have some slight effect — the behaviour of every ship being towed was an individual problem. Speed was increasing, and that, too, might affect *Harvey's* behaviour for better or worse.

"By the mark five!"

That was better. And *Harvey* was behaving herself, too. She was yawing only very slightly now; either the increase in speed or the putting over of the rudder was having its effect.

"That's well done. Captain Bush," said Hornblower pompously.

"Thank you, sir," said Bush, and promptly ordered the main-topsail to be braced up.

"By the deep six!"

They were well off the Saltholm shoal, then, and Hornblower suddenly realized that the guns had not fired for some time, and he had heard nothing of any more firing from Amager. They were through the channel, then, out of range of the batteries, at a cost of only a single spar knocked away. There was no need to come within range of any other hostile gun — they could round Falsterbo well clear of the Swedish batteries.

"By the deep nine!"

Bush was looking at him with that expression of puzzled admiration which Hornblower had seen on his face before. Yet it had been easy enough. Anyone could have foreseen that it would be best to leave to the *Nonsuch* the duty of towing any cripples out of range, and, once that was granted, anyone would have the sense to have a cable roused out and led aft ready to undertake the duty instantly, with heaving-lines and all the other gear to hand, and anyone would have posted *Nonsuch* last in the line, both to endure the worst of the enemy's fire and to be in a position to run down to a cripple and start towing without delay. Anyone could have made those deductions — it was vaguely irritating that Bush should look like that.

"Make a general signal to heave to," said Hornblower. "Captain Bush, stand by, if you please, to cast off the tow. I'll have *Harvey* jury rigged before we round Falsterbo. Perhaps you'll be good enough to send a party on board to help with the work."

And with that he went off below. He had seen all he wanted both of Bush and of the world for the present. He was tired, drained of his energy. Later there would be time enough to sit at his desk and begin the weary business of — 'Sir, I have the honour to report —' There would be dead and wounded to enumerate, too.

CHAPTER SEVEN

His Britannic Majesty's seventy-four-gun ship *Nonsuch* was out of sight of land in the Baltic. She was under easy sail, running before that persistent westerly wind, and astern of her, like a couple of ugly ducklings following their portly mother, came the two bomb-ketches. Far out to starboard, only just in sight, was the *Lotus*, and far out to port was the *Raven*. Beyond the *Raven*, unseen from the *Nonsuch*, was the *Clam*; the four ships made a visual chain which could sweep the narrow neck of the Baltic, from Sweden to Rügen, from side to side. There was still no news; in spring, with the melting of the ice, the whole traffic of the Baltic was outwards, towards England and Europe, and with this westerly wind so long prevailing little was astir. The air was fresh and keen, despite the sunshine, and the sea was silver-grey under the dappled sky.

Hornblower gasped and shuddered as he took his bath under the wash-deck pump. For fifteen years he had served in tropical and Mediterranean waters; he had had lukewarm sea-water pumped over him far more often than he could remember, and this Baltic water, chilled by the melting ice in the gulfs of Bothnia and Finland, and the snow-water of the Vistula and the Oder, was still a shock to him. There was something stimulating about it, all the same, and he pranced grotesquely under the heavy jet, forgetful — as he always was while having his bath — of the proper dignity of a Commodore. Half a dozen seamen, working in leisurely fashion under the direction of the ship's carpenter at replacing a shattered gun-port, stole wondering glances at him. The two seamen at the pump, and Brown standing by with towel and dressing-gown, preserved a proper solemnity of aspect, close under his eye as they were.

Suddenly the jet ceased; a skinny little midshipman was standing saluting his naked Commodore. Despite the gravity of addressing so great a man the child was round-eyed with wonder at this fantastic behaviour on the part of an officer whose doings were a household word.

"What is it?" said Hornblower, water streaming off him. He could not return the salute.

"Mr Montgomery sent me, sir. *Lotus* signals 'Sail to leeward', sir."

"Very good."

Hornblower snatched the towel from Brown, but the message was too important for time to be wasted drying himself, and he ran up the companion still wet and naked, with Brown following with his dressing-gown. The officer of the watch touched his hat as Hornblower appeared on the quarter-deck — it was like some old fairy story, the way everybody rigidly ignored the Commodore's lack of clothes.

"New signal from *Lotus*, sir. 'Chase has tacked. Chase is on the port tack, bearing east-by-north, half east'."

Hornblower leaped to the compass; only the topsails of the *Lotus* were in sight from the deck as he took the bearing by eye. Whatever that sail was, he must intercept it and gather news. He looked up to see Bush hastening on deck, buttoning his coat.

"Captain Bush, I'll trouble you to alter course two points to starboard."

"Aye aye, sir."

"*Lotus* signalling again, sir. 'Chase is a ship. Probably British merchantman'."

"Very good. Set all sail, Captain Bush, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

The pipes shrilled through the ship, and 400 men went pouring up the ratlines to loose the royals and set studding-sails. Hornblower raised a professional eye to watch the operation, carried out under a storm of objurgation from the officer of the watch. The still clumsy crew was driven at top speed by the warrant officers through the evolution, and it was hardly completed before there was a yell from the mast-head.

"Sail on the starboard bow!"

"Must be the ship *Lotus* can see, sir," said Bush. "Mast-head there! What can you see of the sail?"

"She's a ship, sir, close-hauled an' coming up fast. We're headin' to meet her."

"Hoist the colours, Mr Hurst. If she was beating up for the Sound, sir, she would have tacked whether she saw *Lotus* or not."

"Yes," said Hornblower.

A shriek came from the mast-head, where one of the midshipmen of the watch, an urchin who had not yet mastered his changing voice, had run up with a glass.

"British colours, sir!"

Hornblower remembered he was still wet and naked; at least, he was still wet in those parts of him which did not offer free play for the wind to dry him. He began to dab at these inner corners with the towel he still held, only to be interrupted again.

"There she is!" said Bush; the ship's upper sails were over the horizon, in view from the deck.

"Lay a course to pass her within hail, if you please," said Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir. Starboard a point, Quartermaster. Get those stuns'ls in again, Mr Hurst."

The ship they were approaching held her course steadily; there was nothing suspicious about her, not even the fact that she had gone about immediately on sighting *Lotus*.

"Timber from the South Baltic, I expect, sir," said Bush, training his glass. "You can see the deck cargo now." Like most ships bound out of the Baltic her decks were piled high with timber, like barricades along the bulwarks.

"Make the merchant ships' private signal if you please, Captain," said Hornblower.

He watched the reply run up the ship's halliards.

"A — T — numeral — five — seven, sir," read Hurst through his glass. "That's the correct reply for last winter, and she won't have received the new code yet."

"Signal her to heave to," said Hornblower.

With no more delay than was to be expected of a merchant ship, inept at reading signals, and with a small crew, the ship backed her main-topsail and lay-to. The *Nonsuch* came hurtling down upon her.

"That's the yellow Q she's hoisting now, sir," said Hurst, suddenly. "The fever flag."

"Very good. Heave to, Captain Bush, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir. I'll keep to wind'ard of her, too, if you've no objection, sir."

The *Nonsuch* laid her topsails to the mast and rounded-to, rocking in the gentle trough of the waves a pistol-shot to windward. Hornblower took his speaking-trumpet.

"What ship's that?"

"*Maggie Jones* of London. Eleven days out from Memel!"

In addition to the man at the wheel there were only two figures visible on the poop-deck of the *Maggie Jones*; one of them, wearing white duck trousers and a blue coat, was obviously the captain. It was he who was answering by speaking-trumpet.

"What's that yellow flag for?"

"Smallpox. Seven cases on board, and two dead. First case a week ago."

"Smallpox, by God!" muttered Bush. A frightful mental picture came up before his mind's eye, of what smallpox would do, let loose in his precious *Nonsuch*, with 900 men crammed into her restricted space.

"Why are you sailing without convoy?"

"None available at Memel. The rendezvous for the trade's off Langeland on the twenty-fourth. We're beating up for the Belt now."

"What's the news?" Hornblower had waited patiently during all these interminable sentences before asking that question.

"The Russian embargo still holds, but we're sailing under licence."

"Sweden?"

"God knows, sir. Some say they've tightened up their embargo there."

A curious muffled howl came from below decks in the *Maggie Jones* at that moment, just audible in the *Nonsuch*.

"What's that noise?" asked Hornblower.

"One of the smallpox cases, sir. Delirious. They say the Tsar's meeting Bernadotte next week for a conference somewhere in Finland."

"Any sign of war between France and Russia?"

"None that I could see in Memel."

That delirious patient must be very violent for his shrieks to reach Hornblower's ears at this distance against the wind. Hornblower heard them again. Was it possible for one man to make all that noise? It sounded more like a muffled chorus to Hornblower. Hornblower felt a sudden wave of suspicion surging up within him. The white-trousered figure on the *Maggie Jones*'s poop was altogether too glib, too professional in his talk. A naval officer might possibly discuss the chances of war in the Baltic as coldly as this man was doing, but a merchant captain would put more feeling in his words. And more than one man was making that noise in her fore-castle. The captain could easily have offered his information about the Tsar's meeting with Bernadotte as a red herring to distract Hornblower's attention from the cries below deck. Something was wrong.

"Captain Bush," said Hornblower, "send a boat with a boarding-party over to that ship."

"Sir!" protested Bush, wildly. "Sir — she has smallpox on board — sir! Aye aye, sir."

Bush's protests died an uneasy death at the look on Hornblower's face. Bush told himself that Hornblower knew as well as he did the frightful possibilities of the introduction of smallpox into *Nonsuch*, Hornblower knew the chances he was taking. And one more look at Hornblower's face told Bush that the decision had not been an easy one.

Hornblower put the trumpet to his lips again.

"I'm sending a boat to you," he shouted. It was hard at twenty yards' distance to detect any change in the manner of the man he was addressing, especially when hampered with a speaking-trumpet, but Hornblower thought he could see the captain start a little. Certainly there was a decided pause before he answered.

"As you wish, sir. I have warned you of smallpox. Could you send a surgeon and medicines?"

That was exactly what he should have said. But all the same, there was that suspicious pause before answering, as if the man had been taken by surprise and had searched round in his mind for the best reply to make. Bush was standing by, with misery in his face, hoping that Hornblower would countermand his order, but Hornblower made no sign. Under the orders of the boatswain the whaler rose to the pull of the tackles,

was swayed outboard, and dropped into the sea. A midshipman and a boat's crew dropped down into her, sulkily. They would have gone cheerfully to board an armed enemy, but the thought of a loathsome disease unmanned them.

"Push off," ordered the officer of the watch, after a last glance at Hornblower. The whaler danced over the waves towards the *Maggie Jones*, and then Hornblower saw the captain dash his speaking-trumpet to the deck and look round wildly as though for some means of escape.

"Stay hove-to, or I'll sink you," roared Hornblower, and with a gesture of despair the captain stood still, drooping in defeat.

The whaler hooked on to the *Maggie Jones*'s main-chains and the midshipman led his party on to the decks with a rush. There was no sign of any opposition offered, but as the seamen ran aft there was the sudden pop of a pistol, and Hornblower saw the midshipman bending over the writhing, white-trousered body of the captain. He found himself taking an oath that he would break that midshipman, court martial him, ruin him, and have him begging his bread in the gutter if he had wantonly killed the captain. Hornblower's hunger and thirst for news for facts, for information, was so intense that the thought of the captain escaping him by death roused him to ferocious bitterness.

"Why the devil didn't I go myself?" he demanded of no one in particular. "Captain Bush, I'll be obliged if you'll have my barge called away."

"But the smallpox, sir —"

"Smallpox be damned. And there's none on board that ship."

The midshipman's voice came across the water to them.

"*Nonsuch* ahoy! She's a prize. Taken yesterday by a French privateer."

"Who's that captain I was speaking to?" demanded Hornblower.

"A renegade Englishman, sir. He shot himself as we came on board."

"Is he dead?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Mr Hurst," said Bush, "send the surgeon over. I'll give him one minute to get his gear together. I want that renegade's life saved so that we can see how he looks at a yard-arm."

"Send him in my barge," said Hornblower, and then, through the speaking-trumpet. "Send the prisoners and the ship's officers over to me."

"Aye aye, sir."

"And now I'll get some clothes on, by God," said Hornblower; he had only just realized that he had been standing naked on the quarter-deck for an hour or more — if he had obeyed his first impulse and gone over in his barge he would have boarded the *Maggie Jones* without a stitch on.

The captain and the two mates were ushered down into Hornblower's cabin, where he and Bush questioned them eagerly, the chart of the Baltic spread out before him.

"We heard that renegade tell you the truth, sir," said the captain. "We were ten days out from Memel, bound for the Belt, when he pounced on us yesterday — big ship-rigged privateer, ten guns a side, flush-decked. Name *Blanchefleur*, whatever way you say it. What the Frogs call a corvette. French colours. They put a prize crew on board under that renegade — Clarke's his name, sir — an' I think we were headed for Kiel when you caught us. They shut us up in the lazarette. God, how we yelled, hoping you'd hear us."

"We heard you," said Bush.

"How were things at Memel when you left?" demanded Hornblower.

The captain's face wrinkled; if he had been French he would have shrugged his shoulders.

"The same as ever. Russian ports are still closed to us, but they'll give anyone a licence to trade who asks for it. It's the same with the Swedes on the other side."

"What about war between Bonaparte and Russia?"

This time the tangle of doubt really made the captain shrug.

"Everyone's talking about it, but nothing definite yet. Soldiers everywhere. If Boney really fights 'em he'll find 'em as ready as Russians ever are."

"Do you think he will?"

"I wish you'd tell *me*, sir. I don't know. But it was true what Clarke told you, sir. The Tsar and Bernadotte are meeting soon. Perhaps you can guess what that means. It means nothing to a plain man like me, sir. There have been so many of these meetings and conferences and congresses."

So there it was; Sweden and Russia were still in the equivocal position of being nominal enemies of England and nominal allies of Bonaparte, pretending to make war, pretending to be at peace, half belligerent, half neutral, in the strange manner which seemed to have become fashionable nowadays. It was still doubtful whether Bonaparte would take the tremendous step of waging war on Russia. No one could analyse Bonaparte's motives. One might think that he would do better for himself by turning all his vast resources towards finishing off the war in Spain and endeavouring to strike down England before attempting the conquest of the East; but on the other hand a swift decisive blow at Russia might free him from the menace of a powerful and doubtfully friendly nation at his back. Bonaparte had conquered so often; he had struck down every nation in Europe — except England — and it hardly seemed likely that Russia could withstand the impact of his massed forces. With Russia beaten he would have no enemies left on the mainland at all. There would only be England left to oppose him, single-handed. It was comforting that England had not taken active measures in support of Finland when Russia attacked her, all the same. That made a working alliance with Russia far more practicable now.

"Now tell me more about this *Blanchefleur*," said Hornblower bending over the chart.

"She nabbed us off Rügen, sir. Sassnitz bore so'west, eight miles. You see, sir —"

Hornblower listened to the explanations with attention. A twenty-gun corvette under a good French captain was a serious menace loose in the Baltic. With the trade beginning to move on the melting of the ice it would be his first duty to capture her or drive her into port and blockade her. A ship of that force would be able to put up a good fight even against one of his sloops. He hoped he could entrap her, for she would be far too fast for *Nonsuch* to overhaul her in a stern chase. She was sending her prizes into Kiel, for there they could dispose of the prisoners, pick up a French crew, and start the hazardous voyage round Denmark to the west — Bonaparte needed naval stores, with ships of war building in every port from Hamburg to Trieste.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said. "I'll not detain you longer. Captain Bush, we'll talk to the prisoners next."

But there was little to learn from the seamen of the captured prize crew, even though they were brought in separately for questioning. Four of them were Frenchmen; Hornblower conducted his own examination of them, with Bush looking on admiringly. Bush had already succeeded in forgetting all the little French he had so painfully learned during his enforced sojourn in France. Two were Danes, and two were Germans; Mr Braun was called in to interpret while they were questioned. They were all experienced seamen, and as far as Hornblower could gather they had all been driven to take service in the *Blanchefleur* sooner than be conscripted into Bonaparte's navy or army. Even though they were faced with what might well be a lifetime in an English prison the Frenchmen refused any offer to serve in the British Navy, but the others accepted immediately. Braun put the suggestion to them. Bush rubbed his hands at acquiring four prime seamen in this fashion to help fill his chronically undermanned ships. They had picked up a little French in the *Blanchefleur*, and they would soon pick up enough English in the *Nonsuch* or the *Lotus*; certainly they would under the stimulus of a rope's end handled by an experienced petty officer.

"Take 'em away and read 'em in, Mr Hurst," said Bush, rubbing his hands again. "Now, sir, shall we take a look at that damned renegade Englishman?"

Clarke was lying on the main-deck of the *Nonsuch*, to which he had been hoisted from the boat by a tackle at the yardarm, and the surgeon was still bending over him. He had tried to blow out his brains, but he had only succeeded in shattering his lower jaw. There was blood on his blue coat and on his white trousers, and his whole head was swathed in bandages, and he lay tossing in agony on the canvas sheet in which he had been hoisted. Hornblower peered down at him. The features he could see, chalk white so that the tan looked like a coat of dirt, were pinched and refined and weak, a thin nose and hollow cheeks, brown eyes like a woman's, with scant sandy eyebrows above them. What little hair Hornblower could see was scanty and sandy too. Hornblower wondered what combination of circumstances could have led him into betraying his country and taking service with Bonaparte. Hatred of imprisonment, perhaps — Hornblower had known what it was to be a prisoner, in Ferrol and Rosas and in France. Yet that over-refined face did not seem to indicate the sort of personality that would fret itself to pieces in confinement. It might have been a woman, perhaps, who had

driven him or led him to this, or he might be a deserter from the Navy who had fled to escape punishment — it would be interesting to see if his back was scarred with the cat-o'-nine-tails. He might perhaps be an Irishman, one of those fanatic who in their desire to hurt England refused to see that the worst England had ever done to Ireland would be nothing compared with what Bonaparte would do to her if she were once in his power. Whatever might be the case, he was a man of ability and quick wit. As soon as he had seen that *Lotus* had cut him off from escape to the mainland he had resolutely taken the only course that gave him any chance of safety. He had steered the *Maggie Jones* as innocently as kiss-your-hand up to *Nonsuch*; that suggestion of smallpox had been an ingenious one, and his conversation by speaking-trumpet had been very nearly natural. "Is he going to live?" asked Bush of the surgeon.

"No, sir. The mandible is extensively comminuted on both sides — I mean his jaw is shattered, sir. There is some splintering of the maxilla as well, and his tongue — the whole glosso-pharyngeal region, in fact — is in rags. The haemorrhage may prove fatal — in other words the man may bleed to death, although I do not think he will, now. But I do not think anything on earth can stop mortification — gangrene, in other words, sir — which in this area will prove immediately fatal. In any event the man will die of inanition, of hunger and thirst that is to say, even if we could keep him alive for a while by injections per rectum."

It was ghoulish to smile at the surgeon's pomposity, to make the inevitable light speech.

"It sounds as if nothing could save him, then."

It was a human life they were discussing.

"We must hang him, sir, before he dies," said Bush, turning to Hornblower. "We can convene a court martial —"

"He cannot defend himself," replied Hornblower.

Bush spread his hands in a gesticulation which for him was vastly eloquent.

"What defence has he to offer, sir? We have all the evidence we need. The prisoners have supplied it apart from the obvious facts."

"He might be able to rebut the evidence if he could speak," said Hornblower. It was an absurd thing to say. There could be no possible doubt of Clarke's guilt — his attempt at suicide proved it even if nothing else did; but Hornblower knew perfectly well that he was quite incapable of hanging a man who was physically unable to make any defence.

"He'll slip through our fingers if we wait, sir."

"Then let him."

"But the example to the men, sir —"

"No, no, no," flared Hornblower. "What sort of example would it be to the men to hang a dying man — a man who would not know what was being done to him, for that matter?"

It was horrible to see the faint play of expression in Bush's face. Bush was a kindly man, a good brother to his sisters and a good son to his mother, and yet there was that hint of the lust of cruelty, the desire for a hanging. No, that was not quite fair. What Bush lusted for was revenge — revenge on a traitor who had borne arms against their common country.

"It would teach the men not to desert, sir," said Bush, still feebly raising arguments. Hornblower knew — he had twenty years of experience — how every British captain was plagued by desertion, and spent half his waking hours wondering first how to find men and second how to retain them.

"It might," said Hornblower, "but I doubt it very much."

He could not imagine any good being done, and he certainly could picture the harm, if the men were forced to witness a helpless man, one who could not even stand on his feet, being noosed about the neck and swung up to the yard-arm.

Bush still hankered for blood. Even though he had no more to say, there was still a look in his face, there were still protests trembling on his lips.

"Thank you, Captain Bush," said Hornblower. "My mind is made up."

Bush did not know, and might never learn, that mere revenge, objectless, retaliatory, was always stale and unprofitable.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The *Blanchefleur* would most likely still be hovering round the island of Rügen. Cape Arcona would be a profitable haunt — shipping coming down the Baltic from Russian and Finnish ports would make a landfall there, to be easily snapped up, hemmed in between the land and the two-fathom shoal of the Adlergrund. She would not know of the arrival of a British squadron, nor guess that the immediate recapture of the *Maggie Jones* had so quickly revealed her presence here.

"I think that is all perfectly plain, gentlemen?" said Hornblower, looking round his cabin at his assembled captains.

There was a murmur of assent. Vickery of the *Lotus* and Cole of the *Raven* were looking grimly expectant. Each of them was hoping that it would be his ship that would encounter the *Blanchefleur* — a successful single-ship action against a vessel of so nearly equal force would be the quickest way to be promoted captain from commander. Vickery was young and ardent — it was he who had commanded the boats at the cutting-out of the *Sèvres* — and Cole was grey-headed and bent. Mound, captain of the *Harvey*, and Duncan, captain of the *Moth* were both of them young lieutenants; Freeman, of the cutter *Clam*, swarthy and with long black hair like a gipsy, was of a different type; it would be less surprising to hear he was captain of a smuggling craft than captain of a King's ship. It was Duncan who asked the next question.

"If you please, sir, is Swedish Pomerania neutral?"

"Whitehall would be glad to know the answer to that question, Mr Duncan," said Hornblower, with a grin. He wanted to appear stern and aloof, but it was not easy with these pleasant boys.

They grinned back at him; it was with a curious pang that Hornblower realized that his subordinates were already fond of him. He thought, guiltily, that if only they knew all the truth about him they might not like him so much.

"Any other questions, gentlemen? No? Then you can return to your ships and take your stations for the night." At dawn when Hornblower came on deck there was a thin fog over the surface of the sea; with the dropping of the westerly wind the cold water flowing out from the melting ice-packs of the Gulf of Finland had an opportunity of cooling the warm damp air and condensing its moisture into a cloud.

"It could be thicker, sir, but not much," grumbled Bush. The foremast was visible from the quarter-deck, but not the bowsprit. There was only a faint breeze from the north, and the *Nonsuch*, creeping along before it, was very silent, pitching hardly at all on the smooth sea, with a rattle of blocks and cordage.

"I took a cast with the deep-sea lead at six bells, sir," reported Montgomery. "Ninety-one fathoms. Grey mud. That'll be the Arcona deep, sir."

"Very good, Mr Montgomery," said Bush. Hornblower was nearly sure that Bush's curt manner to his lieutenants was modelled on the manner Hornblower used to employ towards him when he was first lieutenant.

"Nosing our way about with the lead," said Bush, disgustedly. "We might as well be a Dogger Bank trawler. And you remember what the prisoners said about the *Blanchefleur*, sir? They have pilots on board who know these waters like the palms of their hands."

Groping about in a fog in shoal waters was not the sort of exercise for which a big two-decker was designed, but the *Nonsuch* had a special value in this campaign. There were few ships this side of the Sound which could match her in force; under her protection the flotilla could cruise wherever necessary. Danes and Swedes and Russians and French had plenty of small craft, but when *Nonsuch* made her appearance they were powerless to hinder.

"If you please, sir," said Montgomery, touching his hat. "Isn't that gunfire which I can hear?"

Everybody listened, enwrapped in the clammy fog. The only noises to be heard were those of the ship, and the condensed fog dripping from the rigging to the deck. Then a flat-sounding thud came faintly to their ears.

"That's a gun, sir, or my name's not Sylvanus Montgomery!"

"From astern," said Hornblower.

"Beg your pardon, sir, but I thought it was on the port bow."

"Damn this fog," said Bush.

If the *Blanchefleur* once had warning of the presence of a British squadron in pursuit of her, and then got away, she would vanish like a needle in a haystack. Hornblower held up a wetted finger and glanced into the binnacle.

"Wind's north," he said. "Maybe nor'nor'east."

That was comforting. To leeward, the likely avenue of escape, lay Rügen and the coast of Swedish Pomerania, twenty miles away. If *Blanchefleur* did not slip through the net he had spread she would be hemmed in.

"Set the lead going, Mr Montgomery," said Bush.

"Aye aye, sir."

"There's another gun!" said Hornblower. "On the port bow, sure enough."

A wild yell from the masthead.

"Sail ho! Sail right ahead!"

The mist was thinner in that direction. Perhaps as much as a quarter of a mile away could be seen the thinnest palest ghost of a ship creeping through the fog across the bows.

"Ship-rigged, flush-decked," said Bush. "That's the *Blanchefleur* sure as a gun!"

She vanished as quickly as she had appeared, into a thicker bank of fog.

"Hard-a-starboard!" roared Bush. "Hands to the braces!"

Hornblower was at the binnacle, taking a hurried bearing.

"Steady as you go!" he ordered the helmsman. "Keep her at that!"

In this gentle breeze the heavily sparred privateer would be able to make better speed than a clumsy two-decker. All that could be hoped for would be to keep *Nonsuch* up to windward of her to head her off if she tried to break through the cordon.

"Call all hands," said Bush. "Beat to quarters."

The drums roared through the ship, and the hands came pouring up to their stations.

"Run out the guns," continued Bush. "One broadside into her, and she's ours."

The trucks roared as three hundred tons of metal were run out. At the breech of every gun there clustered an eager group. The linstocks smouldered sullenly.

"Masthead, there! Stay awake!" pealed Bush, and then more quietly to Hornblower, "He may double back and throw us off the scent."

There was always the possibility of the masthead being above this thin fog — the lookout in *Nonsuch* might catch a glimpse of the *Blanchefleur*'s topmasts when nothing could be seen from the deck.

For several minutes there was no more sound save for the cry of the leadsman; *Nonsuch* rolled gently in the trough of the waves, but it was hard to realize in the mist that she was making headway.

"By the mark twenty," called the leadsman.

Before he had uttered the last word Hornblower and Bush had turned to glance at each other; up to that moment their subconscious minds had been listening to the cries without their consciousness paying any attention. But 'by the mark' meant that now there was at most twenty fathoms under them.

"Shoaling, sir," commented Bush.

Then the masthead lookout yelled again.

"Sail on the lee quarter, sir!"

Bush and Hornblower sprang to the rail, but in the clinging fog there was nothing to be seen.

"Masthead, there! What d'you see?"

"Nothin' now, sir. Just caught a glimpse of a ship's royals, sir. There they are again, sir. Two points — three points abaft the port beam."

"What's her course?"

"Same as ours, sir. She's gone again now."

"Shall we bear down on her, sir?" asked Bush.

"Not yet," said Hornblower.

"Stand to your guns on the port side!" ordered Bush.

Even a distant broadside might knock away a spar or two and leave the chase helpless.

"Tell the men not to fire without orders," said Hornblower. "That may be *Lotus*."

"So it may, by God," said Bush.

Lotus had been on *Nonsuch*'s port beam in the cordon sweeping down towards Rügen. Someone had undoubtedly been firing — that must have been *Lotus*, and she would have turned in pursuit of the *Blanchefleur*, which could bring her into just the position where those royals had been seen; and the royals of two ship-rigged sloops, seen through mist, would resemble each other closely enough to deceive the eye even of an experienced seaman.

"Wind's freshening, sir," commented Hurst.

"That's so," said Bush. "Please God it clears this fog away."

Nonsuch was perceptibly leaning over to the freshening breeze. From forward came the cheerful music of the sea under the bows.

"By the deep eighteen!" called the leadsman.

Then twenty voices yelled together.

"There she is! Sail on the port beam! That's *Lotus*!"

The fog had cleared in this quarter, and there was *Lotus* under all sail, three cables' lengths away.

"Ask her where's the chase," snapped Bush.

"Sail — last — seen — ahead," read of the signal midshipman, glass to eye.

"Much use that is to us," Bush grumbled. There were enough streaks of fog still remaining to obscure the whole circle of the horizon, even though there was a thin watery sunshine in the air, and a pale sun — silver instead of gold — visible to the eastward.

"There she is!" suddenly yelled someone at the masthead. "Hull down on the port quarter!"

"Stole away, by God!" said Hurst. "She must have put up her helm the moment she saw us."

The *Blanchefleur* was a good six miles away, with only her royals visible from the deck of the *Nonsuch*, heading downwind under all sail. A string of signal flags ran up *Lotus*'s mast, and a gun from her called attention to the urgency of her signal.

"She's seen her too," said Bush.

"Wear ship, Captain Bush, if you please. Signal 'general chase'."

Nonsuch came round on the other tack, amid the curses of the officers hurled at the men for their slowness.

Lotus swung round with her bow pointing straight at *Blanchefleur*. With the coast of Pomerania ahead, *Nonsuch* to windward, and *Lotus* and *R.aven* on either side, *Blanchefleur* was hemmed in.

"*Raven* must be nearly level with her over there, sir," said Bush, rubbing his hands. "And we'll pick the bombs up again soon, wherever they got to in the fog."

"By the deep fourteen!" chanted the leadsman. Hornblower watched the man in the chains, whirling the lead with practised strength, dropping it in far ahead, reading off the depth as the ship passed over the vertical line, and then hauling in ready for a fresh cast. It was tiring work, continuous severe exercise; moreover, the leadsman was bound to wet himself to the skin, hauling in a hundred feet of dripping line. Hornblower knew enough about life below decks to know that the man would have small chance of ever getting his clothes dry again; he could remember as a midshipman in Pellew's *Indefatigable* being at the lead that wild night when they went in and destroyed the *Droits de l'homme* in the Biscay surf. He had been chilled to the bone that night, with fingers so numb as almost to be unable to feel the difference between the markers — the white calico and the leather with a hole in it and all the others. He probably could not heave the lead now if he tried, and he was quite sure he could not remember the arbitrary order of the markers. He hoped Bush would have the humanity and the common sense to see that his leadsmen were relieved at proper intervals, and given special facilities for drying their clothes, but he could not interfere directly in the matter. Bush was personally responsible for the interior economy of the ship and would be quite rightly jealous of any interference; there were crumpled roseleaves in the bed even of a Commodore.

"By the mark ten!" called the leadsman.

"*Raven* in sight beyond the chase, sir," reported a midshipman. "Heading to cut her off."

"Very good," said Hornblower.

"Rügen in sight, too, sir," said Bush. "That's Stubbenkammer, or whatever they call it — a white cliff, anyway." Hornblower swung his glass round the horizon; fate was closing in on the *Blanchefleur*, unless she took refuge in the waters of Swedish Pomerania. And that was clearly what she was intending to do. Bush had the chart spread out before him and was taking bearings on the distant white streak of the Stubbenkammer.

Hornblower studied the chart, looked over at the distant ships, and back at the chart again. Stralsund was a fortress — it had stood more than one siege lately. If *Blanchefleur* got in there she would be safe if the Swedes saw fit to protect her. But the rest of the coast ahead was merely shoals and sandbanks; a couple of bays had water enough for coasting vessels — there were batteries marked in the chart to defend their entrances. Something might be attempted if *Blanchefleur* ran in one of those — she was probably of light enough draught — but it would be hopeless if she reached Stralsund.

"Signal *Lotus*," he said. "'Set course to cut chase off from Stralsund'."

In the course of the interminable war every aid to navigation had disappeared. There was not a buoy left to make the deep-water channel — the Bodden, the chart called it — up to Stralsund. Vickery in the *lotus* would have to look lively with the lead as he found his way into it.

"By the mark seven!" called the leadsman; *Nonsuch* was in dangerously shoal water already; Bush was looking anxious.

"Shorten sail, if you please, Captain Bush."

There was no chance of *Nonsuch* overhauling *Blanchefleur*, and if they were going to run aground they might as well do so as gently as possible.

"Chase is hauling her wind, sir," said Hurst.

So she was; she was clearly giving up the attempt to reach Stralsund. That was thanks to Vickery, who had gone charging with gallant recklessness under full sail through the shoals to head her off.

"*Raven*! I'll have a chance at her if she holds that course long!" said Bush in high excitement.

"Chase is going on the other tack!" said Hurst.

"And a half five!" called the leadsman.

Bush was biting his lips with anxiety; his precious ship was entangling herself among the shoals on a lee shore, and there was only thirty-three feet of water under her now.

"Heave to, Captain Bush," said Hornblower. There was no reason to run any farther now until they could see what *Blanchefleur* intended. *Nonsuch* rounded-to and lay with her port bow breasting the gentle swell. The sun was pleasantly warm.

"What's happened to *Raven*?" exclaimed Bush.

The sloop's foretopmast, with yard and sail and everything, had broken clear off and was hanging down in a frightful tangle among her headsails.

"Aground, sir," said Hurst, glass to eye.

The force with which she had hit the sand had snapped her topmast clean off.

"She draws eight feet less than us, sir," said Bush, but all Hornblower's attention was directed again to *Blanchefleur*.

Obviously she was finding her way up a channel to the shelter of Hiddensoe. On the chart there was a single sounding marked there, a laconic '2½'. Fifteen feet of water, and a battery at the head of the long peninsula. *Blanchefleur* could reckon herself safe if the Swedes would defend her. On the horizon to windward Hornblower saw the queer topsails of the bomb-ketches; Duncan and Mound, after blundering about in the fog, must have caught sight of *Nonsuch* while on their way to the rendezvous off Cape Arcona.

"Send the boats to assist *Raven*, if you please, Captain Bush," said Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir."

Hoisting longboat and cutter off their chocks and overside was an evolution calling for a couple of hundred hands. Pipes squealed and the bos'un's cane stirred up the laggards. The sheaves squeaked in the blocks, bare feet stamped the decks, and even *Nonsuch*'s massive bulk heeled a little with the transfer of weight. Hornblower betook himself to his telescope again.

Blanchefleur had found herself a curious anchorage. She lay between the main island of Rügen and the long narrow strip of Hiddensoe; the latter was more of a sandspit than an island, a thread of sand-dunes emerging from the yellow shallows. In fact *Blanchefleur*'s spars were still in plain sight against the background of the low mud cliffs of Rügen; it was only her hull which was concealed by the dunes of Hiddensoe lying like a long curving breakwater in front of her. On one end of Hiddensoe was a battery — Hornblower could see the silhouettes of the guns, black against the green of the grass-grown embrasures — which covered one entrance to the tiny roadstead; at the other end the breaking waves showed that there was not water enough even for

a ship's longboat to pass. The squadron had succeeded in cutting off the privateer's escape into Stralsund, but it seemed as if she were just as safe where she was now, with miles of shoals all round her and a battery to protect her; any attempt to cut her out must be made by the ship's boats, rowing in plain view for miles through the shallows, then through a narrow channel under the guns of the battery, and finally bringing out the prize under the same guns and over the unknown shoals. That was not a tempting prospect; he could land marines on the seaward front of Hiddensee and try to storm the battery by brute force, but the attempt would be inviting a bloody repulse if there were no surprise to cover the assaulting party. Besides, the battery's garrison would be Swedes, and he did not want to shed Swedish blood — Sweden was only a nominal enemy, but any vigorous action on his part might easily make her an active one. Hornblower remembered the paragraphs of his instructions which bore on this very point

As if in echo to his thoughts the signal midshipman saluted with a new report.

"Signal from *Lotus*, sir."

Hornblower read the message written in crude capitals on the slate.

"Flags of truce coming out from Stralsund. Have allowed them to pass."

"Acknowledge," said Hornblower.

What the devil did that mean? One flag of truce he could expect, but Vickery was reporting two at least. He swung his glass over to where Vickery had very sensibly anchored *Lotus*, right between *Blanchefleur*'s refuge and any possible succour from Stralsund. There were one — two — three — small sails heading straight for the *Nonsuch*, having just rounded *Lotus*. They were all of them of the queer Baltic rig, like Dutchmen with a foreign flavour — rounded bows and lee-boards and big gaff-mainsails. Close-hauled, with the white water creaming under their blunt bows and the spray flying in sheets even in this moderate breeze, they were clearly being sailed for all they were worth, as if it were a race.

"What in God's name?" said Bush, training his glass on them.

It might be a ruse to gain time. Hornblower looked round again at the spars of *Blanchefleur* above the sandspit. She had furled everything and was riding at anchor.

"White above yellow and blue, sir," said Bush, still watching the approaching boats. "That's Swedish colours under a flag of truce."

Hornblower turned his glass on the leader and confirmed Bush's decision.

"The next one, sir —" Bush laughed apologetically at his own innocence, "I know it's strange, sir, but it looks just like the British ensign under a flag of truce."

It was hard to believe; and it was easy to make a mistake in identifying a small boat's flag at that distance. But Hornblower's glass seemed to show the same thing.

"What do you make of that second boat, Mr Hurst?"

"British colours under white, sir," said Hurst without hesitation.

The third boat was some long way astern, and her colours were not so easy to make out.

"French, I think, sir," said Hurst, but the leading boat was approaching fast now.

It was a tall portly gentleman who was swung up on to the deck in the bos'un's chair, clinging to his cocked hat. He wore a blue coat with gold buttons and epaulettes, and he hitched his sword and his stock into position before laying the hat — a fore-and-aft one with a white plume and a Swedish cockade — across his chest in a sweeping bow.

"Baron Basse," he said.

Hornblower bowed.

"Captain Sir Horatio Hornblower, Commodore commanding this squadron."

Basse was a heavily jowled man with a big hook-nose and a cold grey eye; and it was obvious that he could only guess faintly at what Hornblower said.

"You fight?" he asked, with an effort.

"I am in pursuit of a privateer under French colours," said Hornblower, and then, realizing the difficulty of making himself understood when he had to pick his words with diplomatic care: "Here, where's Mr Braun?" The interpreter came forward with a brief explanation of himself in Swedish, and Hornblower watched the interplay of glances between the two. They were clearly the deadliest political enemies, meeting here on the

comparatively neutral ground of a British man-o'-war. Basse brought out a letter from his breast pocket and passed it to Braun, who glanced at it and handed it to Hornblower.

"That is a letter from the Governor-General of Swedish Pomerania," he explained, "saying that this gentleman, the Baron Basse, has his full confidence."

"I understand," said Hornblower.

Basse was already talking rapidly to Braun.

"He says," explained Braun, "that he wants to know what you will do."

"Tell him," said Hornblower, "that that depends on what the Swedes do. Ask him if Sweden is neutral."

Obviously the reply was not a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Basse offered a lengthy explanation.

"He says that Sweden only wants to be at peace with all the world," said Braun.

"Tell him that that means neutrality, then, and neutrality has obligations as well as privileges. There is a ship-of-war under French colours there. She must be warned that her presence in Swedish waters can only be tolerated for a limited time, and I must be informed of what the time-limit is."

Basse's heavy face showed considerable embarrassment at Braun's translation of Hornblower's demand. He worked his hands violently as he made his reply.

"He says he cannot violate the laws of international amity," said Braun.

"Say that that is exactly what he is doing. That ship cannot be allowed to use a Swedish port as a base of operations. She must be warned to leave, and if she will not, then she must be taken over and a guard put in her to make sure she does not slip away."

Basse positively wrung his hands as Braun spoke to him, but any reply he was going to make was cut short by Bush's salute to Hornblower.

"The French flag of truce is alongside, sir. Shall I allow them to send someone on board?"

"Oh, yes," said Hornblower testily.

The new figure that came in through the entry-port was even more decorative than Basse, although a much smaller man.

Across his blue coat lay the watered red silk ribbon of the Legion of Honour, and its star glittered on his breast. He, too, swept off his hat in an elaborate bow.

"The Count Joseph Dumoulin," he said, speaking French, "Consul-General in Swedish Pomerania of His Imperial and Royal Majesty Napoleon, Emperor of the French, King of Italy, Protector of the Confederation of the Rhine, Mediator of the Swiss Republic."

"Captain Hornblower," said Hornblower. He was suddenly excessively cautious, because his government had never recognized those resounding titles which Dumoulin had just reeled off. In the eyes of King George and his ministers, Napoleon, Emperor of the French, was merely General Bonaparte in his personal capacity, and Chief of the French Government in his official one. More than once British officers had found themselves in serious trouble for putting their names to documents — cartels and the like — which bore even incidental references to the Empire.

"Is there anyone who can speak French?" asked Dumoulin politely, "I regret bitterly my complete inability to speak English."

"You can address yourself to me, sir," said Hornblower, "and I should be glad of an explanation of your presence in this ship."

"You speak admirable French, sir," said Dumoulin. "Ah, of course, I remember. You are the Captain Hornblower who made the sensational escape from France a year ago. It is a great pleasure to meet a gentleman of such renown."

He bowed again. It gave Hornblower a queer self-conscious pleasure to find that his reputation had preceded him even into this obscure corner of the Baltic, but it irritated him at the same time, as having nothing to do with the urgent matter in hand.

"Thank you," he said, "but I am still waiting for an explanation of why I have the honour of this visit."

"I am here to support *M. le Baron* in his statement of the belligerent position of Swedish Pomerania."

Braun interpreted, and Basse's embarrassment perceptibly increased.

"Boat with English colours alongside, sir," interrupted Bush.

The man who came on board was immensely fat, and dressed in a sober black civilian suit.

"Hauptmann," he said, bending himself at the waist; he spoke English with a thick German accent. "His Britannic Majesty's consular agent at Stralsund."

"What can I do for you, Mr Hauptmann?" asked Hornblower, trying not to allow himself to grow bewildered.

"I have come," said Hauptmann — actually what he said was "I haf come" — "to help explain to you the position here in Swedish Pomerania."

"I see no need for explanation," said Hornblower. "If Sweden is neutral, then that privateer must be either forced to leave or taken into custody. If Sweden is a belligerent, then my hands are free and I can take whatever steps I think proper."

He looked round at his audience. Braun began to translate into Swedish.

"What was it you said, Captain?" asked Dumoulin.

Desperately Hornblower plunged into a French translation, and the curse of Babel descended upon the *Nonsuch*. Everyone tried to speak at once; translation clashed with expostulation. Clearly, what Basse wanted was the best of both worlds, to make both France and England believe Sweden was friendly. What Dumoulin wanted was to make sure that *Blanchefleur* would be enabled to continue her depredations among British shipping. Hornblower looked at Hauptmann.

"Come with me for a minute, please," said Hauptmann. He put his fat hand on Hornblower's shrinking arm and led him across the quarter-deck out of earshot.

"You are a young man," said Hauptmann, "and I know you naval officers. You are all headstrong. You must be guided by my advice. Do nothing in a hurry, sir. The international situation here is tense, very tense indeed. A false move may mean ruin. An insult to Sweden might mean war, actual war instead of pretending war. You must be careful what you do."

"I am always careful," snapped Hornblower, "but do you expect me to allow that privateer to behave as if this were Brest or Toulon?"

Braun came over to them.

"Baron Basse asks me to say to you, sir, that Bonaparte has 200,000 men on the borders of Pomerania. He wants me to say that one cannot offend the master of an army that size."

"That bears out what I say, Captain," said Hauptmann.

Here came Dumoulin, and Basse after him — no one would trust any one of his colleagues to be alone with the British captain for a moment. Hornblower's tactical instinct came to his rescue; the best defensive is a vigorous local offensive. He turned on Hauptmann.

"May I ask, sir, how His Majesty maintains a consular agent in a port whose neutrality is in doubt?"

"It is necessary because of the need for licences to trade."

"Are you accredited to the Swedish Government by His Majesty?"

"No, sir. I am accredited by His Bavarian Majesty."

"His *Bavarian* Majesty?"

"I am a subject of His Bavarian Majesty."

"Who happens to be at war with His Britannic Majesty," said Hornblower dryly. The whole tangle of Baltic politics, of hole-and-corner hostilities and neutralities, was utterly beyond unravelling. Hornblower listened to everyone's pleas and expostulations until he could bear it no longer; his impatience grew at length apparent to his anxious interviewers.

"I can form no conclusion at present, gentlemen," said Hornblower. "I must have time to think over the information you have given me. Baron Basse, as representative of a governor-general, I fancy you are entitled to a seventeen-gun salute on leaving this ship?"

The salutes echoed over the yellow-green water as the officials went over the side. Seventeen guns for Baron Basse. Eleven for Dumoulin, the Consul-General. Hauptmann, as a mere consular agent, rated only five, the smallest salute noticed in naval ceremonial. Hornblower stood at the salute as Hauptmann went down into his boat, and then sprang into activity again.

"Signal for the captains of *Moth*, *Harvey*, and *Clam* to come on board," he ordered, abruptly.

The bomb-vessels and the cutter were within easy signalling distance now; there were three hours of daylight left, and over there the spars of the French privateer still showed over the sand-dunes of Hiddensoe as though to taunt him.

CHAPTER NINE

Hornblower swung himself up over the side of the *Harvey*, where Lieutenant Mound stood at attention to welcome him with his two boatswain's mates twittering their pipes. The bang of a gun, coming unexpectedly and not a yard from him, made him jump. As the Commodore was shifting his broad pendant from one ship to another (there it was breaking out at the lofty mast-head of the *Harvey*) it was the correct moment for another salute, which they were firing off with one of the four six-pounders which *Harvey* carried aft.

"Belay that nonsense," said Hornblower.

Then he felt suddenly guilty. He had publicly described the Navy's beloved ceremonial as nonsense — just as extraordinary he had applied the term to a compliment which ought to have delighted him as it was only the second time he had received it. But discipline had not apparently suffered, although young Mound was grinning broadly as he gave the order to cease firing.

"Square away and let's get going, Mr Mound," said Hornblower.

As the *Harvey* filled her sails and headed diagonally for the shore with *Moth* close astern, Hornblower looked round him. This was a new experience for him; in twenty years of service he had never seen action in a bomb-vessel. Above him towered the enormous mainmast (they had made a good job of replacing the spar shot away in the Sound) which had to make up in the amount of canvas it carried for the absence of a foremast. The mizzenmast, stepped far aft, was better proportioned to the diminutive vessel. The prodigious forestay necessary for the security of the mainmast was an iron chain, curiously incongruous amid the hempen rigging. The waist of the ketch was forward — that was the absurd but only way of describing her design — and there, on either side of her midline, were the two huge mortars which accounted for her quaint build. Hornblower knew that they were bedded upon a solid mass of oak against her keelson; under the direction of a gunner's mate four hands were laying out the immense thirteen-inch shells which the mortars fired. The bos'un's mate with another party had passed a cable out from a starboard gun-port, and, having carried it forward, were securing it to the anchor hanging at the cathead. That was the 'spring'; Hornblower had often attached a spring to his cable as a practice evolution, but had never used one in action before. Close beside him in the port-side main-chains a hand was heaving the lead; Hornblower thought to himself that nine-tenths of the time he had spent in the Baltic the lead had been going, and presumably that would be the case for the rest of this commission.

"And a half three!" called the leadsman. These bomb-ketches drew less than nine feet.

Over there *Raven* was preparing to kedge off the shoal on which she was aground. Hornblower could see the cable, black against the water. She had already cleared away the raffle of her wrecked foretopmast. *Clam* was creeping out beyond her; Hornblower wondered if her gipsy-looking captain had fully grasped the complex instructions given him.

Mound was standing beside him, conning his ship. He was the only commissioned officer; a midshipman and two master's mates kept watches, and the two latter were standing wide-legged aft measuring with sextants the vertical angle subtended by *Blanchefleur's* spars. Hornblower could sense through the vessel an atmosphere of light-heartedness, only to be expected when the captain was only twenty years old. Discipline was bound to be easier in these small craft — Hornblower had often heard crabbed captains of vast seniority bemoaning the fact.

"Quarter less three!" called the leadsman.

Seventeen feet of water.

"We are within range now, sir," said Mound.

"Those mortars of yours are more accurate when firing at less than extreme range, though, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir. And I would prefer to have a little to spare, too, in case they can shift anchorage."

"Leave yourself plenty of room to swing, though. We know nothing of these shoals."

"Aye aye, sir."

Mound swung round for a final glance at the tactical situation; at the spars of the *Blanchefleur* above the dunes where she was anchored far up the lagoon, the battery at the end of the spit, *Clam* taking up a position where she could see up the lagoon from a point just out of range of the battery, and *lotus* waiting beyond the entrance to cut off escape in case by any miracle the *Blanchefleur* should be able to claw her way out to windward and make a fresh attempt to reach Stralsund. Mound kept on reaching for his trouser pockets and then hastily refraining from putting his hands in, when he remembered the Commodore was beside him — an odd gesture, and he did it every few seconds.

"For God's sake, man," said Hornblower, "put your hands in your pockets and leave off fidgeting."

"Aye aye, sir," said Mound, a little startled. He plunged his hands in gratefully, and hunched his shoulders into a comfortable slouch, pleasantly relaxed. He took one more look round before calling to the midshipman standing by the cathead forward.

"Mr Jones. Let go!"

The anchor cable roared out briefly as the crew of the ketch raced aloft to get in the canvas.

The *Harvey* swung slowly round until she rode bows upwind, pointing nearly straight at the invisible *Blanchefleur*. The *Moth*, Hornblower saw, anchored nearly abreast of her sister ship.

Mound moved with a deceptive appearance of leisureliness about the business of opening fire. He took a series of bearings to make sure that the anchor was holding. At a word from him a seaman tied a white rag to the 'spring' where it lay on the deck as it passed forward to the capstan, and Mound fished in his pocket, brought out a piece of chalk, and marked a scale on the deck beside the rag.

"Mr Jones," he said, "take a turn on the capstan."

Four men at the capstan turned it easily. The white rag crept along the deck as the spring was wound in. The spring passed out through an after gun-port and was attached to the anchor far forward; pulling on it pulled the stern of the vessel round so that she lay at an angle to the wind, and the amount of the angle was roughly indicated by the movement of the white rag against the scale chalked on the deck.

"Carry on, Mr Jones," said Mound, taking a rough bearing of the *Blanchefleur*'s spars. The capstan clanked as the men at the bars spun it round.

"Steady!" called Mound, and they stopped.

"One more pawl!" said Mound, sighting very carefully now for *Blanchefleur*'s mainmast.

Clank! went the capstan as the men momentarily threw their weight on the bars.

"One more!"

Clank!

"I think that's right, sir," said Mound. The *Harvey*'s centre line was pointing straight at *Blanchefleur*. "Of course the cables stretch and the anchor may drag a little, but it's easy enough to maintain a constant bearing by paying out or taking in on the spring."

"So I understand," said Hornblower.

He was familiar with the theory of the bomb-vessel; actually he was intensely interested in and excited at the prospect of the approaching demonstration. Ever since, at a desperate moment, he had tried to hit a small boat at long range with a six-pounder-shot from the *Witch of Endor*, Hornblower had been conscious that naval gunnery was an art which should be improved if it were possible. At present it was chancey, literally hit-or-miss. Mortar-fire from a bomb-vessel was the uttermost refinement of naval gunnery, brought to a high degree of perfection, although it was only a bastard offshoot. The high trajectory and the low muzzle velocity of the projectile, and the avoidance of the disturbing factor of irregularities in the bore of the gun, made it possible to drop the shell with amazing accuracy.

"If you'll excuse me, sir," said Mound, "I'll go forrard. I like to cut my fuses myself."

"I'll come with you," said Hornblower.

The two mortars were like big cauldrons in the eyes of the bomb-ketch.

"Eleven hundred yards," said Mound. "We'll try a pound and three-quarters of powder, Mr Jones."

"Aye aye, sir."

The powder was made up in cartridges of a pound, half a pound, and a quarter of a pound. The midshipman tore open one of each size, and poured the contents into the starboard-side mortar, and pressed it home with an enormous wad of felt, Mound had a measuring rule in his hand, and was looking up at the sky in a

calculating way. Then he bent over one of the big shells, and with a pair of scissors he cut the fuse with profound care.

"One and eleven sixteenths, sir," he said, apologetically. "Don't know why I decided on that. The fuse burns at different speeds according to the weather, and that seems right for now. Of course we don't want the shell to burst in the air, but if you have too long a fuse some Frog may get to it and put it out before it bursts."

"Naturally," said Hornblower.

The big shell was lifted up and placed in the muzzle of the mortar; a few inches down, the bore narrowed abruptly, leaving a distinct step inside, on which the bold belt round the shell rested with reassuring solidity. The curve of the thirteen-inch shell, with the fuse protruding, was just level with the rim of the muzzle.

"Hoist the red swallowtail," called Mound, raising his voice to reach the ears of the master's mate aft.

Hornblower turned and looked through his glass at *Clam*, anchored in the shallows a couple of miles away. It was under his personal supervision that this code of signals had been arranged, and he felt a keen anxiety that it should function correctly. Signals might easily be misunderstood. A red swallowtail mounted to the *Clam's* peak.

"Signal acknowledged, sir," called the master's mate.

Mound took hold of the smouldering linstock, and applied it to the fuse of the shell. After a moment the fuse took fire, spluttering feebly.

"One, two, three, four, five," counted Mound, slowly, while the fuse still spluttered. Apparently he left himself a five-second margin in case the fuse burnt unsatisfactorily and had to be relit.

Then he pressed the linstock into the touch-hole of the mortar, and it went off with a roar. Standing immediately behind the mortar, Hornblower could see the shell rise, its course marked by the spark of the burning fuse. Up and up it went, higher and higher, and then it disappeared as it began its downward flight at right angles now to the line of sight. They waited, and they waited, and nothing more happened.

"Miss," said Mound. "Haul down the red swallowtail."

"White pendant from *Clam*, sir," called the master's mate.

"That means 'range too great'," said Mound. "A pound and a half of powder this time, please, Mr Jones."

Moth had two red swallowtails hoisted, and two were hoisted in reply by *Clam*. Hornblower had foreseen the possibility of confusion, and had settled that signals to do with *Moth* should always be doubled. Then there would be no chance of *Harvey* making corrections for *Moth's* mistakes, or vice versa. *Moth's* mortar roared out, its report echoing over the water. From the *Harvey* they could see nothing of the flight of the shell.

"Double yellow flag from *Clam*, sir."

"That means *Moth's* shell dropped short," said Mound. "Hoist our red swallowtail."

Again he fired the mortar, again the spark of the fuse soared towards the sky and disappeared, and again nothing more happened.

"White pendant from *Clam*, sir."

"Too long again?" said Mound, a little puzzled. "I hope they're not cross-eyed over there."

Moth fired again, and was rewarded by a double white pendant from *Clam*. This shell had passed over, when her preceding one had fallen short. It should be easy for *Moth* to find the target now. Mound was checking the bearing of the target.

"Still pointing straight at her," he grumbled. "Mr Jones, take one half a quarter-pound from that pound and a half."

Hornblower was trying to imagine what the captain of the *Blanchefleur* was doing at that moment on his own side of the sandspit. Probably until the very moment when the bomb-ketches opened fire he had felt secure, imagining that nothing except a direct assault on the battery could imperil him. But now shells must be dropping quite close to him, and he was unable to reply or defend himself in any active way. It would be hard for him to get under way; he had anchored his ship at the far end of the long narrow lagoon. The exit near him was shoal water too shallow even for a skiff — as the breakers showed — and with the wind as it was at present it was impossible for him to try to beat up the channel again closer to the battery. He must be regretting having dropped so far to leeward before anchoring: presumably he had done so to secure himself the better from the claws of a cutting-out attack. With boats or by kedging he might be able to haul his ship slowly up to the battery, near enough for its guns to be able to keep the bomb-ketches out of mortar-range.

"Red swallowtail at the dip, sir!" reported the master's mate excitedly.

That meant that the shell had fallen short but close.

"Put in two pinches more, Mr Jones," said Mound.

Moth's mortar roared out again, but this time they saw the shell burst, apparently directly above the *Blanchefleur's* mastheads. They saw the big ball of smoke, and the sound of the explosion came faintly back to them on the wind. Mound shook his head gravely; either Duncan over there had not cut his fuse correctly or it had burnt away more rapidly than usual. Two blue flags at *Clam's* peak indicated that the fall of *Moth's* shot had been unobserved — the signalling system was still functioning correctly. Then Mound bent his gangling body over and applied the linstock to fuse and touch-hole. The mortar roared; some freak of ballistics sent a fragment of blazing wad close over Hornblower's head, making him duck while the smoke billowed round him, but as he looked up again he just caught sight of the spark of the fuse high up against the sky, poised at the top of its trajectory, before it disappeared from sight in its swift downward swoop. Hornblower, Mound, Jones, the whole mortar's crew stood waiting tensely for the shell to end its flight. Then over the rim of the sand-dune they saw a hint of white smoke, and the sound of the bursting shell came back to them directly afterwards.

"I think we've hit her, sir," said Mound, with elaborate carelessness.

"Black ball at *Clam's* masthead, sir!" shouted the master's mate.

That meant a hit. A thirteen-inch shell, soaring that immense distance into the air, had come plunging down onto *Blanchefleur's* decks and had exploded. Hornblower could not imagine what destruction it might cause.

"Both mortars together, now," snapped Mound, throwing aside all lackadaisical pose. "Jump to it, you men."

Two white pendants at the dip from *Clam* meant that *Moth's* next shot had fallen close but too far. Then both of *Harvey's* mortars roared — the little ketch dipped and plunged as the violence of the recoil forced her bows down. Up went the black ball to *Clam's* masthead.

"Another hit!" exulted Mound.

Blanchefleur's topmasts, seen over the dunes, suddenly began to separate. She was turning round — her desperate crew was trying to tow her or kedge her back up the channel.

"Please God we wreck her before she gets away!" said Mound. "Why in hell doesn't *Moth* fire?"

Hornblower watched him closely; the temptation to fire his mortars the moment they were loaded, without waiting for *Moth* to take her turn, was powerful indeed, but to yield to it meant confusion for the observer over in *Clam* and eventual losing of all control. *Moth* fired, and two black balls at *Clam's* masthead showed that she, too, had scored a hit. But *Blanchefleur* had turned now; Hornblower could see the tiniest, smallest movement of her topmast against the upper edge of the dunes, only a yard or two at most. Mound fired his two mortars, and even while the shells were in the air his men leaped to the capstan and flung themselves on the bars. Clank — clank! Twice the pawl slipped over the ratchet as they hauled in on the spring and swung the ketch round to keep her mortars trained on the target. At that instant *Blanchefleur's* fore-topmast fell from view. Only main and mizzen were in sight now.

"Another hit, by God!" shouted Hornblower, the words forced from him like a cork from a popgun. He was as excited as a schoolboy; he found he was jumping up and down on the deck. The foremast gone; he tried to picture the frightful destruction those shells must be causing, crashing down on the frail wooden decks. And there was smoke visible over the crest of the dunes too, more than could be accounted for by the bursting of the shells, and blacker, too. Probably she was on fire. Mizzenmast and mainmast came into line again — *Blanchefleur* was swinging across the channel. She must be out of control. Perhaps a shell had hit the cable out to the kedge or wrecked the towing boats.

Moth fired again; and two red swallowtails at the dip showed that her shells had fallen close and short — *Blanchefleur* must have swerved appreciably across the channel. Mound had noticed it, and was increasing the propelling charge in his mortars. That was smoke; undoubtedly it was smoke eddying from *Blanchefleur*. She must be on fire. And from the way she lay, stationary again — Hornblower could see that her topmasts made no movement at all to the sand-dunes — she must have gone aground. Mound fired again, and they waited. There went the mizzen-topmast, leaning over slowly, and the maintopmast disappeared as well. There was nothing to see now, except the smoke rising ever more thickly. Mound looked at Hornblower for orders.

"Better keep on firing," said Hornblower, thickly. Even if the crew were roasting alive in her it was his duty to see that *Blanchefleur* was utterly destroyed. The mortars roared out again, and the shells made their steep ascent, climbing upwards for ten full seconds before swooping down again. *Clam* signalled 'close and over'. *Moth* fired again, and *Clam* signalled a hit for, her; Hornblower's inner eye was seeing mental pictures of the shells plunging from the sky in among the crew of the *Blanchefleur* as they laboured amid the flames to save their ship, burning, dismasted, and aground. It took only the briefest interval of time for those pictures to form, for the moment the signal was seen in *Clam* Mound bent to fire the mortars, and yet the fuses had not taken fire when the sound of a violent explosion checked him. Hornblower whipped his glass to his eye; an immense gust of smoke showed over the sand-dunes, and in the smoke Hornblower thought he could make out flying specks — corpses or fragments of the ship, blown into the air by the explosion. The fire, or one of *Moth*'s last shells, had reached *Blanchefleur*'s magazines.

"Signal to *Clam*, Mr Mound," said Hornblower "'What do you see of the enemy?'"

They waited for the answer.

"'Enemy — totally — destroyed', sir," read off the master's mate, and the crew gave a ragged cheer.

"Very good, Mr Mound. I think we can leave these shallows now before daylight goes. Hang out the recall, if you please, with *Clam*'s number and *Lotus*'s number."

This watery northern sunshine was deceptive. It shone upon one but it gave one no heat at all. Hornblower shivered violently for a moment — he had been standing inactive, he told himself, upon the *Harvey*'s deck for some hours, and he should have worn a greatcoat. Yet that was not the real explanation of the shudder, and he knew it. The excitement and interest had died away, leaving him gloomy and deflated. It had been a brutal and cold-blooded business, destroying a ship that had no chance of firing back at him. It would read well in a report, and brother officers would tell each other of Hornblower's new achievement, destroying a big French privateer in the teeth of the Swedes and the French amid shoals innumerable. Only he would know of this feeling of inglorious anticlimax.

CHAPTER TEN

Bush wiped his mouth on his table napkin with his usual fussy attention to good manners.

"What do you think the Swedes'll say, sir?" he asked, greatly daring. The responsibility was none of his, and he knew by experience that Hornblower was likely to resent being reminded that Bush was thinking about it.

"They can say what they like," said Hornblower, "but nothing they can say can put *Blanchefleur* together again."

It was such a cordial reply compared with what Hornblower might have said that Bush wondered once more what it was which had wrought the change in Hornblower — whether his new mellowness was the consequence of success, of recognition of promotion, or of marriage. Hornblower was inwardly debating that very question at that very moment as well, oddly enough, and he was inclined to attribute it to advancing years. For a few moments he subjected himself to his usual pitiless self-analysis, almost morbidly intense. He knew he had grown blandly tolerant of the fact that his hair was thinning, and turning grey over his temples — the first time he had seen a gleam of pink scalp as he combed his hair he had been utterly revolted, but by now he had at least grown accustomed to it. Then he looked down the double row of young faces at his table, and his heart warmed to them. Without a doubt, he was growing paternal, coming to like young people in a way new to him; he suddenly became aware, for that matter, that he was growing to like people young or old, and was losing — temporarily at least, said his cautious spirit — that urgent desire to get away by himself and torture himself.

He raised his glass.

"I give you a toast, gentlemen," he said, "to the three officers whose careful attention to duty and whose marked professional ability resulted in the destruction of a dangerous enemy."

Bush and Montgomery and the two midshipmen raised their glasses and drank with enthusiasm, while Mound and Duncan and Freeman looked down at the tablecloth with British modesty; Mound, taken unawares, was blushing like a girl and wriggling uncomfortably in his chair.

"Aren't you going to reply, Mr Mound?" said Montgomery. "You're the senior."

"It was the Commodore," said Mound, eyes still on the tablecloth. "It wasn't us. He did it all."

"That's right," agreed Freeman, shaking his gipsy locks.

It was time to change the subject, thought Hornblower, sensing the approach of an awkward gap in the conversation after this spell of mutual congratulation.

"A song, Mr Freeman. We have all of us heard that you sing well. Let us hear you."

Hornblower did not add that it was from a Junior Lord of the Admiralty that he had heard about Freeman's singing ability, and he concealed the fact that singing meant nothing to him. Other people had this strange desire to hear music, and it was well to gratify the odd whim.

There was nothing self-conscious about Freeman when it came to singing: he simply lifted his chin, opened his mouth, and sang.

When first I looked in Chloe's eyes
Sapphire seas and summer skies —

An odd thing this music was. Freeman was clearly performing some interesting and difficult feat; he was giving decided pleasure to these others (Hornblower stole a glance at them), but all he was doing was to squeak and to grunt in different fashions, and drag out the words in an arbitrary way — and such words. For the thousandth time in his life Hornblower gave up the struggle to imagine just what this music was which other people liked so much. He told himself, as he always did, that for him to make the attempt was like a blind man trying to imagine colour.

Chloe is my o-o-o-only love!

Freeman finished his song, and everyone pounded on the table in genuine applause.

"A very good song, and very well sung," said Hornblower.

Montgomery was trying to catch his eye.

"Will you excuse me, sir?" he said. "I have the second dogwatch."

That sufficed to break up the party; the three lieutenants had to return to their own ships, Bush wanted to take a look round on deck, and the two midshipmen, with a proper appreciation of the insignificance of their species, hastened to offer their thanks for their entertainment and take their departure.

That was quite the right sort of party, thought Hornblower, watching them go — good food, lively talk, and a quick ending. He stepped out into the stern gallery, stooping carefully to avoid the low cove overhead. At six o'clock in the evening it was still broad daylight; the sun had not nearly set, but was shining into the gallery from right aft, and a faint streak beneath it showed where Bornholm lay just above the horizon. The cutter, her mainsail pulled aft as flat as a board, passed close beneath him as she turned close-hauled under the stern with the three lieutenants in the sternsheets going back to their ships — the wind was northwesterly again. The young men were skylarking together until one of them caught sight of the Commodore up in the stern gallery, and then they promptly stiffened into correct attitudes. Hornblower smiled at himself for having grown fond of those boys, and he turned back into the cabin again to relieve them of the strain of being under his eye. Braun was waiting for him.

"I have read through the newspapers, sir," he said. *Lotus* had intercepted a Prussian fishing-boat that afternoon, and had released her after confiscating her catch and taking these newspapers from her.

"Well?"

"This one is the *Königsberger Hartunsche Zeitung*, sir, published under French censorship, of course. This front page is taken up with the meeting at Dresden. Bonaparte is there with seven kings and twenty-one sovereign princes."

"Seven kings?"

"The kings of Holland, Naples, Bavaria, Württemberg, Westphalia, Saxony, and Prussia, sir," read Braun. "The Grand Dukes of —"

"No need for the rest of the list," said Hornblower. He peered at the ragged sheets and found himself, as usual, thinking what a barbaric language German was. Bonaparte was clearly trying to frighten someone — it could not be England who had faced Bonaparte's wrath without flinching for a dozen years. It might be his own subjects, all the vast mass of western Europe which he had conquered. But the obvious person for Bonaparte to try to cow was the Tsar of Russia. There were plenty of good reasons why Russia should have grown restive under the bullying of her neighbour, and this supreme demonstration of Bonaparte's power was probably designed to frighten her into submission.

"Is there anything about troop movements?" asked Hornblower.

"Yes, sir. I was surprised at the freedom with which they were mentioned. The Imperial Guard is at Dresden. There's the First, the Second" — Braun turned the page — "and the Ninth Army Corps all mentioned. They are in Prussia — headquarters Danzig — and Warsaw."

"Nine army corps," reflected Hornblower. "Three hundred thousand men, I suppose."

"There's a paragraph here which speaks of Murat's reserve cavalry. It says 'there are forty thousand men, superbly mounted and equipped'. Bonaparte reviewed them."

An enormous mass of men was obviously accumulating on the frontier between Bonaparte's Empire and Russia. Bonaparte would have the Prussian and Austrian armies under his orders too. Half a million men — six hundred thousand men — the imagination failed to grasp the figures. A vast tide of humanity was piling up here in eastern Europe. If Russia failed to be impressed by the threat, it was hard to believe that anything could survive the onrush of such a mass of men. The doom of Russia appeared to be sealed; she must either submit or be destroyed. No continental nation yet had successfully opposed Bonaparte, although every single one had felt the violence of his attack; only England still withstood him, and Spain still fought on although his armies had ravaged every village and every valley in the unhappy peninsula.

Doubt came back into Hornblower's mind. He could not see that Bonaparte would derive any benefit from the conquest of Russia proportionate to the effort needed, or even proportionate to the slight risk involved.

Bonaparte ought to be able to find a far more profitable employment for the men and the money. Probably there would be no war. Russia would submit, and England would face a Europe every square mile of which would be in the tyrant's hands. And yet —

"This one is the *Warsaw Gazette*, sir," went on Braun. "A little more official, from the French point of view, even than the other one, although it's in the Polish language. Here is a long article about Russia. It speaks of 'the Cossack menace to Europe'. It calls Alexander 'the barbarian ruler of a barbarian people'. 'The successor of Genghis Khan.' It says that 'St Petersburg is the focus of all the potential anarchy of Europe' — 'a menace to the peace of the world' — 'deliberately hostile to the benefits conferred upon the world by the French people'."

"And that must be published with Bonaparte's consent," commented Hornblower, half to himself, but Braun was still deep in the article.

"The wanton ravisher of Finland," read Braun, more than half to himself. He raised his green eyes from the sheet. There was a gleam of hatred in them that startled Hornblower; it reminded him of what he was in a fair way to forget, that Braun was a penniless exile on account of Russia's attack on Finland. Braun had taken service with England, but that was at a time when Russia was at least England's nominal enemy. Hornblower made a mental note that it might be as well not to trust Braun with any confidential business regarding Russia; of her own free will Russia would never restore Finnish independence, and there was always the chance that Bonaparte might do so — that he might restore what Bonaparte would call Finnish independence, for what that was worth. There were still people who might be deceived by Bonaparte's professions, despite his record of deceit and broken faith, of cruelty and robbery.

Braun would bear watching, thought Hornblower — that would be something more to bear in mind, as if he did not have enough worries or carry enough responsibility already. He could joke with Bush about the Swedes and the Russians, but secretly anxiety was gnawing at him. The Swedes might well be exasperated by the destruction of the *Blanchefleur* in Pomeranian waters. That might be the last straw; Bernadotte might at this very moment be contemplating wholehearted alliance with Bonaparte and war with England. The prospect of

the enmity of Sweden as well as that of France might easily break down Russia's resolution. England might find herself with the whole world in arms against her as a result of Hornblower's action. A fine climax that would be to his first independent command. Those cursed brothers of Barbara's would sneer in superior fashion at his failure.

Hornblower shook himself with an effort out of this nightmare, to find that Braun was obviously still in his. The hatred in his eyes, the intensity of his expression were quite startling. And then someone knocked on the cabin door and Braun came out of his dream and slipped instantly into his old attitude of attentive deference.

"Come in," shouted Hornblower.

It was one of the midshipmen of the watch.

"Mr Montgomery sent me with this signal from *Raven*, sir."

He held out the slate; it was scrawled with the words written on it by the signal officer.

Have met Swedish vessel desirous of speaking with Commodore.

"I'll come on deck," said Hornblower. "Ask the captain if he'll be kind enough to come too."

"The cap'n's on deck, sir."

"Very good."

Bush and Montgomery and half a dozen officers had their glasses trained towards the topsails of the *Raven* at her station far out on the port beam as the squadron swept up the Baltic. There was still an hour of daylight left.

"Captain Bush," said Hornblower, "I'd be obliged if you would have the helm put up and run down towards her."

"Aye aye, sir."

"And signal for the squadron to take up night stations, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

Nonsuch heaved her ponderous self about, lying over as she took the wind abeam while the watch hauled aft on the starboard braces.

"There's a sail just astern of *Raven*, sir," said Montgomery. "Looks like a brig. A Swede from the cut of her tops'ls, sir. One of those Baltic traders you see in Leith Roads."

"Thank you," said Hornblower.

It would not be long before he heard what the news was. It might well be — it probably would be — something desperately unpleasant. Some new load of responsibility for his shoulders, for certain, even if it told of no actual disaster. He found himself envying Montgomery his simple duties of officer of the watch, with nothing more to do than simply obey orders and keep an eye on the weather, with the blessed obligation of having to refer all important decisions to a superior. Hornblower made himself stand still on the quarter-deck, his hands clasped behind him, as *Nonsuch* and the brig approached each other, as first the brig's courses and then her hull came up over the horizon. To the west the sky was a flaming crimson, but twilight lingered on as the brig came up into the wind.

"Captain Bush," said Hornblower, "will you heave to, if you please? They are putting a boat overside."

He would not display vulgar curiosity by staring at the boat as it was launched, or by looking down into it as it came alongside; he paced peacefully up and down the quarter-deck in the lovely evening, looking in every direction save towards the boat, while the rest of the officers and the men chattered and stared and speculated. Yet Hornblower, for all his air of sublime indifference, turned to face the entry-port at the exact moment when the visitor was coming in over the side. The first thing Hornblower saw was a fore-and-aft cocked hat with a white plume that seemed familiar, and then under the hat appeared the heavy face and portly form of Baron Basse. He laid the hat across his chest to make his bow just as he had done before.

"Your servant, sir," said Hornblower, saluting stiffly. He was handicapped by the fact that although he could remember Basse very well, and could have described him to perfection, he did not remember his name. He turned to the midshipman of the watch. "Pass the word for Mr Braun."

The Swedish gentleman was saying something, but what it was Hornblower could not imagine.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Hornblower, and Basse repeated what he said, with no more success at conveying his meaning. He began once more laboriously, but cut himself short when he saw Hornblower distractedly looking away from him towards the entry-port. Hornblower was doing his best to be polite, but he could see a bearskin headdress coming in at the entry-port, and that was too intriguing a sight for him possibly to withstand its attraction. A big bearskin cap with a red plume, a bristling red moustache, a scarlet tunic, a red sash, a profusion of gold lace, blue pantaloons with a red stripe, high boots, a sword whose golden hilt glowed strangely in the fading light; that was the uniform of the Guards, surely. The wearer of the uniform was undersized for a guardsman, but he certainly knew his ceremonial; his hand was at the salute to the quarter-deck as he came in through the entry-port, and then he strode forward on short legs and brought his heels together in a smart Guards salute to Hornblower.

"Good evening, sir," he said. "You are Captain Sir Horatio Hornblower?"

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"May I introduce myself? I am Colonel Lord Wychwood, of the First Guards."

"Good evening," said Hornblower coolly. As Commodore he was decidedly senior to a Colonel, and he could afford to be cool while waiting on events. He supposed that he would soon hear the explanation of this arrival of a Colonel of the Grenadier Guards in full regimentals in the middle of the Baltic Sea.

"I have despatches," said Lord Wychwood, fumbling in the breast of his tunic, "from our Ambassador at Stockholm for you, sir."

"Let us go to my cabin, sir," said Hornblower. He darted a glance at Basse.

"You have already made the acquaintance of Baron Basse, I understand? He has messages for you, too."

"Then perhaps the Baron will be kind enough to come below as well. If you gentlemen will be kind enough to allow me to precede you, I will show the way."

Braun interpreted ceremoniously as Hornblower headed the procession. In the darkened cabin Brown hastened to bring lamps and brought forward chairs; Wychwood lowered himself into his with all the caution demanded by his tight overalls.

"You've heard what Boney's done?" he began.

"I have heard nothing recently."

"He sent 50,000 troops into Swedish Pomerania the moment he got the news of what you did off Stralsund."

"Indeed?"

"They acted in their usual style. Vandamme was in command. He began by fining the municipality of Stralsund 100,000 francs for not greeting his arrival with the ringing of the church bells. He interrupted the service at the church of the Holy Ghost so as to lay hold of the communion plate. He seized the Governor-General and threw him into gaol. The troops were out of hand because the garrison of Rügen tried to oppose their crossing. There was looting and murder and rape all through Rügen. The Baron here escaped in a fishing-boat. All the other officials and the troops are prisoners."

"So Boney is at war with Sweden now?"

Wychwood shrugged his shoulders; everyone in the Baltic seemed to shrug shoulders when it was a matter of having to make a downright statement regarding peace and war.

"The Baron here can tell you about that," said Wychwood. They turned their glances towards the Baron, who began a voluble explanation in Swedish; Braun, standing against the bulkhead, translated.

"He says that the question of peace and war lies with the Crown Prince, His Royal Highness Charles John, who used to be known as Marshal Bernadotte. His Royal Highness is not in Sweden at the moment. He is visiting the Tsar in Russia."

"I expect that's what these despatches I have for you are about, sir," said Wychwood. He produced a large canvas envelope, heavily sealed, and handed it over. Hornblower tore it open and read the contents.

Embassy of His Britannic Majesty at Stockholm

May 20, 1812

SIR,

The bearer of this despatch, Colonel Lord Wychwood, First Guards, will inform you as to the political situation here. It is to be hoped that Bonaparte's invasion of Swedish Pomerania will bring about a declaration of war on

the part of the Swedish government. It is therefore necessary that all possible aid should be given to Swedish officials who wish to communicate with H.R.H. the Crown Prince. You are therefore directed and required to use all diligence and despatch to escort or convey any such officials on their way to Russia. You are further directed and required to make all use of this opportunity to enable Lord Wychwood to open communication with the Russian government so as to assure H.I.M. the Tsar of the full support of His Majesty's forces by land and sea in the event of war between H. I. M. and the French government. You will further make all use of any opportunity which may present itself to you to further good relations between H.M. and H.I.M.

Your obd't servant,
H. L. MERRY, *H.B.M.'s Ambassador
to the Court of Stockholm*

CAPTAIN SIR HORATIO HORNBLOWER, K.B.

Commodore Commanding the British Squadron in the Baltic

Hornblower read the orders through twice, carefully. There was an important decision to be made. Merry had no business giving orders, and especially had no business to give orders in the explicit 'directed and required' wording which was the cherished prerogative of his naval superiors. An Ambassador was an important official — to a naval officer in foreign waters the most important official after the Lords of Admiralty — but he could only request and advise, not give orders. If Hornblower should follow Merry's instructions and the matter turn out ill he would have no excuse to plead to the Admiralty. Yet on the other hand Hornblower knew only too well that if he were to ignore Merry's letter there would be bitter complaints sent to London.

Hornblower recalled his Admiralty orders to himself; they gave him wide discretion as to how he should behave towards the northern powers. Merry's letter relieved him of no responsibility. He could allow Wychwood and Basse to proceed in the Swedish brig, or he could convey them himself; the point at issue was whether the news of Bonaparte's latest aggression should be conveyed by a British squadron or not. Bearers of bad tidings were always unpopular — a ridiculous detail to have to bear in mind, but an important one. The two potentates might feel exasperated at being reminded of the meddling British Navy, bringing trouble to everyone. On the other hand, the presence of a British squadron far up the Baltic, at the very gates of St Petersburg, might be a salutary reminder of the length of England's arm. Submission to Bonaparte or the part of Sweden and Russia must mean war, real actual war with England this time; Bonaparte would be satisfied with nothing less. The sight of British topsails on the horizon, the knowledge that war would mean instant blockade, instant capture of every ship that ventured out, constant harassing of all their shores, might be a powerful argument at their councils. Bonaparte might be at their frontiers, but England would be at their doors. Hornblower made his decision.

"Gentlemen," he said. "I think it is my duty to convey you to Russia in this squadron. I can offer you the hospitality of this ship, if you would be kind enough to accept it."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Despite the fact that he was a peer and a guardsman, despite his little red moustache and his funny pop-eyes and his ludicrous appearance in uniform, Wychwood was a shrewd and experienced man of the world. At thirty-five he had visited two-thirds of the Courts of Europe, he was familiar with their intrigues, knew their weaknesses and their strengths, the military power of which they could dispose, their prejudices and their traditions. He sat (at Hornblower's invitation) in Hornblower's cabin while a brisk westerly wind sent the squadron rolling and pitching up the Baltic. Basse was incapacitated in his berth with seasickness, so that they were not embarrassed by his presence — Wychwood's cheeks were a little pale as well, and his manner occasionally hinted at an inward preoccupation, but he controlled himself manfully.

"Boney's weakness," said Wychwood, "is that he thinks all the opposition in the world can be dissolved by force. Often he's right, of course; you have only to look back at his career to see that. But sometimes he is wrong. People would rather fight — would rather die — than be slaves to his will any longer."

"Spain showed that," said Hornblower.

"Yes. But with Russia it still may be different. Russia is the Tsar, much more definitely than Spain was the Bourbon monarchy. If Alexander chooses to submit to Boney's threats, Russia will submit. Alexander's swallowed insults enough already."

"He's swallowed other things besides insults," said Hornblower dryly.

"Finland, you mean? That's perfectly true. And all the other Baltic provinces, Lithuania and Courland and so on. You know better than I do how much difference that makes to the security of St Petersburg — I find it hard to blame him for it. At home, of course, his attack on Finland roused a good deal of feeling. I hope they forget it if he becomes our ally."

"And what are the chances of that?"

"God knows. If he can be sure of the Swedish alliance he may fight. And that depends on whether Bernadotte is willing to submit to having Pomerania taken away from him."

"Bonaparte made a false step there," said Hornblower.

"Yes, by God! The British colours are like a red rag to a bull to him. You have only to show them to get him to charge. The way you destroyed that ship — what was her name? — the *Blanchefleur* under his very nose must have driven him crazy. If anything makes the Swedes fight, it'll be that."

"Let's hope it does," said Hornblower, decidedly comforted.

He knew he had taken a bold step when he went in to destroy the *Blanchefleur*; if the subsequent political repercussions should be unfavourable he might well be called to account. His only justification would be the final event; a more cautious man would have held back and contented himself with keeping the privateer under observation. Probably that would have resulted in her slipping clean away the first foggy night, to resume her ravages among British shipping, but no man could be held responsible for fog. And if Sweden became an active enemy all England would clamour for the head of the officer they deemed responsible. Yet come what might he could not but feel that he had taken the best course in proving that England had the power to strike and would not hesitate to use it. There were few occasions in history when timidity was wise. They were bringing further news to St Petersburg, too. Wellington was on the offensive in Spain; in two desperate strokes he had cleared his front by storming Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz, and now was ready to strike into the heart of the Peninsula. The knowledge that a large part of Bonaparte's army was hotly engaged in the South might bring firmness to the councils of the North.

His brother-in-law was an Earl now — another victory or two would make him a Duke, reflected Hornblower. Barbara would be proud of him, and to Hornblower that was another reason for him to dread failure for himself; Barbara had a high standard of comparison. But she would understand. She would know how high were the stakes he was playing for in the Baltic — as high as those her brother was playing for in Spain; she would know what moral courage was needed to make the kind of decisions he had made. She would be considerate; and at that moment Hornblower told himself that he did not want his wife to have to be considerate on his account. The thought revolted him, drove him to make his excuses to Wychwood and plunge out on deck, into the pouring rain under the grey sky, to walk the quarter-deck while the other officers eyed him askance and kept well clear of him. There was not a soul in the squadron who had not heard that only fools crossed the Commodore's hawse when he was walking the deck.

The brisk wind was chill, even in late May, here in the North Baltic; the squadron pitched and rolled over the short steep waves, leaden-hued under the leaden sky, as it drove ever northward towards the Gulf of Finland, towards Russia, where the destiny of the world hung in the balance. The night was hardly darker than the sky, up here in the sixtieth degree of north latitude, when the sky cleared, for the sun was barely hidden below the horizon and the moon shone coldly in the twilight as they drove past Hoghland and hove to in sight of Lavansaari so as to approach Kronstadt after sunrise.

Braun was on deck early, leaning against the rail, craning over in fact; that faint grey smear on the horizon to the northward was his native land, the Finland of lake and forest which the Tsar had just conquered and from which he was a hopeless exile. Hornblower noted the dejection of the poor devil's pose and was sorry for him, even in the keen excitement of anticipation regarding the reception they might be accorded. Bush came bustling up, in all the glory of epaulettes and sword, darting eager glances over the deck and aloft to make quite sure that everything in the ship was ready to bear the inspection of an unfriendly power.

"Captain Bush," said Hornblower, "I'd be obliged if you would square away for Kronstadt."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower would have liked to have asked if the arrangements for saluting were properly in train, but he forbore. He could trust Bush with any routine duty, and he had to be very careful not to interfere with the working of the ship. He was glad that so far he had never forgotten to make use of the polite forms of request when giving orders to Bush, who was his equal in substantive rank. 'I'd be obliged' and 'if you please' still came strangely enough to his lips as a preface to an order.

He turned his back on the dawn and trained his glass aft on the squadron; they were squaring away and taking up their stations astern in succession, the two sloops, and then the two bomb-vessels, and the cutter last.

"General signal," he snapped, "'Keep better station'."

He wanted his squadron to come up the difficult channel in exact, regular order, like beads on a string. Out of the tail of his eye he saw Basse and Wychwood come on deck, and he ignored them.

"Make that signal again," he rasped, "with *Harvey's* number."

Harvey was yawing slightly from her course; young Mound had better keep a sharp eye on his helmsman, or he would be in trouble. To starboard, where the wide shoals extended from the Oranienbaum shore, there were buoys to mark the limits of the channel, which serpentine back and forth in unpredictable fashion. If ever he had to penetrate this channel as an enemy he would find it a tricky business. There were the low grey fortifications of Kronstadt on the port bow; a turn in the channel sent the *Nonsuch* heading directly for them, so that in the event of fighting the fire of the guns there would enfilade the whole line. Then the channel swung back again, and then it straightened out so that all ships would be forced to pass close under the guns of Kronstadt. Through his glass Hornblower made out the blue and white flag of Imperial Russia flying above the grey walls.

"Make the signal, 'anchor'," said Hornblower to the signal midshipman, and then he darted a meaning glance at Bush, who nodded. He had everything ready. The ship crept forward, closer and closer under the guns.

"Haul down," said Hornblower, and the signal to anchor came down in a flash, putting the order into force at that moment. Six cables roared through six hawseholes. In the six ships a thousand men poured aloft, and the canvas vanished as though by magic as the ships swung round to their cables.

"Pretty fair," said Hornblower to himself, realizing, with an inward smile at his own weakness, that no evolution could ever be carried out to his perfect satisfaction. Forward the saluting gun began to crash out its marks of respect for the Russian flag; Hornblower saw a puff of smoke from the fortress and then the sound of the first gun of the return salute reached his ears. Eleven guns; they recognized his broad pendant, then, and knew what compliments were due to a Commodore. Here came the doctor's boat to give them pratique; the doctor was a man with a large black beard who spoke limping French. His visit was a good opportunity to test Braun's ability to speak Russian — Braun translated with facility Hornblower's declaration that there was no infectious disease on board. Everyone in the ship was a little excited at this visit to Russia, and crowded the side to look down at the Russian boat's crew, seated in their boat with the bowman hooking on to the chains, but they appeared no different from any other boat's crew — much the same kind of coloured shirts and ragged trousers and bare feet, and they handled their craft capably enough. It was Bush who drove the *Nonsuch's* crew from the side; he was hotly indignant about their blatant curiosity and the noise they made.

"Chattering like a herd of monkeys," said Bush indignantly to the first lieutenant. "Making more noise than a tree full of jackdaws. What'll these Russians think of us? Set the men to work and keep 'em at it."

In these conditions of doubtful neutrality it would be best for the first contact with the shore to be made by Basse. At least ostensibly the squadron had come to Kronstadt merely to bring him with his news to the Swedish Crown Prince. Hornblower had his barge hoisted out and sent Basse away in it, and the boat returned without him but with no other information. Basse had landed at the jetty, and the barge, in accordance with Hornblower's orders, had immediately returned. Apart from the salute and the doctor's visit the Russian Empire chose to ignore the British squadron's existence.

"What sort of people do they think we are?" grumbled Bush, fretting, as usual, at inaction. Bush knew as well as Hornblower that in all matters of diplomacy it was best to display no eagerness at all, but he could not force himself to appear calm as Hornblower could. He gave a meaning glance at Hornblower's full uniform and ribbon and star, donned so as to be ready for any official occasion whatever; he wanted Hornblower to

proceed on shore to call on the local governor and put the whole situation to the test, but Hornblower was obstinate. He was waiting for an invitation. England had survived the storm in Europe so far without a Russian alliance, and future relations would be simplified if Russia were to make the first advances now — provided she did make them. His squadron was present merely to bring Basse to report to Bernadotte; if the Russian Government chose to take advantage of his presence to approach him, well and good. Otherwise he would have to devise some other plan.

"The telegraph hasn't ceased working since Basse reached shore," commented Bush, glass to eye. The three gaunt black arms of the semaphore on the top of the fortress were whirling busily round transmitting messages to the next station higher up the bay. Otherwise there was almost nothing to be seen; across the low land of the island were visible a few masts to mark the site of the naval dockyard; two or three merchant ships swung at anchor in that direction, and a few fishing-boats plied their trade.

"There goes a boat!" said Montgomery suddenly.

A smart pinnace was shooting out from the direction of the dockyard heading across the channel almost directly away from *Nonsuch*.

"Russian Imperial colours," said Bush. "Can anyone see who's onboard?"

But the pinnace was too far away for any details to be visible by telescope.

"I think I can see gold lace," said Carlin, doubtfully.

"Much good that is," said Bush. "A blind man would guess there was gold lace in a Russian navy pinnace at Kronstadt."

The pinnace passed away into the distance, quartering across the broad channel until her white sail dwindled to a speck.

"Call me if anything happens, if you please, Captain Bush," said Hornblower.

He went off below to his cabin; Brown relieved him of his heavy full-dress coat with the epaulettes, and, once more alone, he began to fidget about the cabin. He opened the case of pistols which Barbara had given him, read the card inside it — the last word he had received from her — and shut the case again. He stepped out into the stern gallery and returned to the cabin. The realization that he was worried annoyed him; he took down Archdeacon Coxe's travels from the bookshelf and set himself seriously to read the Archdeacon's intensely wearisome remarks about the condition of Russia, in the endeavour to inform himself more fully about the northern powers. But the words made sheer nonsense to him; he took up the slim volume of *Childe Harold* instead.

"Bombast and fustian," he said to himself, flipping through the pages.

He heard six bells strike; it was still no later than eleven in the morning, and he could not possibly dine before two.

He got up from his chair and made himself lie on his cot, shut his eyes and grimly clenched his hands and tried to force himself to doze. He could not possibly go up on deck again and walk up and down, as he wanted to — that would be a public admission that he was restless and nervous. The minutes passed on leaden feet; he felt he had never felt so caged and unhappy before in his life.

Eight bells went, and he heard the watch relieved; it was like an eternity before he heard a bustle on the half-deck outside and someone knocked on the door. Hornblower settled himself in an attitude of complete relaxation on his cot.

"Come in!" he called, and he blinked and peered at the midshipman as if he had just awakened from a sound sleep.

"Boat heading towards us, sir," said the midshipman.

"I'll come up," said Hornblower. "Pass the word for my cox'n."

Brown helped him into his dress-coat, and he reached the deck while the boat was still some distance off.

"The same pinnace that we saw before, sir," commented Hurst.

The pinnace came into the wind, and took in her mainsail while the bowman hailed the ship in Russian.

"Where's Mr Braun?" said Hornblower.

The hail was repeated, and Braun translated.

"He is asking permission to hook on to us, sir. And he says he has a message for you."

"Tell him to come alongside," said Hornblower, This dependence upon an interpreter always irritated him.

The boat's crew was smart, dressed in something like a uniform with blue shirts and white trousers, and in the stern-sheets, ready to mount the side, was an officer in military uniform, frogged across the breast in Hussar fashion. The Hussar came clumsily up the side, and glanced round, saluting the mass of gold lace which awaited him. Then he produced a letter, which he offered with a further explanation in Russian.

"From His Imperial Majesty the Tsar," translated Braun with a catch in his voice.

Hornblower took the letter; it was addressed in French —

M. LE CHEF D'ESCADRE LE CAPITAIN SIR HORNBLOWER,
VAISSEAU BRITANNIQUE NOONSUCH.

Apparently the Tsar's secretary, however competent he might be in other ways, was shaky regarding both British titles and spelling. The letter within was written in French as well — it was pleasant to be able to translate without Braun's assistance.

The Imperial Palace of Peterhof
Grand Marshalate of the Imperial Court
May 30, 1812

SIR,

I am commanded by His Imperial Majesty the Emperor of All the Russias to express to you His Imperial Majesty's pleasure at hearing of your arrival in His Imperial Majesty's waters. His Imperial Majesty and His Royal Highness the Prince of Sweden further command you to dinner at this palace to-day at four o'clock accompanied by your staff. His Excellency the Minister of Marine has put at your disposal a boat which will convey you and your party direct to the quay, and the officer who conveys this letter to you will serve as your guide.

Accept, sir, the assurances of my highest consideration,

KOTCHUBEY, *Grand Marshal of the Court*

"I am invited to dinner with the Tsar and Bernadotte," said Hornblower to Bush; he handed over the letter, and Bush looked at it wisely with his head on one side as if he could read French.

"You're going, I suppose, sir?"

"Yes."

It would hardly be tactful to begin his first encounter with the Russian and Swedish authorities by refusing an Imperial and a royal command.

Hornblower suddenly glanced round to find half the officers of the ship hanging on his words. This public discussion of his affairs was not in the least dignified, and detracted vastly from the pomp and mystery which should surround a Commodore. He had fallen sadly away from his old standards.

"Have none of you anything better to do than stand about and gape?" he bellowed, rounding on the herd. "I can find mastheads even for senior officers if necessary."

They began to slink away in gratifying fright, each one doing his best to avoid catching his eye as he glowered round him. That was a very desirable result. Then he became aware that the Hussar had yet another letter in his hand. He took it from him and glanced at the superscription.

"Here, Colonel, this is for you," he said, handing it to Wychwood before turning back to Bush. "The Tsar and Bernadotte are at Peterhof — the place is marked on the chart, on the Oranienbaum shore over there. You will be in command in my absence, of course."

Bush's face reflected a complexity of emotions; Hornblower knew that he was remembering other occasions when Hornblower had left him in command, to go on shore to beard a mad tyrant on the coast of Central America, or to undertake some harebrained adventure on the coast of France.

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush.

"I have to take my staff," said Hornblower. "Who do you think would care to dine with the Tsar?"

He could afford to be jocose with Bush, who held the same substantive rank as himself — especially after his recent assertion of his dignity.

"You'll need Braun, I suppose, sir?"

"I suppose so."

Dinner with the Tsar would be a notable experience for any young officer, something he would be able to yarn about for the rest of his life. Good service could be rewarded by an invitation; and at the same time some future Admiral might gain invaluable experience.

"I'll take Hurst," decided Hornblower; there were not the makings of an Admiral in the first lieutenant, but discipline demanded that he be included in the party. "And young Mound, if you'll signal for him. And a midshipman. Who do you suggest?"

"Somers is the brightest, sir."

"The fat one? Very good, I'll take him. Have you been invited, too, Colonel?"

"I have, sir," answered Wychwood.

"We must be there at four. How long will it take to arrive?"

He looked at the Hussar, who did not understand him, and then looked round for Braun, who had left the deck, which was perfectly infuriating. When Hornblower had turned on the idling crowd he had not meant Braun to go, of course. It was just like Braun with his mock humble pose to take his chief literally. Hornblower angrily ordered the word to be passed for him, and fumed until he came up again; yet when he came there was small satisfaction to be derived from his services, for when Hornblower's question was translated to the Hussar the latter merely raised his eyes to the sky and shrugged his shoulders before offering the information — translated by Braun — that it might be two hours and it might be four. As a soldier the Hussar would make no estimate of the time necessary for a journey by boat.

"We mustn't be late for a royal command, damn it," said Hornblower. "We'll leave in half an hour."

Hornblower came punctually to the ship's side to find the others awaiting him, young Somers' plump cheeks empurpled with the constriction of his stock, Hurst and Mound uncomfortable in their full dress, Braun stiffly uniformed.

"Carry on," said Hornblower.

Young Somers went first in accordance with the age-old rule of the junior getting first into a boat, and Braun followed him. Braun's lifted arm, as he went over the side, pulled up his tight coat for a moment, and his waistcoat with it. Something flashed momentarily into view at his waistband; something black — Hornblower's eyes were resting on it at that moment. It must have been the butt of a pistol, the barrel of it pushed into the waistband of his breeches, round by his hip where the bulge would be least noticeable. The fellow was wearing his sword, of course. Hornblower began to wonder why he should take a pistol. But Mound and Hurst had followed him down by this time, and Wychwood was heaving himself over, in his scarlet tunic and bearskin. The Hussar should go next, so that the Commodore should descend last, but he was hanging back with misplaced politeness, bowing and making way for the Commodore.

"After you, sir," said Hornblower to his deaf ears.

Hornblower had positively to stamp his foot to compel the ignorant soldier to precede him, and then he swung himself over to the shrilling of the pipes of the boatswain's mates and the rigid salutes of the ship's officers. He dropped into the sternsheets, encumbered with his boat-cloak. There was a tiny cabin forward, where he joined Wychwood and Hurst. Mound and the warrant officers and the Hussar kept themselves discreetly in the stern. The coxswain yelled some strange order and the boat cast off, the lugsail was hoisted and they headed over to the Oranienbaum shore.

From where he sat Hornblower could see Braun sitting stiffly in the sternsheets. That business of the pistol was rather curious. Presumably he had fears of attack or arrest on shore as a recent rebel, and wished to have the means to defend himself. But not even the Russians would lay hands on an English officer, in a British uniform. That was a big pistol butt; a black one too. Hornblower suddenly moved uneasily on his locker, uncrossed his knees and recrossed them. That was one of the pistols Barbara had given him the butt of which he had seen in Braun's waistband. He remembered the shape of the ebony butt too well to be mistaken about it.

The presence of a thief on board a ship was always upsetting and disturbing; theft was so easy and suspicion could be spread so wide, although that was not true in this case. It would still be a nasty business accusing Braun of the crime and punishing him for it. An English-made rifled pistol with percussion caps — presumably

the very first of its kind to reach Russia — would command a fabulous price at the Russian Court. Braun could reasonably expect to obtain two or three hundred guineas for it. And yet even with all his prejudice against him he could not believe Braun capable of petty theft.

The coxswain suddenly shouted a new order, and the pinnacle came about on the other tack; the dipping lug with which she was equipped had to be taken in and reset when she tacked, and Hornblower watched the evolution with professional interest. The Russian sailors were smart and handy enough, but that was to be expected of the crew of the pinnacle specially attached to the service of the Russian Admiralty. The *Nonsuch* was already far astern, hull down. A buoy made its appearance close alongside, and passed away astern, the rapidity of its passage proof of the speed the pinnacle was making through the water.

"We're heading sou'west now, sir," commented Hurst; "we're out of the fairway."

He climbed up out of the little cabin and peered ahead.

"Land right ahead, sir," he reported, "but no sign of any palace."

"I know nothing about the Peterhof," remarked Wychwood. "I was in Tsarskoe Selo and the old Winter Palace as a subaltern on Wilson's staff before Tilsit. The Peterhof's one of the lesser palaces; I expect they chose it for this meeting so that Bernadotte could arrive direct by sea."

It was quite futile to debate what would be the result of this evening's meeting, and yet the temptation was overwhelming. The minutes slipped by until the coxswain shouted a new order. The lugsail came down, and the piles of a jetty came into sight beside the pinnacle as she rounded-to. Lines were thrown out and the pinnacle drew in beside a broad companion way rundown into the water from the top of the jetty. This time the Russian officer's politeness was not misplaced. First out of a boat and last in, in order of seniority, was the etiquette of the Navy; Hornblower ducked out of the little cabin, stepped on to the companionway and began to walk up, hurriedly making sure that his cocked hat was on straight and his sword properly slung. As he reached the top someone shouted an order; there was a guard of twenty soldiers drawn up there, grenadiers in bearskins and blue coats. They put their left arms across their breasts as they presented arms in a fashion that appeared backhanded to a man accustomed to receiving salutes from the Royal Marines. Yet the uniforms and the pose seemed strangely familiar; Hornblower realized that he was being reminded of the wooden soldiers that young Richard had been playing with — a box of German soldiers smuggled out of the continental blockade and presented to him by one of Barbara's diplomatic friends. Of course the Russian Army was organized on the German model, and German uniforms had been introduced by Peter III. Hornblower stiffly returned the salute of the officer of the guard, standing at attention long enough for the rest of the party to catch him up; the Hussar spoke rapidly to Braun in Russian.

"There are carriages waiting for us, sir," Braun interpreted, Hornblower could see them at the end of the jetty, two big open landaus, with fine horses to each; in the drivers' seats sat coachmen pigtailed and powdered wearing red coats — not the scarlet of the British Army or of the British royal liveries, but a softer, strawberry red. Footmen similarly dressed stood at the horses' heads and at the carriage doors.

"Senior officers go in the first carriage," explained Braun.

Hornblower climbed in, with Wychwood and Hurst after him; with an apologetic smile the Hussar followed them and sat with his back to the horses. The door shut. One footman leaped up beside the coachman and the other sprang up behind, and the horses dashed forward. The road wound through a vast park, alternate sweeps of grass and groves of trees; here and there fountains threw lofty jets of water at the sky, and marble naiads posed by marble basins. Occasional turns in the road opened up beautiful vistas down the terraced lawns; there were long flights of marble steps and beautiful little marble pavilions, but also, at every turning, beside every fountain and every pavilion, there were sentries on guard, stiffly presenting arms as the carriages whirled by.

"Every Tsar for the last three generations has been murdered," remarked Wychwood. "It's only the women who die in their beds. Alexander is taking precautions."

The carriage turned sharply again and came out on a broad gravelled parade ground; on the farther side Hornblower just had time to see the palace, a rambling rococo building of pink and grey stone with a dome at either end, before the carriage drew up at the entrance to the salute of a further guard, and a white-powdered footman opened the doors. With a few polite words in Russian the Hussar led the party forward up a flight of pink marble steps and into a lofty anteroom. A swarm of servants came forward to take their boat-cloaks;

Hornblower remembered to put his cocked hat under his arm and the others followed his example. The folding doors beyond were thrown open, and they went towards them, to be received by a dignified official whose coat was of the same Imperial red where the colour was visible through the gold lace. He wore powder and carried in his hand a gold-tipped ebony stave.

"Kotchubey," he said, speaking fair French. "Grand Marshal of the Palace. Commodore Hornblower? Lord Wychwood?"

They bowed to him, and Hornblower presented the others; he saw the Grand Marshal run an all-embracing eye over their uniforms to make sure that nothing unworthy of the Court of the Tsar would penetrate farther into the palace. Then he turned back to Hornblower and Wychwood.

"His Excellency the Minister of Marine would be honoured if Commodore Hornblower would grant him time for a short interview."

"I am at His Excellency's service," said Hornblower, "but I am here at the command of His Imperial Majesty."

"That is very good of you, sir. There will be time before His Imperial Majesty appears. And His Excellency the Minister of Foreign Affairs would be honoured by Lord Wychwood's attention for a few minutes in a similar way."

"I am at His Excellency's service," said Wychwood. For a man of his experience his French was remarkably poor.

"Thank you," said Kotchubey.

He turned, and three more officers of the Court approached at his gesture. They wore less gold lace than Kotchubey, and from the gold keys embroidered on their lapels Hornblower knew them to be chamberlains. There were further introductions, more bows.

"Now if you have the kindness to accompany me, sir —" said Kotchubey to Hornblower.

Two chamberlains took charge of the junior officers, one took charge of Wychwood, and Kotchubey led Hornblower away. Hornblower gave one last glance at his party. Even the stolid Hurst, even the deliberately languid Mound, wore rather scared expressions at being abandoned by their captain like this in an Imperial palace. Hornblower was reminded of children being handed over by their parents to a strange nurse. But Braun's expression was different. His green eyes were glowing with excitement, and there was a new tenseness about his features, and he was casting glances about him like a man preparing himself for some decisive action. Hornblower felt a wave of misgiving break over him; during the excitement of setting foot in Russia he had forgotten about Braun, about the stolen pistol, about everything connected with him. He wanted time to think, and yet Kotchubey was hurrying him away and allowing him no time. They walked through a magnificent room — Hornblower was only just conscious of its furniture, pictures, and statuary — and through folding doors beyond, which were opened for them by two of the footmen who seemed to be present in hundreds. The corridor was wide and lofty, more like a picture gallery than a corridor, but Kotchubey only went a few yards along it. He stopped abruptly at an inconspicuous door, from before which two more footmen stepped with alacrity at his approach. The door opened straight upon a steep winding stairway; half-way up there was another door, this one guarded by four burly soldiers in pink uniforms with high boots and baggy breeches whom Hornblower recognized as the first Cossacks he had ever seen in the flesh. They nearly jammed the narrow stairway as they drew back against the wall to make way; Hornblower had to push past them. Kotchubey scratched upon the door and instantly opened it, immediately drawing Hornblower after him with a gesture as though he were a conspirator.

"Sir Hornblower," he announced, having shut the door. The big man in the vaguely naval uniform, with epaulettes and a string of orders across his breast, must be the Minister of Marine; he came forward cordially, speaking fair French and with a courtly apology for not speaking English. But in the far corner of the room was another figure, tall and slender, in a beautiful light-blue uniform. He was strikingly handsome, but as though he came from another world; the ivory pallor of his cheeks, accentuated by his short black side-whiskers, was more unnatural than unhealthy. He made no move as he sat stiffly upright in the dark corner, his finger-tips resting on a low table before him, and neither of the Russian officials gave any overt sign of acknowledging his presence, but Hornblower knew that it was the Tsar; thinking quickly, he realized that if the Tsar's own officials pretended the Tsar was not there, then he could do no less. He kept his eyes on the Minister of Marine's.

"I trust," said the latter, "that I see you in good health?"

"Thank you," said Hornblower. "I am in the best of health."

"And your squadron?"

"That is in the best of health too, Your Excellency."

"Does it need anything?"

Hornblower had to think quickly again. On the one hand was the desire to appear utterly independent, but on the other there was the nagging knowledge that water would soon be running short. Every commanding officer, whether of ships or squadron, carried always at the back of his mind the vital, urgent need for renewing his ship's drinking water. And a Minister of Marine — even a Russian one — must be aware of that.

"Firewood and water, as always," said Hornblower, "would be of the greatest convenience."

"I shall inquire if it is convenient to send a water-boat to your squadron to-morrow morning," said the Minister.

"I thank Your Excellency," said Hornblower, wondering what he would be asked to do in exchange.

"You have been informed, sir," said the Minister, changing the subject so obviously that Hornblower could only attribute it to nervousness at having the Tsar listening to the conversation, "of Bonaparte's occupation of Swedish Pomerania?"

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"And what is your opinion of that transaction?"

Hornblower delayed his answer while he sorted out his thoughts and worked out the French phrases.

"Typical Bonapartism," he said. "He tolerates neutrality on the part of weak powers only while he can profit by it. The moment he finds it inconveniences him, he treacherously sends forward his army, and on the heels of the army march all the plagues of Bonapartism, terror and famine and misery. The gaol, the firing party, and the secret police. The bankers and the merchants are stripped of all they possess. The men are thrust into the ranks of his army, and the women — all the world knows what happens to the women."

"But do you not believe his object was merely plunder?"

"No, Your Excellency — although plunder is always useful to Bonaparte's top-heavy finances. He overran Pomerania the moment it was apparent that its usefulness as a neutral base for his privateers had ceased with the appearance of my squadron."

Inspiration came to Hornblower at that moment; his expression must have changed, for as he hesitated the Minister prompted him with obvious interest.

"Monsieur was going to say — ?"

"Bonaparte controls the whole Baltic coast now, as far as the frontiers of His Imperial Majesty's dominions. That would be most convenient to him in one particular event, Your Excellency. In the event of his deciding to launch an attack on Russia." Hornblower threw into those words all the power of speech that he could muster, and the Minister nodded — Hornblower did not dare, much as he wanted to, to throw a glance at the Tsar to see what effect his words had on him.

"Bonaparte would never feel easy in his mind regarding his communications while Pomerania was Swedish so long as there was a British fleet in the Baltic. It could be too good a base for an attack on his rear, convoyed by my squadron. He has eliminated that danger now — he can march an army against St Petersburg, should he attack Russia, without fear of its being cut off. It is one more threat to His Imperial Majesty's dominions."

"And how serious do you consider his threats to be regarding Russia, sir?"

"Bonaparte's threats are always serious. You know his methods, Your Excellency. A demand for concessions, and when the concessions are granted then new demands, each one more weakening than the one before, until either the object of his attentions is too weak to oppose him further or is at least so weakened as to make armed resistance fatal. He will not rest until all his demands are granted; and what he demands is nothing short of the dominion of the world, until every nation is in bondage to him."

"Monsieur is very eloquent."

"I am eloquent because I speak from the heart, Your Excellency. For nineteen years, since my boyhood, I have served my country against the monstrous power which overshadows Europe."

"And with what effect has your country fought?"

"My country is still free. In the history of the world that counts for much. And now it counts for more. England is striking back. Portugal, Sicily, are free too, thanks to England. Her armies are marching into Spain even while

I am speaking to you here, Your Excellency. Soon Bonaparte will be defending the very frontiers of his boasted Empire against them. We have found the weak spot in the vast structure; we are probing into it, on to the very foundations, and soon the whole elaborate mass will crumble into ruin."

The little room must be very warm; Hornblower found himself sweating in his heavy uniform.

"And here in the Baltic?"

"Here England has penetrated too. Not one of Bonaparte's ships will move from to-day without my permission. England is ready with her support. She is ready to pour in money and arms to help any power that will withstand the tyrant. Bonaparte is ringed in from the South and the West and the North. There is only the East left to him. That is where he will strike and that is where he must be opposed."

It was the handsome, pale young man in the dark corner of the room to whom these remarks were really addressed. The Minister of Marine had a far smaller stake on the board of international politics than did his master. Other kings in war risked a province or two, risked their dignity or their fame, but the Tsar of Russia, the most powerful and autocratic of them all, risked his life, and there was no gainsaying that. A word from the Tsar might send a nobleman to Siberia; another word might set half a million men on the move to war; but if either move were a false one the Tsar would pay for it with his life. A military defeat, a momentary loss of control over his courtiers or his guards, and the Tsar was doomed, first to dethronement and then to inevitable murder. That had been the fate of his father, and of his grandfather. If he fought and was unsuccessful; if he did not fight and lost his prestige there would be a silken scarf round his throat or a dozen swords between his ribs.

An ormulu clock on a bracket on the wall struck in silvery tones.

"The hour strikes, you see, Your Excellency," said Hornblower. He was shaking with the excitement that boiled within him. He felt weak and empty.

"The hour strikes indeed," answered the Minister. He was clearly struggling desperately not to glance back at the Tsar. "As regards the clock, I regret it deeply, as it reminds me that if I detain you longer you will be late for the Imperial reception."

"I must certainly not be late for that," said Hornblower.

"I must thank you for the clear way in which you have stated your views, Captain. I shall have the pleasure of meeting you at the reception. His Excellency the Grand Marshal will show you the way to the Tauride Hall." Hornblower bowed, still keeping his eyes from wavering towards the Tsar, but he contrived to back from the room without either turning his back on the Tsar or making his precaution too obvious. They squeezed past the Cossacks on the stairs down to the ground floor again.

"This way, if you please, sir."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Footmen opened two more huge doors, and they entered a vast room, the lofty ceiling soaring into a dome far above their heads. The walls were a mass of marble and gold, and grouped in the hall was a crowd of people, the men in uniforms of all the colours of the rainbow, the women in Court dresses with plumes and trains. Orders and jewels reflected the light of innumerable candles.

A group of men and women, laughing and joking in French, opened their ranks to admit Hornblower and the Grand Marshal.

"I have the honour to present —" began the latter. It was a prolonged introduction; the Countess of This, and the Baroness of That, and the Duchess of the Other, beautiful women, some of them bold-eyed and some of them languid. Hornblower bowed and bowed again, the Star of the Bath thumping his chest each time he straightened up.

"You will partner the Countess Canerine at dinner, Captain," said the Grand Marshal, and Hornblower bowed again.

"Delighted," he said.

The Countess was the boldest-eyed and most beautiful of them all; under the arches of her brows her eyes were dark and liquid and yet with a consuming fire within them. Her face was a perfect oval, her complexion like rose petals, her magnificent bosom white as snow above the low décolleté of her Court dress.

"As a distinguished stranger," went on the Grand Marshal, "you will take precedence immediately after the Ambassadors and Ministers. Preceding you will be the Persian Ambassador, His Excellency Gorza Khan." The Grand Marshal indicated an individual in turban and diamonds; it was a bit of blessed good fortune that he was the most easily identified person in the whole crowd, seeing that Hornblower would have to follow him. Everyone else in the group looked with even greater interest at this English captain who was being accorded such distinction; the Countess rolled a considering eye upon him, but the Grand Marshal interrupted the exchange of glances by continuing the introductions. The gentlemen returned Hornblower's bows.

"His Imperial Majesty," said the Grand Marshal, filling in the gap in the conversation when the introductions were completed, "will be wearing the uniform of the Simonouski Guards."

Hornblower caught sight of Wychwood across the room, his bearskin under his arm and Basse at his side, being introduced to another group. They exchanged nods, and Hornblower returned, a little distractedly, to the conversation of his own group. The Countess was asking him about his ship, and he tried to tell her about *Nonsuch*. Through the far doors there was filing a double line of soldiers, tall young men in breastplates that shone like silver — that probably were silver — with silver helmets with waving white plumes.

"The Chevalier Guard," explained the Countess, "all young men of noble birth."

She looked at them with distinct approval; they were forming against the walls at intervals of two or three yards, each standing like a silver statue as soon as he reached his post. The crowd was moving slowly away from the centre of the room, leaving it clear. Hornblower wondered where the rest of his officers were; he looked round, and realized that there was a further crowd of uniformed individuals in the gallery which ran at first-floor level three-quarters of the way round the dome over his head. That would be where the lesser people could look down on the doings of the great. He saw Hurst and Mound leaning against the balustrade. Behind them young Somers, his low-crowned hat in his hand, was talking with elaborate pantomime to a trio of pretty girls, who were holding weakly on to each other as they laughed. Heaven only knew what language Somers was trying to talk, but he was evidently making himself agreeable.

It was Braun that Hornblower was worried about; yet what with the violence of his reaction after his speech-making, and the chatter and glitter around him, and the sultry glances of the Countess, it was hard to think. Hornblower had to drive himself to keep his mind on his subject. The pistol in Braun's waistband — the fierce intensity of Braun's expression — that gallery up there. He could fit the pieces of the puzzle together if only he were left undistracted for a moment.

"The Prince of Sweden will make his entry with His Imperial Majesty," the Countess was saying.

The Prince of Sweden! Bernadotte, the initiator of a new dynasty, the supplanter of Gustavus, for whom Braun had risked life and fortune. Alexander had conquered Finland; Bernadotte had abandoned it to him. The two men whom Braun had most reason to hate in the whole world were probably Alexander and Bernadotte. And Braun was armed with a double-barrelled pistol, a rifled pistol with percussion caps that never missed fire and which carried true for fifty yards. Hornblower swept the gallery with his eyes. There he was, at the far end, standing unobtrusively between two pillars. Something must be done at once. The Grand Marshal was chattering affably with a couple of courtiers, and Hornblower turned to him, abandoning the Countess and breaking rudely into the conversation with the only excuse that he could think of.

"Impossible!" said the Grand Marshal, glancing at the clock. "His Imperial Majesty and His Royal Highness enter in three and a half minutes."

"I'm sorry," said Hornblower. "I regret it deeply, but I must — it is absolutely necessary — it is urgent —" Hornblower fairly danced with anxiety, and the gesture reinforced the argument he had already advanced. The Grand Marshal stood weighing the relative undesirability of interrupting a Court ceremony and offending someone who, as the recent interview showed, might have the ear of the Tsar.

"Go out through that door, then, sir," he said reluctantly at length, pointing, "and please, sir, come back without calling attention to yourself."

Hornblower fled, sidling rapidly but as unobtrusively as possible through the groups of people to the door; he slipped through it and glanced round desperately. The broad staircase to the left must lead up to the gallery.

He grasped the scabbard of his sword to keep it from tripping him up and ran up the stairs two at a time; the one or two footmen whom he passed hardly spared him a glance. The gallery was crowded, although the dresses were not as beautiful nor the uniforms as brilliant. Hornblower hurried along towards the end where he had seen Braun; he took long strides while doing his best to look like a nonchalant stroller. Mound caught his eye — Hornblower could not spare the time to say anything, dared not risk saying a word, but he put all the meaning into his glance that he could, hoping that Mound would follow him. Down below he heard the sound of doors being thrown open, and the babble of conversation stopped abruptly. A loud harsh voice announced, "L'Empéreur! L'Impératrice! Le Prince Royal de Suède!"

Braun stood there between the two pillars, glancing down. His hand was at his waist; he was drawing the pistol. There was only one silent way to stop him. Hornblower whipped out his sword — the hundred-guinea gold-hilted sword, the gift of the Patriotic Fund, with an edge like a razor — and he slashed at the wrist of the hand that held the pistol. With the tendons severed the fingers opened nervelessly and the pistol fell heavily on the carpeted floor while Braun turned in gaping surprise, looking first at the blood spouting from his wrist and then at Hornblower's face. Hornblower put the point of the blade at his breast; he could lunge and kill him on the instant, and every line in his expression must have attested the genuineness of his determination to do so if necessary, for Braun uttered no sound, made no movement. Somebody loomed up at Hornblower's shoulder; it was Mound, thank God.

"Look after him," whispered Hornblower. "Tie that wrist up! Get him out of here somehow."

He glanced over the railing. A little crowd of royalty was advancing through the huge doors opposite and below him — Alexander in his light-blue uniform; a tall swarthy man with a huge nose who must be Bernadotte; a number of women, two with crowns who must be the Empress and Empress-Mother, and the rest in plumes. Braun would have had the easiest shot heart could desire. All round the vast room the Court was making obeisance, the men bowing low and the women curtsying; as Hornblower looked they rose all together, plumes and uniforms like a breaking wave of flowers. Hornblower tore his eyes from the spectacle, sheathed his sword, and picked up the pistol from the floor, stuffing it down into his waistband. Mound, his eternal nonchalance replaced by swift catlike movements, had his long arms round Braun, who was leaning against him. Hornblower snatched out his handkerchief and put it in Mound's hand, but there was not time to do more. He turned away and hastened back along the gallery. The lesser courtiers up here had straightened up from their bows and their curtsies and were beginning to look around them again and resume their conversation. It was lucky that at the moment of crisis they had had no eyes or ears for anything save the royal party. Hurst and Somers were about to start talking to the women again when Hornblower caught their eyes. "Go back there to Mound," he said. "He needs your help." Then he walked quickly down the stairs again, found the door into the audience hall, and pushed past the footman on guard there. A glance showed him the position of the group he had left, and he sidled round to it and took up his position at the Countess's side. The royal party was making the circle of the room, making the usual conventional remarks to distinguished individuals, and it was only a matter of a few minutes before they reached Hornblower. The Grand Marshal presented him, and Hornblower, his head swimming with his recent excitement so that he felt as if he was in a nightmare, bowed to each crowned head in turn and to Bernadotte.

"It is a pleasure to meet Commodore Hornblower," said Alexander pleasantly. "We have all of us heard of his exploits."

"Your Majesty is too kind," gulped Hornblower.

Then the royal group passed on, and Hornblower turned to meet the Countess's glance again. The fact that the Tsar had addressed a few words to him personally evidently confirmed her suspicions that he was a man of potential influence, and there was a considering look in her eyes.

"Will you be making a long stay in Russia?" she asked.

It was very hard, during this period of intense reaction, to keep his mind on anything. All he wanted to do was to sit down and rest quietly. He flogged his mind into making a polite rejoinder, and when the men of the party began to ply him with questions about the British Navy and about maritime affairs in general he tried to answer sensibly, but it was a forlorn hope.

Footmen were rolling in long buffet tables, glittering with gold and silver; Hornblower forced himself to watch keenly, so as to commit no breach of etiquette. To one side the royal party had taken their seats. Empresses

and Tsar in armchairs and the princes and princesses in upright chairs, and everyone had to be careful always to face in that direction so as not to commit the heinous crime of letting royalty see a human back. People were beginning to take food from the buffets, and, try as he would, Hornblower could see no sign at all of any attention to precedence. But there was the Persian Ambassador munching something from a gold plate, so that he was justified in making a move in the same direction. Yet all the same this was the most curious dinner he had ever attended, with everyone standing up except royalty: and royalty, he could see, were eating nothing at all.

"May I offer you my arm, Countess?" he said, as the group began to drift towards a buffet.

The courtiers by dint of long practice had seemingly mastered the art of eating while standing up and while holding their hats under their arms, but it was not easy. His dangling sword was liable to trip him, too, and that infernal pistol in his waistband was digging uncomfortably into his side. The footmen serving at the buffets understood no French, and the Countess came to Hornblower's rescue with an order.

"That is caviare," she explained to him, "and this is vodka, the drink of the people, but I think you will find that the two are admirably suited to each other."

The Countess was right. The grey, unappetizing-looking stuff was perfectly delicious. Hornblower sipped cautiously at the vodka, and in his present highly-strung condition hardly noticed the fierce bite of the liquor; but there was no doubt that vodka and caviare blended together exquisitely. He felt the warm glow of the alcohol inside him, and realized that he was desperately hungry. The buffet was covered with foods of all kinds, some being kept warm in chafing dishes, some cold; under the tutelage of the Countess, Hornblower went a fair way towards tackling them all. There was a dish apparently of stewed mushrooms that was excellent, slices of smoked fish, an unidentifiable salad, some varieties of cheese, eggs both hot and cold, a sort of ragout of pork. There were other liquors as well, and Hornblower ate and drank with his spirits rising momentarily, playing his part in the conversation and feeling more and more warmly grateful to the Countess. It might be a queer way to have dinner, but Hornblower thought he had never tasted such delicious food. His head began to whirl with the liquor; he knew that danger signal of old, although this time he did not resent it quite so bitterly as usual, and he checked himself in the midst of a laugh in time not to be too unrestrained. Laughter, chatter, and bright lights; this was one of the jolliest parties he had ever attended — he felt as if it had been someone else who had slashed Braun's wrist open with a sword an hour ago. Hornblower replaced his lovely porcelain plate on the buffet, among the gold dishes, and wiped his mouth with one of the silken napkins that lay there. He was comfortably replete, with the gratifying sensation of having eaten just too much and having drunk just enough; he supposed coffee would be served soon, and a cup of coffee was all he needed to complete his internal gratification.

"I have dined extremely well," he said to the Countess.

The most remarkable expression passed over the Countess's face. Her eyebrows rose, and she opened her mouth to say something and then shut it again. She was smiling and puzzled and distressed all at the same time. She again started to speak, but her words were cut short by the ceremonial opening of yet another pair of doors from which twenty or thirty footmen emerged to form an avenue leading into the next room. Hornblower became conscious that the royal party had risen from their chairs and were falling into formation, and the complete cessation of conversation told Hornblower that some specially solemn moment had arrived. Couples were moving about the room like ships jockeying for position. The Countess laid her hand on his arm with a gentle pressure as if to lead him. By George, a procession was forming behind the royal party! There went the Persian Ambassador, a smiling girl on his arm. Hornblower just had time to lead his own partner forward to join the procession next, and after two or three more couples had joined behind him the procession began to move forward, its tail being steadily lengthened as it went. Hornblower kept his eyes on the Persian Ambassador before him; they passed down the avenue of footmen, and entered the next room. The procession was breaking off to left and to right in alternate couples as though in a country dance; the Persian Ambassador went to the left, and Hornblower was ready to go to the right without the prompting of the gesture of the Grand Marshal, who was standing there ready to direct anyone in doubt. It was another enormous room, lit by what seemed to be hundreds of cut-glass chandeliers dangling from the roof, and all down the length of it ran a vast table — miles long, it seemed, to Hornblower's disordered imagination — covered with gold plate and crystal and embanked with flowers. The table was shaped like a T with a very

small crosspiece, and the royal party had already taken their seats at the head; behind every chair all the way down stood a white-wigged footman. It dawned upon Hornblower that dinner was about to begin; the food and drink which had been served in the domed hall had been something extra and introductory. Hornblower was ready to laugh at himself for his idiotic lack of comprehension at the same time as he was ready to groan with despair at the thought of having to eat his way through an Imperial dinner in his present distended condition.

Save for royalty, the men were standing at their chairs while the ladies sat; across the table the Persian Ambassador was bending affably over the young woman he had brought in, and the aigrette in his turban nodded and his diamonds flashed. The last woman took her seat, and then the men sat down together — not quite as simultaneously as marines presenting arms, but almost so. A babble of conversation began immediately, and almost immediately a golden soup plate was put under Hornblower's nose and a golden soup tureen full of pink soup was offered to him for him to help himself from. He could not help glancing down the table; everyone had been given soup at the same moment — there must be two hundred footmen at least waiting at table.

"That is M. de Narbonne, the French Ambassador," said the Countess, indicating with a glance a handsome young man across the table two places higher than the Persian Ambassador. "Of course the Grand Marshal did not present you to him. And that is the Austrian Ambassador, and the Saxon Minister, and the Danish Minister, all your enemies officially. The Spanish Ambassador comes from Joseph Bonaparte, not from the Spanish partisan government which you recognize, so you could hardly be presented to him either. I don't believe there's a soul here except us Russians to whom it would be proper to present you."

There was a cool, pleasant yellow wine in a tall glass before Hornblower, and he sipped it.

"My experience to-day," he said, "is that the Russians are the most delightful people in the world, and Russian women the most charming and most beautiful."

The Countess flashed a glance at him from her sultry eyes, and, it seemed to Hornblower, set his brains creeping about inside his skull. The golden soup plate was whisked away and replaced by a golden dinner plate. Another wine was poured into another glass before him — champagne. It effervesced just as his thoughts appeared to him to be doing. His footman spoke to him in Russian, apparently offering him a choice, and the Countess settled the problem without referring to him.

"As this is your first visit to Russia," she explained, "I could be sure that you have not yet tasted our Volga River trout."

She was helping herself to one as she spoke, from a golden dish: Hornblower's footman was presenting another golden dish.

"A gold service looks very well," said the Countess sadly, "but it allows the food to grow unfortunately cold. I never use mine in my house save when I entertain His Imperial Majesty. As that is the case in most houses I doubt if His Imperial Majesty ever has a hot meal."

The gold knife and fork with which Hornblower dissected his fish were heavy in his hands, and scraped oddly against the gold plate.

"You have a kind heart, madame," he said. "Yes," said the Countess, with deep significance.

Hornblower's head whirled again; the champagne, so cold, so delicate, seemed perfectly adapted to put this right, and he drank of it thirstily.

A couple of fat little birds on toast followed the trout; they melted delicately in the mouth; some other wine followed the champagne. And there was a venison stew, and a cut off some roast which might be mutton but which was borne on Pegasus-wings of garlic beyond mundane speculation. Somewhere in the procession of food appeared a pink water ice, only the third or fourth which Hornblower had ever tasted.

"Foreign kickshaws," said Hornblower to himself, but he enjoyed the food and had no prejudice against foreign cookery. Perhaps he said 'foreign kickshaws' to himself because that was what Bush would have said had he been eating the dinner. Or perhaps it was because he was a little drunk — Hornblower's persistent self-examination brought him to this startling conclusion with a shock, comparable with that received by a man walking into a stanchion in the dark. He must certainly not get drunk while he was representing his country, and he would be a fool to get drunk while in the imminent personal danger which surrounded him. He personally had brought an assassin to the palace, and if the fact ever leaked out it would go hard with him,

especially if the Tsar should become aware that the assassin was armed with a rifled pistol which was Hornblower's private property. Hornblower sobered still further when it came to him that he had forgotten all about his junior officers — he had left them trying to dispose of the wounded assassin, and what they would do with him was more than he could guess.

The Countess beside him was pressing his foot under the table; and a little electric thrill ran through him and his steadiness vanished once more. He smiled at her beatifically. She gave him a long look with lowered lids and then turned away to address a remark to her neighbour on her other side, a tactful hint for Hornblower to pay a little attention to the Baroness to whom he had hardly spoken a word. Hornblower plunged feverishly into conversation, and the general in the outlandish dragoon uniform on the far side of the Baroness joined in with a question about Admiral Keats, whose acquaintance he had made in 1807. The footman was offering a new dish; his hairy wrist was exposed between his cuff and his white glove, and that, wrist was spotted with flea-bites. Hornblower remembered having read in one of the books he had been studying about the northern powers that the farther east one travelled the worse the vermin became — the Polish flea was bad, but the Russian flea was unbearable. If it was any worse than the Spanish flea, with which Hornblower had an intimate acquaintance, it must be a remarkably well developed flea.

There must be hundreds — there must actually be thousands — of servants in this palace, and Hornblower could guess how closely they must be herded together. Having waged a ceaseless war against body-vermin for twenty years in crowded ships Hornblower was well aware of the difficulty of extermination. But while one part of his mind was discussing with the dragoon general the principles of seniority and selection in the British Navy another part was telling himself that he would greatly prefer not to be served by a flea-bitten footman. The conversation languished, and Hornblower turned back to the Countess.

"Do pictures interest monsieur very much?" she asked.

"Of course," said Hornblower politely. "The picture gallery in this palace is very fine. You have not seen it yet?"

"I have not yet had that pleasure."

"This evening, after the royal party has retired, I could show it to you. Unless you would rather join one of the card tables?"

"I would much prefer to see pictures," said Hornblower. His laugh rang a little loud even in his own ears.

"Then if, after the royal party has withdrawn, you are by the door on the far side of the room, I shall show you the way."

"That will be delightful, madame."

They were drinking toasts at the head of the table — for the first one everyone had to stand while they drank the health of the Prince of Sweden, and after that conversation perforce became disjointed with other toasts to be drunk, announced by a gigantic official with a colossal voice — Stentor with Hercules' frame, said Hornblower to himself, pleased with the classical touch — who stood behind the Tsar's chair. Between toasts there was music; not orchestral music, but vocal music from an unaccompanied male choir, seemingly of hundreds of voices which filled the vast room with their din. Hornblower heard it with the faint but growing irritation of the completely tone-deaf. It was a relief when the music ceased and everyone stood once more while the royal party withdrew through a doorway near the head of the table, and no sooner had the door closed after them than the women went out too, ushered through the far door by Madame Kotchubey.

"À *bientôt*," smiled the Countess, as she left him.

The men began to gather in groups along the table while footmen hastened in with coffee and cordials; Wychwood, his bearskin still under his arm, made his way round to Hornblower. His face was redder than ever; his eyes, if it were possible, stuck out even farther from his head.

"The Swedes'll fight if Russia will," said Wychwood, in a grating whisper. "I have that direct from Basse, who was with Bernadotte all day."

Then he passed on and Hornblower heard his remarkable French being practised on a uniformed group higher up the table. The room was unbearably hot, presumably because of the infinity of candles alight in it; some of the men were already beginning to drift away through the door where the women had preceded them.

Hornblower drank his coffee and rose to his feet, transferring his cocked hat once more from his knees to under his arm. The room he entered must have been the counterpart of the one in which the royal reception had been held, for it was domed too, and of similar proportions; Hornblower remembered the two domes he

had seen when his carriage drew up to the palace. It was dotted with chairs and sofas and tables, round one of which a group of dowagers were already playing cards, and an elderly couple were playing backgammon at another. At the far end his eye instantly discerned the Countess, seated on a couch with her train spread beside her and her coffee cup and saucer in her hands, while she chatted with another woman; every line of the Countess's attitude proclaimed girlish innocence.

From the number of people already assembled it was clear that this was the meeting-place of the whole Court; presumably the hundreds of people who had perforce witnessed the royal reception from the gallery were permitted to descend and mingle with their betters after dining less elaborately. Young Mound was lounging towards him, his lean gangling body looking like an overgrown colt's.

"We have him in a side room aloft, sir," he reported. "He fainted with the loss of blood — we had to put a tourniquet on his arm to stop the bleeding. We bandaged him with half of Somers' shirt, and Somers and Mr Hurst are keeping guard over him."

"Does anyone know about it?"

"No, sir. We got him into the room without anyone seeing us. I poured a glass of liquor over his coat and from the stink of him anyone'll think he's drunk."

Mound was obviously a capable man in an emergency, as Hornblower had already suspected.

"Very good."

"The sooner we get him away the better, sir," said Mound, with a diffidence to be expected of a junior officer making suggestions to a senior.

"You're quite right," said Hornblower, "except that —"

Hornblower was still having to think quickly. It would hardly be possible, in any case, to leave at once, the moment dinner was over. It would not be polite. And there was the Countess over there, presumably watching them. If they were to leave now, immediately after conferring together — and breaking an engagement with her — she would be full of suspicion, as well as of the fury of a woman scorned. They simply could not leave immediately.

"We shall have to stay another hour at least," he said. "The conventions demand it. Go back and hold the fort for that time."

"Aye aye, sir."

Mound restrained himself in the nick of time from coming to attention as with the habit of years he had grown accustomed to do when uttering those words — further proof of the clearness of his head. He nodded and wandered off as if they had been merely discussing the weather, and Hornblower allowed his slow legs to carry him over towards the Countess.

She smiled at his approach.

"Princess," she said, "you have not met Commodore Hornblower? The Princess de Stolp."

Hornblower bowed; the Princess was an elderly woman with a good deal left of what must have been marvellous beauty.

"The Commodore," went on the Countess, "has expressed a desire to see the picture gallery. Would you care to come with us, Princess?"

"No, thank you," said the Princess, "I fear I am too old for picture galleries. But go, my children, without me."

"I would not like to leave you alone, here," protested the Countess.

"Even at my age, I can boast that I am still never left long alone, Countess. Leave me, I beg you. Enjoy yourselves, children."

Hornblower bowed again, and the Countess took his arm, and they walked slowly out. She pressed his arm, while footmen stood aside to allow them passage.

"The Italian pictures of the Cinque Cento are in the far gallery," said the Countess as they came into the broad corridor. "Would you care to see the more modern ones first?"

"As madame wishes," said Hornblower.

Once through a door, once out of the ceremonial part of the palace, it was like a rabbit warren, narrow passages, innumerable staircases, an infinity of rooms. The apartment to which she led him was on the first floor; a sleepy maid who was awaiting her coming vanished into the room beyond they came into the luxurious sitting-room. It was into the room beyond that the Countess called him, five minutes later.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hornblower turned over in his cot with a groan; the effort of turning brought back the pain into his temples, although he moved very cautiously. He was a fool to have drunk so much — it was the first time he had had this sort of headache for half a dozen years. Yet it had been hard to avoid, just as everything else had been hard to avoid; he did not know what else he could have done, once events had him in their grip. He raised his voice and shouted for Brown — it hurt his head again to shout, and his voice was a hoarse croak. He heard the voice of the sentry at the door passing on the word, and with an infinity of effort he sat up and put his legs out of bed, determined that Brown should not find him prostrate.

"Bring me some coffee," he said when Brown came in.

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower continued to sit on the edge of his cot. Overhead he heard the raucous voice of Hurst blaring through the skylight, apparently addressing a delinquent midshipman.

"A fine young flibberty-gibbet *you* are," said Hurst "Look at that brasswork! D'you call that bright? Where d'you keep your eyes? What's your division been doing this last hour? God, what's the Navy coming to, when warrants are given to young jackanapes who couldn't keep their noses clear with a marline-spike! You call yourself a King's officer? You're more like a winter's day, short, dark, and dirty!"

Hornblower took the coffee Brown brought in.

"My compliments to Mr Hurst," he croaked, "and ask him kindly not to make so much noise over my skylight."

"Aye aye, sir."

The first satisfaction that day was to hear Hurst cut his tirade abruptly short. Hornblower sipped at the scalding coffee with some degree of pleasure. It was not surprising that Hurst should be in a bad temper to-day. He had been through a harassing evening the night before; Hornblower remembered Hurst and Mound carrying Braun, unconscious and reeking with spirits, into the carriage at the palace door. Hurst had been strictly sober, but apparently the mental strain of keeping guard over a secret assassin in the Tsar's palace had been too much for his nerves. Hornblower handed his cup back to Brown to be refilled when Brown reappeared, and pulled his nightshirt over his head as he waited. Something caught his eye as he laid his nightshirt on his cot; it was a flea, leaping high out of the sleeve. In a wave of disgust he looked down at himself; his smooth round belly was pockmarked with flea-bites. That was a striking commentary on the difference between an Imperial palace and one of His Britannic Majesty's ships of the line. When Brown returned with his second cup of coffee Hornblower was still cursing fiercely both at Imperial uncleanness and at the dreary prospect of the nuisance of having to rid himself of vermin to which he was peculiarly susceptible.

"Take that grin off your face," snapped Hornblower, "or I'll send you to the grating to see if you grin there!" Brown was not grinning; all that could be said about his expression was that he was too obviously not grinning. What irritated Hornblower was the knowledge that Brown was enjoying the superior and paternal state of mind of one who has not a headache while the man who is with him has.

His shower-bath restored some of Hornblower's peace of mind, and he put on clean linen, gave Brown orders for the disinfection of his clothes, and went up on deck, where the first person on whom he laid eyes was Wychwood, bleary-eyed and obviously with a far worse headache than he had himself. Yet the keen air of the Russian morning was invigorating and refreshing. The normal early-morning ship's routine, the sight of the rows of men holystoning the decks, the pleasant swish of the water over the planking, were comforting and restorative as well.

"Boat coming off to us, sir," reported a midshipman to the officer of the watch.

It was the same pinnace as had taken them ashore yesterday, and it brought a naval officer with a letter in French —

His Excellency the Minister of the Imperial Marine presents his compliments to Commodore Sir Hornblower. His Excellency has given orders for a water-boat to be alongside the *Nonsuch* at eleven o'clock this morning. A distinguished nobleman, M. le Comte du Nord, having expressed a desire to see one of His Britannic Majesty's Ships, His Excellency proposes to trespass upon Sir Hornblower's hospitality by visiting the *Nonsuch* at ten o'clock in company with the Comte du Nord.

Hornblower showed the letter to Wychwood, who confirmed his suspicions.

"That's Alexander," he said. "He used the title of Comte du Nord when he was travelling on the continent as Tsarevitch, He'll be coming incognito, so that there'll be no need for royal honours."

"Yes," said Hornblower dryly, a little nettled at this soldier giving him advice beyond what he was asked for. "But an Imperial Minister of Marine must rank with a First Lord of the Admiralty. That'll mean nineteen guns and all the other honours. Midshipman of the watch! My compliments to the captain, and I shall be very obliged if he will be good enough to come on deck."

Bush heard the news with a low whistle, and instantly turned to sweep decks and rigging with his glance, anxious that his ship should be in the perfection of condition for this Imperial visit.

"How can we take in water," asked Bush piteously, "and be in a fit state for the Tsar to come on board, sir? What will he think of us? Unless we water the flotilla first."

"The Tsar's a man of sense," said Hornblower, briskly. "Let's show him the hands at work. He doesn't know the difference between the mizzen-stay and the flying jib-boom, but he'll recognize efficient work if we show it to him. Start watering while he's on board."

"And the food?" asked Bush. "We'll have to offer him something, sir."

Hornblower grinned at his anxiety.

"Yes, we'll offer him something."

It was typical of Hornblower's contrary temperament that the more difficulties other people foresaw the more cheerful he became; the only person really capable of depressing Hornblower was Hornblower himself. His headache had left him completely, and he was positively smiling now at the thought of a busy morning. He ate his breakfast with appetite, and put on his full-dress uniform once more and came on deck to find Bush still fussing round the ship, with the crew all in clean white frocks and duck trousers, the accommodation ladder rigged, with hand-ropes as white as snow, the marines pipeclayed and polished, the hammocks stowed in mathematical tiers. It was only when the midshipman of the watch reported a cutter approaching that he felt a little twinge of nervousness, a sudden catch in his breath, at the thought that the next few hours might have a decided bearing on the history of the world for years to come.

The calls of the boatswain's mates shrilled through the ship, and the ship's company fell in by divisions, officers to the front with epaulettes and swords, and Hornblower at the quarterdeck rail looked down at the assembly. British seamen on parade could not possibly rival the Prussian Guard in exactitude and uniformity, and to drill them into any approach to it would be likely to expel from them the very qualities that made them the valuable men they were; but any thinking man, looking down the lines of intelligent, self-reliant faces, could not fail to be impressed.

"Man the yards!" ordered Bush.

Another squeal from the pipes, and the topmen poured the rigging in an orderly upward torrent, without a break in their speed as they hung back-downward from the futtock-shrouds, going hand-over-hand up the topgallant-shrouds like the trained gymnasts they were, running out along the yards like tight-rope walkers, each man taking up his position on the foot-ropes the moment he reached it.

Various emotions warred in Hornblower's breast as he watched. There was a momentary feeling of resentment that these men of his, the cream of the service, should be put through their paces like performing bears to gratify an Oriental monarch. Yet as the evolution was completed, when each man reached his place, as though by some magic a gust of wind had whirled a heap of dead leaves into the air and left them suspended in a pattern of exquisite symmetry, his resentment was swamped by artistic satisfaction. He hoped that Alexander, looking on, would have the sense to realize that these men could be relied upon to perform the same feat in any conditions, in a black night with a howling gale blowing, on a raging sea with the bowsprit stabbing at the invisible sky and the yard-arms dipping towards the invisible sea.

The boatswain, looking with one eye over the starboard rail, gave an infinitesimal jerk of his head. A little procession of officers was coming up the accommodation ladder. The boatswain's mates put their calls to their lips. The sergeant-drummer of marines contrived to snap his fingers beside the seams of his trousers as he stood at attention, and the six side-drums roared out in a bold ruffle.

"Present arms!" bellowed Captain Norman, and the fifty muskets with fixed bayonets of the marines left the fifty scarlet shoulders and came down vertically in front of fifty rows of gleaming buttons, while the swords of the three marine officers swept in the graceful arc of the military salute.

Alexander, followed by two aides-de-camp, came slowly on board side by side with the Minister of Marine to whom nominally all this ceremony was dedicated. He put his hand to his hat-brim while the pipes died away in a final squeal, the drums completed their fourth ruffle, the first gun of the salute banged out forward, and the fifes and drums of the marine band burst into 'Heart of Oak'. Hornblower walked forward and saluted.

"Good morning, Commodore," said the Minister of Marine. "Permit me to present you to the Comte du Nord." Hornblower saluted again, his face as expressionless as he could manage it even while he fought down a smile at Alexander's queer liking to be incognito.

"Good morning, Commodore," said Alexander; with a shock Hornblower realized that he was speaking English of a sort. "I hope our little visit does not discommode you too much?"

"Not in any way to compare with the honour done to the ship, sir," said Hornblower, wondering as he said it whether 'sir' was the right way to address a Tsar incognito. Apparently it sufficed.

"You may present your officers," said Alexander.

Hornblower brought them up one by one, and they saluted and bowed with the uneasy stiffness to be expected of junior officers in the presence of a Tsar of all the Russias, and an incognito one at that.

"I think you can give orders to prepare the ship for watering now, Captain," said Hornblower to Bush, and then he turned back to Alexander. "Would you care to see more of the ship, sir?"

"I would indeed," said Alexander.

He lingered on the quarter-deck to watch the preparations begin. The topmen came pouring down from aloft; Alexander blinked in the sunlight with admiration as half a dozen hands came sliding down the mizzen-backstays and the mizzen-topsail halliards to land on their feet on the quarter-deck beside him. Under the petty officers' urging the men ran hither and thither about their tasks; it was a scene of activity like a disturbed ants' nest, but far more orderly and purposeful. The hatches were whipped off, the pumps made ready, tack rigged at the yard-arms, fenders dropped over the port side. Alexander stared at the sight of a half-company of marines tailing on to a fall and walking away with it in flat-footed rhythm.

"Soldiers and sailors too, sir," explained Hornblower, deprecatingly, as he led the way below.

Alexander was a very tall man, an inch or two taller than Hornblower, and he bent himself nearly double as he crouched under the low deck beams below decks and peered about with short-sighted eyes. Hornblower took him forward along the lower gun-deck, where the head clearance was no more than five feet six inches; he showed him the midshipmen's berth, and the warrant officers' mess, all the unlovely details of the life of a sailor. He called away a group of seamen, had them unstow and sling their hammocks, and get into them, so that Alexander could see more clearly what twenty-two inches per man really meant, and he gave a graphic description of a whole deck full of hammocks swinging together in a storm, with the men packed in a solid mass. The grins of the men who made the demonstration were proof enough to Alexander not merely of the truth of what Hornblower was saying, but also of the high spirits of the men, far different from the patient uneducated peasants whom he was accustomed to see in the ranks of his army.

They peered down through the hatchway to see the working party down there breaking out the water casks and preparing the tiers for refilling, and a whiff of the stench of the orlop came up to them — bilge-water and cheese and humanity intermingled.

"You are an officer of long service, I believe, Commodore?" said Alexander.

"Nineteen years, sir," said Hornblower.

"And how much of that time have you spent at sea?"

"Sixteen years, sir. For nine months I was a prisoner in Spain, and for six months in France."

"I know of your escape from France. You went through much peril to return to this life."

Alexander's handsome forehead was wrinkled as he puzzled over the fact that a man could spend sixteen years of his life living in these conditions and still be sane and healthy.

"How long have you held your present rank?"

"As Commodore, sir, only two months. But I have nine years' seniority as Captain."

"And before that?"

"I was six years lieutenant, and four years midshipman."

"Four years? You lived four years in a place like the midshipmen's berth you showed me?"

"Not quite as comfortable as that, sir. I was in a frigate nearly all the time, under Sir Edward Pellew. A battleship is not quite as crowded as a frigate, sir."

Hornblower, watching Alexander closely, could see that he was impressed, and he could guess at the line of thought Alexander was following. The Tsar was not so much struck by the miserable conditions of life on board ship — if he knew anything about his people at all he must be aware that nearly all of them lived in conditions a good deal worse — as by the fact that those conditions could train an officer of ability.

"I suppose it is necessary," sighed Alexander, revealing for a moment the humane and emotional side of his nature which rumour had long hinted that he possessed.

By the time they came on deck again the water-boat was already alongside. Some of the *Nonsuch's* hands were down on her decks, mingling with the Russians to help with the work. Working parties were swinging away lustily at the pumps, and the long snake-like canvas hoses pulsated at each stroke. Forward they were swaying up bundles of firewood, the men chanting as they hauled.

"Thanks to your generosity, sir," said Hornblower, "we will be able to keep the sea for four months if necessary without entering port."

Luncheon was served in Hornblower's cabin to a party of eight, Hornblower, Bush, the two senior lieutenants, and the four Russians. Bush was sweating with nervousness at the sight of the inhospitable table; at the last moment he had drawn Hornblower aside and pleaded unavailingly for Hornblower to change his mind and serve some of his remaining cabin delicacies as well as the plain ship's fare. Bush could not get out of his mind the obsession that it was necessary to feed the Tsar well; any junior officer entertaining an admiral would blast all his hopes of future promotion if he put the men's ration beef on the table, and Bush could only think in terms of entertaining admirals.

The Tsar looked with interest at the battered pewter tureen which Brown set before Hornblower.

"Pea soup, sir," explained Hornblower. "One of the great delicacies of shipboard life."

Carlin, of long habit, began to rap his biscuit on the table, stopped when he realized what he was doing, and then started rapping again, guiltily. He remembered the orders Hornblower had given, that everyone should behave as if no distinguished company were present; Hornblower had backed up those orders with the direct threat of punishment should they be forgotten, and Carlin knew that Hornblower did not threaten in that way without every intention of doing what he promised. Alexander looked at Carlin and then inquiringly at Bush beside him.

"Mr Carlin is knocking out the weevils, sir," explained Bush, almost overcome with self-consciousness. "If you tap gently they come out of their own accord, this way, you see, sir."

"Very interesting," said Alexander, but he ate no bread; one of his aides-de-camp repeated the experiment, peered down at the fat white weevils with black heads that emerged, and exploded into what must have been a string of Russian oaths — almost the first words he had said since boarding the ship.

The visitors, after this inauspicious beginning, gingerly tasted the soup. But in the British Navy pea soup, as Hornblower had remarked, was the best dish served; the aide-de-camp who had sworn at the weevils exclaimed with surprised gratification when he had tasted it, speedily consumed his plateful, and accepted another. There were only three dishes served as the next course, boiled salt ribs of beef, boiled salt-beef tongue, and boiled salt pork, with pickled cabbage to accompany the meat. Alexander studied the three dishes, and wisely accepted the tongue; the Minister of Marine and the aides-de-camp, at Hornblower's suggestion, took a mixed plateful, carved for them by Hornblower and Bush and Hurst. The once silent but now talkative aide-de-camp set himself to chew on the salt beef with a truly Russian appetite and found it a long hard struggle.

Brown was now serving rum.

"The life-blood of the Navy, sir," said Hornblower, as Alexander studied his tumbler. "May I offer you gentlemen a toast which we can all drink with the heartiest goodwill? The Emperor of All the Russias! Vive l'Eempéreur!"

All rose except Alexander to drink the toast, and they were hardly seated before Alexander was on his feet in turn.

"The King of Great Britain."

The aide-de-camp's French broke down again when he tried to explain how deep an impression Navy rum made on him at this, his first encounter with it. Eventually he gave the clearest proof of his appreciation by draining his tumbler and holding it out for Brown to refill. As the table was cleared Alexander was ready with another toast.

"Commodore Sir Horatio Hornblower, and the British Royal Navy."

As the glasses were drained Hornblower, looking round him, saw that he was expected to reply in form.

"The Navy," he said. "The guardian of the liberties of the world. The unswerving friend, the unremitting enemy. When the tyrant of Europe looks about him, seeking by fair means or foul to extend his dominion, it is the Navy that he finds in his path. It is the Navy which is slowly strangling that tyrant. It is the Navy which has baulked him at every turn, which is draining the life-blood from his boasted Empire and which will bring him down in ruin at the end. The tyrant may boast of unbroken victory on land, but he can only deplore unbroken defeat at sea. It is because of the Navy that every victory only leaves him weaker than before, forced, like Sisyphus, to roll his rock once more up towards an unattainable summit. And one day that rock will crush him. May it be sooner rather than later!"

Hornblower ended his speech amid a little fierce murmur from the others at the table. He was in an exalted mood again; this present occasion for making a speech had taken him a little by surprise, but he had hoped when he had first heard of the intended visit of the Tsar to have an opportunity sometime during the day of calling his attention once more to the aid which the British alliance could afford him. Alexander was young and impressionable. It was necessary to appeal to his emotions as well as to his intellect. Hornblower stole a glance at the Tsar to see if he had attained his end; Alexander was sitting rapt in thought, his eyes looking down at the table. He raised them to meet Hornblower's with a smile, and Hornblower felt a wave of exultation, of sublime confidence that his plan had succeeded. He had had plain fare served at luncheon of set purpose; he had shown Alexander exactly how the Navy lived and slept and worked. The Tsar could not be ignorant of the British Navy's glory, and Hornblower's intuitive mind told him that proof of the hardship of naval life would be a subtle appeal to the Tsar's emotions; it would be hard to explain exactly how it would appeal, but Hornblower was sure of it. Alexander would be moved both to help men who won glory at such a cost and also would desire to have such tough fighters on his side.

Alexander was making a move to leave; the aide-de-camp hurriedly drained his fifth tumbler of rum, and it and its predecessors so worked upon him as to make him put his arm round Bush's shoulders as they came up on the quarter-deck and pat him on the back with wholehearted affection, while the long row of medals and orders on his chest jingled and clinked like tinkers working on pots and kettles. Bush, keenly aware of the eyes of the ship's company upon him, tried to writhe away from the embrace, but unavailingly. He was red in the face as he bawled the order for the manning of the yards, and sighed with evident relief as Alexander's departure down the accommodation ladder made it necessary for the aide-de-camp to follow him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

An easterly wind was not to be wasted. *Nonsuch* and the flotilla were heading back down the Gulf of Finland with all sail set, and the Commodore was walking the quarter-deck, turning over in his mind all the problems which beset a commander-in-chief. The problem of drinking water at least was settled; it would be two months easily, four months if necessary, before he had to worry about that. The mere fact that he had refilled his water casks would be some sort of justification for his having had dealings with the Court of St Petersburg should Downing Street or Whitehall take exception to his recent activities — Hornblower ran through in his

mind the wording of his report, which had laid as much stress on the advantage gained in this fashion as on the desirability of having made contact with the Russian Government. He had a good case to plead. But... Hornblower turned and looked back at the squadron.

"Make a signal to *Lotus*," he ordered. "'Why are you out of station?'"

The flags soared up the halliards, and Hornblower saw the sloop hurriedly correct her position.

"*Lotus* acknowledges the signal, sir," reported the midshipman.

"Then make 'Why do you not reply to my question?'" said Hornblower, harshly.

It was some seconds before any reply was visible.

"*Lotus* signals 'Inattention on the part of the officer of the watch', sir."

"Acknowledge," said Hornblower.

He had stirred up trouble there; Vickery would be raging at this public censure, and the officer of the watch in question would be regretting his inattention at this very moment. There would be no harm done and probably some good. But Hornblower was perfectly aware that he had only launched the censure because he wanted an excuse to postpone thinking about the next unpleasant matter on which he had to decide. He wondered to himself how many of the other reprimands he had seen dealt out — which he himself had received as a junior officer, for that matter — had been administered by harassed admirals as a distraction from more unpleasant thoughts. He himself had to think about the case of Braun.

The low shore of Finland was just visible to the northward; down on the main-deck Carlin had a division of guns at exercise, the men going through the drill of loading and running out. With the wind almost dead astern and studding-sails set *Nonsuch* was making good speed through the water — if the sea were to get up any more she would have to shorten sail so as to allow the bomb-ketches to keep up. A boatswain's mate forward was starting one of the hands with the foretop-sail clew-line, something altogether too thick to be used for that purpose. Hornblower was on the point, reluctantly, of interfering with the internal working of the ship when he saw a lieutenant intervene and save him the trouble. Some knowledge of his prejudices and desires had evidently filtered down through Bush to the junior officers. Hornblower watched the trio separate again about their business until there was absolutely no excuse for watching them any longer.

He simply had to think about Braun. The man had attempted to commit murder, and by the laws of England and the Articles of War he should die. But being the holder of a Navy Board warrant, it would call for a court of five post-captains to pass a death sentence on him, and there were not five post-captains within a hundred miles. Bush and Hornblower were the only ones, Vickery and Cole being merely commanders. By law, then, Braun should be kept under arrest until a competent court could be assembled to try him, unless — and here he had discretion — the good of the service, the safety of the ship, or the welfare of England demanded immediate action. In that case he could summon a court composed of whatever senior officers were available, try him, and hang him on the spot. The evidence would be overwhelming; his own and Mound's would suffice to hang Braun ten times over.

The need for summary action was not so apparent, nevertheless, Braun, languishing in the sick bay with a right hand he would never use again, and half dead with loss of blood, was certainly not going to start a mutiny among the hands, or set fire to the ship, or seduce the officers from their duty. But there must be the wildest tales flying round the lower deck already. Hornblower could not imagine how the hands would try to account for Braun being brought back from the Tsar's palace badly wounded. There would be talk and gossip which sooner or later would reach the ears of Bonaparte's agents, and Hornblower knew Bonaparte's methods too well to doubt that he would make the utmost use of an opportunity to sow dissension between his enemies. Alexander would never forgive a country which had brought him within a hair's breadth of assassination. When the authorities at home should come to know of the incident they would be furious, and it was he, Hornblower, who would be the object of their fury. Hornblower thought of the report locked in his desk, marked 'Most Secret and Confidential' in which he had put down the facts. He could imagine that report being put in as evidence against him at a court martial, and he could imagine what view his brother captains who would be his judges would take of it.

For a moment Hornblower toyed with the idea of concealing the incident altogether, making no report about it at all, but he put the motion aside as impractical. Someone would talk. On the other hand, there was the clause in his orders which bound him to make the freest use of Braun's experience; that might cover him, and

besides, the insertion of that clause implied that Braun had friends in authority who would be interested possibly in protecting him and certainly in protecting themselves, and who in consequence would not wish too public a scandal to be made. It was all very complex.

"Mr Montgomery," said Hornblower, harshly, "what sort of course do your quartermasters keep? Have 'em steer smaller than that, or I shall want an explanation from you."

"Aye aye, sir," said Montgomery.

At least he had done his part towards dragging Russia into war with Bonaparte — the last word he had received from Wychwood before leaving Kronstadt had been to the effect that Alexander had sent a defiant reply to Bonaparte's latest demands. Should war result, Bonaparte's main strength would have to be employed in the East for this summer, giving Wellington the opportunity to strike a blow in the South. But how much chance had Russia of withstanding the attack Bonaparte could launch against her? Every year for a dozen years had seen a great victory won by Bonaparte, one nation or another overthrown in a few weeks' campaign. Next winter might well see Russia beaten and as subservient to Bonaparte as Austria or Prussia were already; and Downing Street, faced by Russian hostility, would remember her previous dubious neutrality with regret, especially as Bonaparte would undoubtedly take advantage of a Russian defeat to overrun Sweden. So then the whole of Europe, from North Cape to the Dardanelles, would be leagued against England; she would be driven from her meagre foothold in Spain, and left to face the alternatives of continuing a struggle in which there was no prospect of any relief, or making a still more dangerous peace with a tyrant whose malignant ill will could never be appeased. In that case it would not be to any man's credit that he had contributed to the catastrophe of Russia's entry into the war.

Bush had come on deck, clearly sent for by Montgomery as officer of the watch. He was reading the deck log which Montgomery had inscribed on the slate, and he was studying the traverse board. Now he came stumping over to the starboard side of the quarter-deck to touch his hat to Hornblower.

"Reval — Tallinn as those Swedish charts call it, sir — bears south-east twenty-five miles by my reckoning, sir. That point of land to port is the north cape of Naissaar island, however it's pronounced."

"Thank you, Captain Bush."

Hornblower even felt the temptation to vent his ill temper on Bush; he could imagine keenly enough how Bush would wilt and the hurt look that would come into his face at a sarcastic gibe at his mispronouncing of foreign names and his self-consciousness regarding it. Bush was always an easy target, and a satisfactory one from the point of view of readily apparent results, Hornblower dallied with the temptation while Bush stood before him awaiting orders. It was even amusing to keep him waiting like this; Hornblower suspected that Bush was nervously wondering what devilment he had in mind. Then in a wave of reaction Hornblower felt contempt for himself. It was bad enough that Vickery's unknown officer of the watch should at this moment be in trouble because his Commodore was worried about what to do with Braun; it was far worse that the faithful, capable Bush should be suffering mental unhappiness for the same reason.

"Lay a course for Königsberg, Captain Bush, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir."

So far did the reaction go that Hornblower went on to explain the motives that guided him in reaching this decision.

"Danzig and Königsberg and East Prussia are Bonaparte's base of operations. The army he has gathered in Poland is supplied by river and canal from there — by the Vistula and the Pregel and the Memel. We're going to see if we can put a spoke in Bonaparte's wheel."

"Aye aye, sir."

"I'll put the squadron through general evolutions this morning."

"Aye aye, sir."

Bush was simply beaming at this remarkable unbending of his unpredictable chief. He was a long-suffering individual; as second-in-command he would be justified in looking upon it as his right to be admitted to the Commodore's secrets. After all, a stray bullet, a falling spar, a stroke of disease might easily put him in command of the whole force. Yet he remained grateful for any scraps of information which Hornblower condescended to throw to him.

Nonsuch came round on the port tack as Bush and the sailing master decided on what course to steer. She lay over under her pyramids of canvas, the taut weather-rigging harping sharply to the wind, and Hornblower moved over from the starboard side to port, the windward side, as was his right. He looked back at the rest of the squadron, each vessel bracing sharp up in succession, following in the leader's wake, *Lotus* and *Raven*, *Moth* and *Harvey*. *Clam* was not with them — she had been kept at Kronstadt to follow with any news Wychwood might be able to pick up — but five vessels were quite enough to exercise at manoeuvres.

"Bring me the signal book," ordered Hornblower.

Flags raced up the halliards, each signal a chain of black balls, like beads on a string, until it was broken out, but in the other ships keen eyes were watching through telescopes, reading the flags even before they were broken out, and anxious officers were ordering the replies to be bent on ready to hoist without a moment's delay. The squadron tacked in succession, wore together on a line of bearing, came to the wind again in succession into line ahead. They reduced sail in conformity with the leader — every ship sending every possible hand aloft to get in courses or topgallants the moment Hornblower's intentions became clear — and they made sail again. They reefed topsails, double-reefed them, shook them out again. They hove-to, hoisted out their boats manned with armed boarding parties, and hoisted the boats in again. Resuming their course they opened their ports, ran out their guns, secured them again, and then ran them out and secured them again. A fresh signal mounted *Nonsuch's* halliards, headed by *Raven's* number.

"Commodore to Captain. Why did you not obey my order?"

Hornblower's glass had detected that *Raven* had not fully secured her guns — she had not bolted her gun-ports so as to open them more quickly if the order should come, but Hornblower could see the ports opening slightly with the roll of the ship; moreover, judging by the little of the action of the guns' crews that he could see she had not uncoupled and stowed her train-tackles, giving her a clear five seconds' start over the other ships. It was foolish of Cole to try an old trick like that, and one so easily detected; it was right that *Raven's* shame should be proclaimed to the rest of the squadron. Half the object of manoeuvres was to sharpen the captains' wits; if they could manage to outguess the Commodore, well and good, for there would be more likelihood of their outguessing a Frenchman should they meet one.

Raven hastily secured gun-ports and train-tackles; to rub the lesson in Hornblower waited until he was sure the order had just been passed on her decks and then sent up the signal for running out the guns. The counter-order following so quickly upon the order caught *Raven* unready — Hornblower could imagine the cursing officers on her main-deck — and she was seven full seconds behind any other ship in hoisting the 'evolution completed' signal. There was no need to comment on the fact, however — everybody in the *Raven* would be aware of what had happened and a further reprimand might weaken Cole's authority over his ship's company. It was an active busy morning for all hands in the squadron, and Hornblower, looking back to the time when he was a midshipman, could well imagine the sigh of relief that must have gone round when at noon he signalled for the order of sailing and gave the men a chance to get their dinners. He watched the *Nonsuch's* crew form up to receive their ration of spirits; the eager, skylarking hands each carrying his wooden piggin; the guard over the grog tub — the latter with its painted inscription 'The King, God bless him'; Montgomery and two master's mates watching the issue. Hornblower saw one hand come up to the tub and be indignantly hustled away; evidently he was a defaulter who had been sentenced to lose his ration and who had nevertheless tried to obtain it. Such an attempt would earn a man at least two dozen lashes in some ships but, judging by Montgomery's actions, it would mean no more than a further deprivation or a spell at the pumps or perhaps a turn at cleaning out the heads.

The liveliness and high spirits of everyone were reassuring. He could rely on these men to fight as desperately as any occasion could demand; equally important, he could rely on them to endure the long tedious days of beating about at sea, the wearisome monotony of life in a ship of the line, without more complaint than one need expect. But he must drop a hint to Bush to see that this happy condition endured. A hornpipe competition — theatricals — something of that sort would be necessary soon, unless there should happen to be enough action to keep the men's minds busy. And with that decision he turned and went below, having managed, as a result of this morning's activity, to drive out of his own mind any worry about what to do with Braun when the latter should recover from his wound. After all, he might yet die.

Besides, there were the charts of the Frisches Haff and the approaches to Königsberg to study, and plans to be made for assailing Bonaparte's communications in the neighbourhood, should that be possible. If this fair wind should persist he had no more than three days in which to think out some method of attack there. He had the charts got out for him and he pored over them, irritably calling for lamps to light his dim cabin so as to make it possible to read the little figures scattered over them. The soundings were fantastically complex, and the problem of studying them was not made easier by the fact that he had three different charts to study — a Swedish one with the soundings marked in Swedish feet, a new French one with the soundings in metres, and only a sketchy English one in fathoms. It was a toilsome business comparing them, and perfectly unsatisfactory in the end, seeing that they did not agree.

Yet the desirability of striking a blow there was perfectly obvious. In roadless Poland and East Prussia the only way of distributing provisions and munitions to Bonaparte's swelling armies was by water. His main advanced base was Danzig, whence the troops in Central Poland could be supplied by the Vistula. But the large forces in East Prussia and in eastern Poland were dependent on the other river systems, radiating from Königsberg and Elbing on the Frisches Haff. This Frisches Haff, a long narrow lagoon almost cut off from the Baltic by a long sand spit, would quite obviously be the scene of extensive barge traffic from Elbing to Königsberg. Fifty miles long, a dozen miles wide, shallow — three or four fathoms at most — with the narrow entrance guarded by the guns of the fortress of Pillau, from the French point of view it would be a perfectly safe route for water-borne supplies, sheltered both from storms and from the English. Danzig was the best objective, of course, for a stroke anywhere along this Baltic coast, but Danzig was safe, several miles from the sea up the Vistula, and heavily fortified to boot. If it took Bonaparte and a hundred thousand men three months to capture Danzig Hornblower was not likely to effect anything against the place with a couple of hundred marines. Danzig was impregnable to him. For that matter, so were Königsberg and Elbing. But it was the communications between them that he wanted to break; no more than that need be done. The wind was fair, too — a Roman would look on that as a good omen.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

This was an ideal night in which to reconnoitre the entrance to the Frisches Haff. Overcast, so that not much light came from the summer sky with the sun only just below the horizon, and a strong breeze blowing — the sloop Hornblower had just quitted had single-reefed her topsails earlier in the evening. A strong breeze and a choppy sea meant that there would be far less chance of guard-boats — guard-boats manned by landsmen — rowing a close watch over this boom that Hornblower was setting out to investigate.

But at the same time Hornblower was suffering considerable personal inconvenience from the choppy sea. The cutter in whose sternsheets he sat was rearing and plunging, standing first on her bows and then on her stern, with the spray flying across her in a continuous sheet, so that a couple of hands had to bale all the time. The spray was finding its way remorselessly through the interstices of his boat-cloak, so that he was wet and cold, and the cold and the violent motion inevitably turned his mind towards seasickness. His stomach felt as uneasy as his body felt uncomfortable. In the darkness he could not see Vickery, beside him at the tiller, nor Brown tending the sheet, and he felt a poor sort of relief at the thought that his pallor and uneasiness were not apparent to them. Unlike some victims he had met he could never be seasick unselfconsciously, he told himself bitterly, and then with his usual rasping self-analysis he told himself that that should not surprise him, seeing that he was never unselfconscious at all.

He shifted his position in the stern of the cutter, and clutched his cloak more tightly round him. The Germans and Frenchmen guarding Pillau had as yet no knowledge that an English squadron was so close to them; it was less than an hour ago that he had come up in the darkness with the two sloops, leaving *Nonsuch* and the bomb-vessels over the horizon. A soft-hearted senior officer in Königsberg might easily hesitate before giving orders that a guard-boat should toilsomely row guard up and down the boom on such a blustery night, and even if the orders were given there was every chance that the petty officer in charge of the boat might shirk

his duty — especially as there could not be much love lost between French who would occupy the higher ranks and the Germans who would fill the lower ones.

A low warning cry came from the lookout in the bows, and Vickery put down his tiller a trifle, bringing the cutter closer to the wind. She rose over a crest, and then as she came down in the trough a dark object appeared close overside, dimly visible in the darkness in a flurry of foam.

"A cable, sir," reported Vickery. "An' there's the boom, right ahead."

On the heaving surface of the sea just ahead could be seen a faint hint of blackness.

"Lay me alongside it," said Hornblower, and Vickery turned up into the wind, and at his shouted order the lugsail came down and the cutter ranged herself against the boom. The wind was blowing not quite along it, so that there was a tiny lee on their side of the boom; on the far side the steep waves broke against it with a roar, but on this side the surface for a narrow space was smooth although covered with foam that reflected what little light made its way from the dark sky. The bowmen had hooked on to the cable just where it was secured to the boom.

Hornblower put off his cloak and left himself exposed to the spray which hurtled at him, poised himself for a leap, and sprang for the boom. As he landed on it a wave broke across it, sousing him to the skin, and he had to clutch desperately with fingers and toes to save himself from being washed off. He was riding an enormous tree trunk, floating on the surface with very little of itself exposed above the surface. With the best timber country in Europe to draw upon, and easy water transport available, it was, of course, certain that the French would select the heaviest trees possible to guard the entrance to the port. He clawed his way on all fours along the log, balancing in nightmare fashion on his pitching and rolling mount. An active topman, or Vickery for that matter, would probably walk upright, but then Hornblower wanted the evidence of his own senses regarding the boom, not a report at secondhand. The cable, when he reached it, was the largest he had ever seen in his life — a thirty-inch cable at least; the largest cable *Nonsuch* carried was only nineteen inches. He felt about the log with inquiring fingers while the icy water soused him to the ears, and found what he was expecting to find, one of the chain cables that attached this log to the next. It was a two-inch chain cable with a breaking strain of a hundred tons or so, heavily stapled down to the log, and further search immediately revealed another one. Presumably there were others below the surface, making four or five altogether. Even a ship of the line, charging down full tilt before the wind, would be hardly likely to break that boom, but would only cause herself desperate under-water damage. Peering through the spray, he could see the end of the next log and its cable; the gap was some ten feet only. The wind, blowing almost lengthwise along the boom, had pushed it down to leeward as far as the cables would allow, boom and cables making a herring-bone with the cables as taut as could be.

Hornblower clawed his way back down the trunk, poised himself, and leaped for the boat. In the darkness, with the irregular motion of boom and boat in the choppy sea, it was hard to time the moment to jump, and he landed awkwardly across the gunwale with one leg in the sea, and Vickery hauled him into the boat without much dignity left him.

"Let her drop down to leeward," ordered Hornblower. "I want soundings taken at every log."

Vickery handled the boat well. He kept her bows to the wind after shoving off, and with a couple of oars pulling steadily he manoeuvred her past each cable as the boat drifted to leeward. Brown stood amidships, balancing himself against the boat's extravagant plunges, while he took soundings with the awkward thirty-foot sounding pole. It called for a powerful man to handle that thing in this wind, but properly used it was quicker and far less noisy than a hand lead. Four fathoms — three and a half — four — the boom was laid right across the fairway, as was only to be expected. At the windward end it was not more than a couple of hundred yards — a cable's length — from the beach at Pillau, and Hornblower, staring into the night, more than suspected a supplementary boom from that shore which, overlapping this one, would compel any vessel entering to go about so as to make the turn. That meant that any ship trying to enter with hostile intentions would be sunk or set afire for certain by the heavy guns in Pillau.

They reached the leeward end of the boom; a stretch of clear water extended from here towards the sandspit — the *Nehrung*, to use the curious German word for it — which divided the Haff from the Baltic for twenty miles. The open stretch must be a quarter of a mile wide, but it was useless for navigation. Brown's pole

recorded a depth of ten feet for a couple of soundings, and then the water shallowed to no more than six or eight.

Vickery suddenly put his hand on Hornblower's arm and pointed to the land. There was a nucleus of greater darkness there — a guard-boat beating out through the shallows to keep watch over the boom.

"Out oars," said Hornblower. "Get out to sea."

There were thrum mats round the looms of the oars to muffle the noise they made against the thole-pins; the men put their backs into their work, and the cutter crept out to sea as the guard-boat continued its course. When the two boats were far enough apart for the sail to be invisible Hornblower gave orders for the lug to be set and they began the beat back to *Lotus*, with Hornblower shivering uncontrollably in his wet clothes, bitterly ashamed though he was that Vickery should be aware that his Commodore should shiver on account of a mere wet jacket which any tough seaman would think nothing of. It was irritating, though it was no more than was to be expected, that the first attempt to find *Lotus* in the darkness should be unsuccessful, and the cutter had to go about and reach to windward on the other tack before at last they picked up the loom of her in the night. When her hail reached their ears Brown made a speaking-trumpet of his hands.

"Commodore!" he shouted, and Vickery turned the cutter into the *Lotus*'s lee, and Hornblower went up the sloop's low side as the two came together. On the quarter-deck Vickery turned to him for orders.

"Haul up and make an offing, Mr Vickery," said Hornblower. "Make sure *Raven* follows us. We must be out of sight of land by dawn."

Down in Vickery's tiny cabin, stripping off his wet clothes, with Brown hovering round him, Hornblower tried to make his dulled mind work on the problem before him. Brown produced a towel and Hornblower rubbed a little life into his chilled limbs. Vickery knocked and entered, coming, as soon as he had seen his ship on her proper course, to see that his Commodore had all that he needed. Hornblower straightened up after towelling his legs and hit his head with a crash against the deck beams; in this small sloop there was hardly more than five feet clearance. Hornblower let out an oath.

"There's another foot of headroom under the skylight, sir," said Vickery, diplomatically.

The skylight was three feet by two, and standing directly beneath it Hornblower could just stand upright, and even then his hair brushed the skylight. And the lamp swung from a hook in a deck beam beside the aperture; an incautious movement on Hornblower's part brought his bare shoulder against it so that warm stinking oil ran out of the receiver on to his collarbone. Hornblower swore again.

"There's hot coffee being brought to you, sir," said Vickery.

The coffee when it came was of a type which Hornblower had not tasted for years — a decoction of burnt bread with the merest flavouring of coffee — but at least it was warming. Hornblower sipped it and handed back the cup to Brown, and then took his dry shirt from the breech of the twelve-pounder beside him and struggled into it.

"Any further orders, sir?" asked Vickery.

"No," replied Hornblower heavily; his head poked forward to make sure it did not hit the deck beams again. He tried to keep the disappointment and the bad temper out of his voice, but he feared he had not succeeded. It irked him to have to admit that there was no chance of any successful attempt against the Frisches Haff, and yet prudence, common sense, his whole instinct dictated such a decision. There was no breaking that boom, and there was no going round it, not in any of the vessels under his command. He remembered bitterly his unnecessary words to Bush about the desirability of raiding this area from the sea. If ever he needed a lesson in keeping his mouth shut he was receiving one now. The whole flotilla was expecting action, and he was going to disappoint them, sail away without doing anything at all. In future he would double lock his jaws, treble curb his unruly tongue, for if he had not talked so light-heartedly to Bush there would not be nearly so much harm done; Bush, in the absence of orders to the contrary, would naturally have discussed the future with his officers, and hope would be running high — everyone was expecting great things of the bold Hornblower (said he to himself with a sneer) whose reputation for ingenious daring was so tremendous.

Unhappy, he went back again over the data. At the sandspit end of the boom there was water enough for a flotilla of ship's boats to pass. He could send in three or four launches, with four-pounders mounted in the bows and with a hundred and fifty men on board. There was not much doubt that at night they could run past the boom, and, taking everyone in the lagoon by surprise, could work swift havoc on the coasting trade. Very

likely they could destroy thousands of tons of shipping. But they would never get out again. The exit would be watched far too carefully; the batteries would be manned day and night, gunboats would swarm round the end of the boom, and even gunboats manned by landsmen, if there were enough of them, would destroy the flotilla. His squadron could ill afford to lose a hundred and fifty trained seamen — one-tenth of the total ships' complements — and yet a smaller force might well be completely wasted.

No; no destruction of coasters would be worth a hundred and fifty seamen. He must abandon the idea; as if symbolical of that decision he began to pull on the dry trousers Vickery had provided for him. And then, with one leg in and one leg out, the idea suddenly came to him, and he checked himself, standing in his shirt with his left leg bare and his right leg covered only from ankle to knee.

"Mr Vickery," he said, "let's have those charts out again."

"Aye aye, sir," said Vickery.

There was eagerness and excitement in his voice at once, echoing the emotion which must have been obvious in Hornblower's tone — Hornblower took notice of it, and as he buckled his waistband he reaffirmed his resolution to be more careful how he spoke, for he must regain his reputation as a silent hero. He stared down at the charts which Vickery spread for him — he knew that Vickery was studying his face, and he took great care to show no sign whatever of reaching a decision one way or the other. When his mind was made up he said: "Thank you," in the flattest tone he could contrive, and then, suddenly remembering his most non-committal exclamation, he cleared his throat.

"Ha-h'm," he said, without any expression at all, and, pleased with the result, he repeated it and drew it out longer still, "Ha-a-a-h'm."

The bewildered look in Vickery's face was a great delight to him.

Next morning, back in his own cabin in *Nonsuch*, he took a mild revenge in watching the faces of his assembled captains as he laid the scheme before them. One and all, they thirsted for the command, hotly eager to risk life and liberty on a mission which might at first sight seem utterly harebrained. The two commanders yearned for the chance of promotion to post rank; the lieutenants hoped they might become commanders.

"Mr Vickery will be in command," said Hornblower, and had further opportunity of watching the play of emotion over the faces of his audience. But as in this case everyone present had a right to know why he had been passed over, he gave a few words of explanation.

"The two captains of the bomb-vessels are irreplaceable; there are no other lieutenants with us who can use their infernal machines as well as they can. I don't have to explain to you why Captain Bush is irreplaceable. It was Mr Vickery who happened to go with me to investigate the boom, and so he happens to know more about the situation than Mr Cole, who's the other obvious candidate for the command."

There was no harm in soothing Cole's feelings with an excuse like that, for no good end would be served by letting people guess that he would not trust Cole with any command out of his sight — poor old Cole, grey-haired and bowed, almost too old for his work, hoping against hope for promotion to captain. Hornblower had an uneasy feeling that Cole saw through the excuse, and had to comfort himself with the trite thought that no war can be fought without someone's feelings being hurt. He passed on hurriedly to the next point.

"Having settled that question, gentlemen, I would welcome your views on who else should go as Mr Vickery's subordinates. Mr Vickery first, as he is most concerned."

When those details were settled the next step was to prepare the four boats for the expedition — *Nonsuch's* launch and cutter, and the cutters from *Lotus* and *Raven*. A four-pounder in the eyes of the launch, a three-pounder in the eyes of each of the cutters; food, water, ammunition, combustibles for setting captures on fire. The crews that had been told off for the expedition were paraded and inspected, the seamen with pistols and cutlasses, the marines with muskets and bayonets. At the end of the day Vickery came back on board *Nonsuch* for a final confirmation of the future rendezvous.

"Good luck," said Hornblower.

"Thank you, sir," said Vickery.

He looked frankly into Hornblower's eyes.

"I have so much to thank you for, sir," he added.

"Don't thank me, thank yourself," said Hornblower testily.

He found it particularly irksome to be thanked for risking young Vickery's life. He calculated to himself that if he had married as a midshipman he might by now be the father of a son just Vickery's age.

At nightfall the squadron stood in towards the land. The wind was backing northerly a little, but it was still blowing a strong breeze, and although the night was not quite as overcast as the preceding one, there was every chance that the boats would slip through unobserved. Hornblower watched them go, just as two bells struck in the middle watch, and as they vanished into the greyness he turned away. Now he would have to wait. It interested him to discover once more that he would genuinely and sincerely have preferred to be in action himself, that he would rather be risking life and limb and liberty there in the Frisches Haff than be here safe at sea with nothing to do but await results. He looked on himself as a coward; he dreaded mutilation and he disliked the thought of death only less than that, so that it was a matter of peculiar interest to find that there were some things he disliked even more than danger. When a long enough time had elapsed for the boats to have passed the boom — or for them to have fallen into the hands of the enemy — Hornblower went below to rest for the brief interval before dawn, but he could only pretend to sleep, he could only hold himself down in his cot and prevent himself by sheer mental effort from tossing and turning. It was a positive relief to go out on the half-deck again when the sky began to grow lighter, to souse himself under the head-pump, and then to go up on the quarter-deck and drink coffee there, glancing the while over the starboard quarter where (with the ship hove-to on the port tack) lay Pillau and the entrance to the Haff.

The growing daylight revealed it all through Hornblower's glass. At random cannon-shot lay the yellow and green headland on which Pillau was set; the twin church steeples were clearly visible. The line of the boom showed up, lying across the entrance, marked by breaking waves and occasionally a glimpse of dark timber. Those dark mounds above the water's edge must be the batteries thrown up there to defend the entrance. On the other side lay the long line of the Nehrung, a yellowish green line of sandhills, rising and falling with minute variations of altitude as far as the eye could see, and beyond. But through the entrance there was nothing to see at all, nothing except grey water, flecked here and there with white where the shoals dotted the lagoon. The opposite shore of the Haff was too distant to be visible from the deck.

"Captain Bush," ordered Hornblower, "would you please be good enough to send an officer with good eyes to the masthead with a glass?"

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower watched the young lieutenant dashing up the rigging, moving as fast as he could with his Commodore's eye on him, hanging back downward as he scaled the futtock-shrouds, going hand over hand up the topgallant-shrouds, Hornblower knew that in his present condition he could not do that without resting in the maintop for a space, and he also knew that his eyes were not as good as they were — not as good as the lieutenant's. He watched the lieutenant settle himself at the topgallant mast-head, adjust his glass, and sweep the horizon, and he waited impatiently for a report. Unable to wait longer he grabbed his speaking-trumpet.

"Mast-head, there! What do you see of the shore inside?"

"Nothing, sir. It's too hazy to see plain. But I can see no sails, sir."

Maybe the garrison was laughing up their sleeves at him. Maybe the boats had fallen straight into their hands, and now they were amusing themselves watching the squadron beginning an endless wait for any further sight of the lost boats and seamen. Hornblower refused to allow himself to be pessimistic. He set himself to picture the state of affairs in the batteries and in the town, when the dawn revealed a British squadron lying-to just out of range. How the drums would beat and trumpets peal, as the troops were hurriedly turned out to guard against a possible landing. That was what must be going on at this very moment. The garrison, the French governor, must be still unaware as yet that wolves had slipped into their sheep-fold, that British boat crews had penetrated into the waters of the Haff where no enemy had been seen since Danzig fell to the French five years back. Hornblower tried to comfort himself with thought of all the additional bustle that would develop as soon as the situation disclosed itself to the enemy; the messengers that would gallop with warnings, the gunboats that would be hastily warned, the coasters and barges which would seek the shelter of the nearest batteries — if batteries there were; Hornblower was willing to bet that there was none between Elbing and Königsberg, for none had been necessary so far.

"Mast-head! Can't you see anything inshore?"

"No, sir — yes, sir. There's gunboats putting out from the town."

Hornblower could see those himself, a flotilla of small two-masted vessels, rigged with the sprit-mainsails usual to small Baltic craft, putting out from Elbing. They were a little like Norfolk wherries. Presumably they each carried one heavy gun, a twenty-four-pounder possibly, mounted right up in the eyes of the boat. They anchored at intervals in the shoal water, obviously as a further protection to the boom in case of an attempt upon it. Four of them moved right across and anchored to guard the shallows between the boom and the Nehrung — not exactly locking the stable door after the horse had been stolen, decided Hornblower, rejecting the simile after it came to his mind; they were locking the stable door to prevent the thief getting out, if they knew as yet (which was highly doubtful) that there was a thief inside. The haziness was fast clearing; overhead the sky was almost blue and a watery sun was showing through.

"Deck, there! If you please, sir, there's a bit of smoke in sight now, right up the bay. Can't see more than that, sir, but it's black smoke and might be from a burning ship."

Bush, measuring with his eye the dwindling distance between the ship and the boom, was giving orders to brace up and work a trifle farther out to sea again, and the two sloops conformed to the *Nonsuch's* movements. Hornblower wondered whether or not he had put too much trust in young Mound with the bomb-ketches. Mound had an important rendezvous for next morning; with the *Moth* and the *Harvey* he was out of sight below the horizon. So far the garrison of Elbing had seen only the three British ships, and did not know of the existence of the ketches. That was well — as long as Mound carried out his orders correctly. Or a gale might blow up, or a shift of the wind might raise too much of a surf for the project Hornblower had in mind. Hornblower felt anxiety surge upon him. He had to force himself to relax, to appear composed. He permitted himself to walk the deck, but slowed down his nervous strides to a casual saunter.

"Deck, there! There's more smoke inshore, sir. I can see two lots of it, as if there were two ships on fire now." Bush had just given orders to back the main-topsail again, and as the ship hove-to he came across to Hornblower.

"It looks as if Vickery had caught something, doesn't it, sir?" he said, smiling.

"Let's hope so," answered Hornblower.

There was no sign of any anxiety in Bush's expression; his craggy face denoted nothing more than fierce satisfaction at the thought of Vickery loose amid the coasting trade. His sublime confidence began to reassure Hornblower until the latter suddenly realized that Bush was not really paying consideration to circumstances. Bush knew that Hornblower had planned this attack, and that was enough for him. In that case he could imagine no possibility of failure, and Hornblower found it profoundly irritating that this should be the case.

"Deck, there! There's two small sail heading across the bay close-hauled for the town. And I can't be sure yet, sir, but I think the second one is our cutter."

"Our cutter it is, sir!" yelled another voice. Every idle hand in the ship was perched by now at the mast-heads.

"That'll be Montgomery," said Bush. He had fitted the toe of his wooden leg into the ring-bolt of the aftermost carronade tackle so that he could stand without effort on the gently heaving deck.

"She's caught her, sir!" yelled the voice from the mast-head. "Our cutter's caught her!"

"That's one lot of beef and bread that Boney won't get," said Bush.

Very heavy destruction of the coastal shipping in the Haff might be some compensation for the loss of 150 prime seamen. But it would be hard to convince Their Lordships of the Admiralty of that, if there was no certain evidence of the destruction.

"Deck, there! The two sail are parting company. Our cutter's going off before the wind. The other has her mains'l brailed up, I think, sir. Looks to me as if —"

The lieutenant's report terminated abruptly in mid-sentence.

"There she goes!" yelled another voice, and at the same moment there came a cheer from everyone aloft.

"She's blown up!" shouted the lieutenant, forgetting in his excitement even to add 'sir' to his words when addressing his Commadore. "There's a pillar of smoke as high as a mountain! You can see it from the deck, I think."

They certainly could — a mushroom-topped pillar of smoke, black and heavy, apparent as it reached above the horizon. It lasted a perceptible time before the wind blew it into strange ragged shapes and then dispersed it utterly.

"That wasn't beef and bread, by God!" said Bush, pounding his left palm with his right fist. "That was powder! A barge-load of powder! Fifty tons of powder, by God!"

"Mast-head! What of the cutter?"

"She's all right, sir. Doesn't look as if the explosion harmed her. She's hull-down from here already, sir."

"Off after another one, please God," said Bush.

The destruction of a powder barge was the clearest possible proof that Bonaparte was using the inland water route for the transport of military stores. Hornblower felt he had achieved something, even though Whitehall might not be fully convinced, and he found himself smiling with pleasure. He suppressed the smile as soon as he was aware of it, for his dignity demanded that triumph should leave him as unmoved as uncertainty.

"It only remains to get Vickery and the men out to-night, sir," said Bush.

"Yes, that is all," said Hornblower, as woodenly as he could manage.

The blowing up of the powder barge was the only sure proof they had that day in the *Nonsuch* of success in the Haff, although more than once the lookouts hesitatingly reported smoke on the horizon inside. As evening came on another string of gunboats made their appearance, from Königsberg presumably, and took up their stations along the boom. A column of troops could be seen for a space, too, the horizontal lines of blue coats and white breeches clearly visible even from the deck as they marched in to strengthen the defences of Pillau. The entrance into the Haff was going to be stoutly defended, obviously, if the British should attempt a *coup de main*.

In the evening Hornblower came up from below, where he had been making pretence at eating his dinner, and looked round him again although his senses had been so alert in his cabin that his glance told him nothing he did not know already. The wind was moderating with the dying of the day; the sun was on the point of setting, although there would be daylight for a couple of hours more at least.

"Captain Bush, I'd be obliged if you would send your best gun pointers to the lower gun-deck starboard-side guns."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Have the guns cleared away and run out, if you please. Then I would like it if you would allow the ship to drop down within range of the batteries there. I want to draw their fire."

"Aye aye, sir."

Pipes twittered around the ship; bosun and bosun's mates roared out orders, and the bands ran to their stations. A long earthquake-tremor shook the ship as the massive twenty-four pounders of the lower gun-deck ran thunderously out.

"Please see that the gun-captains are certain what their target is," said Hornblower.

He knew how limited was the view afforded a man on the lower deck, looking through a gun-port only a yard or so above the water's edge, and he did not want the enemy to jump to the conclusion that the feint he was about to make was no more than a feint. The hands at the main-topsail lee brace walking smartly down the deck, swung the big sail round and *Nonsuch* came to the wind and slowly gathered way.

"Port a little," said Bush to the helmsman. "Let her fall off. Meet her there! Steady as you go!"

"Steady as you go, sir," echoed the helmsman, and then by a neat feat of facial gymnastics transferred his quid from his cheek to his mouth, and a moment later spat accurately into the spit-kid beside the wheel without transferring any of his attention from the leech of the main-topsail and the compass in the binnacle.

Nonsuch edged down steadily towards the entrance and the batteries. This was a ticklish business, coming down to be shot at. There was smoke as from a fire visible not far from the batteries; maybe it was merely rising from the cooking stoves of the garrison, but it might well be smoke from the furnaces for heating red-hot shot. But Bush was aware of that possibility when in action against coastal batteries, and had needed no warning. Every available man was standing by with fire buckets, and every pump and hose was rigged. Now he was measuring the range with his eye.

"A little closer, if you please, Captain Bush," said Hornblower to prompt him, for to Hornblower it was obvious that they were still out of range. A fountain of water was visible for a moment on the surface of the choppy sea, two cables' lengths from the starboard bow.

"Not near enough yet, Captain Bush," said Hornblower.

In tense silence the ship moved on. A whole cluster of fountains sprang suddenly into existence close under the starboard quarter, one so close indeed that a hatful of water, flung by some freak of wave and wind, hit Bush full in the face.

"God damn it to hell!" spluttered Bush, wiping his eyes.

That battery had no business to have come so close as that with that salvo. And there was no smoke near it either. Hornblower traversed his glass round, and gulped. It was another battery altogether which had fired, one farther to the left, and moreover one whose existence he had not suspected until that moment. Apparently the grass had grown over the parapets sufficiently to conceal it from quite close inspection; but it had unmasked itself a trifle too soon. If the officer commanding there had been patient for another ten minutes *Nonsuch* might have found herself in a difficult situation.

"That will do, Captain Bush," said Hornblower.

"Full and by," said Bush to the helmsman and then raised his voice. "Lee braces, there!"

Nonsuch swung round, turning her starboard broadside towards the batteries, and, close-hauled, was now edging towards them far less rapidly. Hornblower pointed out the exact situation of the newly revealed battery to the midshipman of the watch, and then sent him flying below to carry the information to the guns.

"Keep your luff!" growled Bush to the helmsman.

"Keep your luff, sir."

For a moment or two there were waterspouts leaping from the surface of the sea all round, and the loud noise of cannon-balls passing through the air assaulted their ears. It was remarkable that they were not hit; at least, it was remarkable until Hornblower, glancing up, saw two elliptical holes in the mizzen-topsail. The shooting was poor, for there were at least twenty heavy guns firing at them, as Hornblower calculated from the smoke appearing on shore. He took careful note of the sites of the batteries — one never knew when such intelligence might be useful.

"Open fire, Captain, if you please," said Hornblower, and before the polite ending of his sentence had passed his lips Bush had raised his speaking-trumpet and was repeating the order at the top of his lungs. The gunner's mate posted at the main hatchway relayed the message to the lower gun-deck. There was a brief pause which Hornblower noted with pleasure, because it showed that the gun-captains were taking pains to train their guns on the target, and not merely jerking the lanyards the moment the word reached them. Then came a ragged crash; the ship trembled, and the smoke surged up and blew away to leeward. Through his glass Hornblower could see sand flying all round the masked battery. The seventeen twenty-four pounders roared out again and again, the deck vibrating under Hornblower's feet with the concussion and with the rumble of the gun-tracks.

"Thank you, Captain Bush," said Hornblower, "you can put the ship about, now."

Bush blinked at him momentarily, his fighting blood roused so that he had to stop and think before dealing with the new order.

"Aye aye, sir." He raised his trumpet. "Cease fire! Stand by to go about!"

The order was relayed to the guns, and the din died down abruptly, so that Bush's "Hard-a-lee" to the helmsman sounded unnecessarily loud.

"Mainsail haul!" bellowed Bush.

As *Nonsuch* went ponderously about, rising to an even keel with her canvas slatting, a further cluster of waterspouts, grouped closely together for the first time, rose from the surface of the sea on the starboard bow. If she had not made the sudden turn the shots might well have hit her. Hornblower might be a mutilated corpse lying on the quarter-deck with his guts strung out beside him at this moment.

Nonsuch had passed the wind, and the after sails were filling.

"Let go and haul!" yelled Bush. The forward sails filled as the hands came aft with the lee braces, and *Nonsuch* settled down on the new tack.

"Any further orders, sir?" asked Bush.

"That will do for the present."

Close-hauled on the starboard tack the ship was drawing away fast from the land, beating out to where the two sloops were backing and filling while waiting for her. The people on shore must be exulting over having driven off a serious attack; probably some garrulous gunner was swearing that he had seen with his own eyes

damaging hits striking home on the British intruder. They must be encouraged in the belief that something desperate was still being meditated in this neighbourhood.

"Midshipman?" said Hornblower.

Strings of coloured flags soared up *Nonsuch's* halliards; it was good practice for the signal midshipman to try to spell out 'The curfew tolls the knell of parting day' with the fewest possible number of flag hoists. With his telescope pointed the midshipman read off *Raven's* reply.

"The —" he read, "I — o — w — must be 'blowing'. No, it's 'lowing', whatever he means by that. H — e — r — d. Herd. Two — five. That's 'wind', and 's'. That 'winds' — S — I — o —"

So Cole in the *Raven* was at least familiar with Gray's *Elegy*, and whoever was responsible for the flag hoists on board her was ingenious enough to use the code hoist for 'winds'. As Hornblower expected, he used the code hoist 'lee' for 'lea' as well, thereby saving one signal flag.

"The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lee, sir," reported the puzzled midshipman.

"Very good. Acknowledge."

All these innumerable signals between battleship and sloops must be visible from the shore and exciting their interest. Hornblower sent up another signal under *Lotus's* number — 'The ploughman homeward plods his weary way' — only to receive the puzzled reply 'Signal not understood'. Purvis, the first lieutenant of the *Lotus*, at present in command, was obviously not very bright, or perhaps not very well read. What in the world, at that rate, he was making of all this, was beyond even Hornblower's imagination, although the thought of it brought a smile to his lips.

"Cancel the signal, then," he ordered, "and substitute 'Report immediately number of red-haired married men on board'."

Hornblower waited until the reply came; he could have wished that Purvis had not been so literal-minded and had been able to think up an answer which should combine the almost incompatible qualities of deference and wit, instead of merely sending the bald reply 'Five'. Then he turned to business.

"Signal to both sloops," he ordered. "'Advance on boom in threatening manner avoiding action'."

In the dwindling daylight he watched the two vessels move down as though to attack. They wheeled, edged into the wind, and fell away again. Twice Hornblower saw a puff of smoke and heard, echoing over the water, the dull flat boom of a twenty-four-pounder as a gunboat tried the range. Then, while there was just light enough for the signal to be read, he hoisted 'Discontinue the action after half an hour'. He had done all he could to attract the enemy's attention to this end of the bay, the only exit. The garrison ought to be quite certain now that the raiding boats would attempt to escape by this route. Probably the garrison would anticipate a rush in the first light of dawn, assisted by an attack by the big ships from outside. He had done all he could, and it only remained now to go to bed and spend the rest of the night in tranquillity, if that were possible.

Naturally, it was impossible, with the fate of a hundred and fifty seamen at stake, with his own reputation for good fortune and ingenuity at stake. Half an hour after he had got into bed Hornblower found himself wishing that he had ordered three junior officers to join him in a game of whist until dawn. He dallied with the idea of getting up and doing so now, but put it aside in the certainty that if he should do so now everyone would know that he had tried to go to sleep and had failed. He could only turn over stoically and force himself to stay in bed until dawn came to release him.

When he came on deck the pearly mist of the Baltic morning was making the vague outline of visible objects vaguer yet. There was every promise of a fine day, wind moderate, backing a little. Bush was already on deck — Hornblower knew that, before he went up, because he had heard Bush's wooden leg thumping over his head — and at first sight of him Hornblower hoped that his own face did not show the same signs of sleeplessness and anxiety. They had at least the effect of bracing him up to conceal his own anxiety as he returned Bush's salute.

"I hope Vickery's all right, sir," said Bush.

The mere fact that Bush ventured to address Hornblower at this time in the morning after so many years of service under him was the best possible proof of his anxiety.

"Oh yes," said Hornblower, bluffly. "I'll trust Vickery to get out of any scrape."

That was a statement made in all sincerity; it occurred to Hornblower as he made it — what he had often thought before — that worry and anxiety were not really connected with the facts of the case. He had done everything possible. He remembered his profound study of the charts, his careful reading of the barometer, his painstaking — and now clearly successful — attempts to predict the weather. If he were compelled to bet, he would bet that Vickery was safe, and moreover he would judge the odds to be at least three to one. But that did not save him from being anxious, all the same. What did save him was the sight of Bush's nervousness.

"With this breeze there can't have been much surf, sir," said Bush.

"Of course not."

He had thought of that fifty times at least during the night, and he tried to look as if it had not been more than once. The mist was thin enough now to make the land just visible; the gunboats were still stationed along the boom, and he could see a belated guard-boat rowing along it.

"The wind's fair for the bomb-ketches, sir," said Bush. "They ought to have picked Vickery up by now and be on their way towards us."

"Yes."

Bush turned a searching eye aloft to make sure that the lookouts were at their posts and awake. It was twelve miles down the Nehrung, the long spit of sand that divided the Haff from the Baltic, that Mound with the bomb-ketches was going to pick up Vickery and his men. Vickery was going to land in the darkness on the Nehrung, abandon his boats, cross the sandspit, and rendezvous with Mound an hour before dawn. With their shallow draught the ketches would be safe among the shoals, so that they could send in their boats and bring Vickery off. Vickery's four ships' boats would all be lost, but that was a small price to pay for the destruction he must have caused, and Hornblower hoped that, what with the distraction of his own demonstrations off Pillau, and what with the fact that the possibility of Vickery abandoning his boats might easily never occur to the enemy's mind, Vickery would find no opposition on the Nehrung. Even if there were, the Nehrung was fifteen miles long and Vickery with a hundred and fifty determined men could be relied upon to break through any thin cordon of sentries or customs officials.

Yet if all had gone well the bomb-ketches ought to be in sight very soon. The next few minutes would be decisive.

"We couldn't have heard gunfire in the bay yesterday, sir," said Bush, "the wind being where it was. They may have met with any sort of armed vessel in the bay."

"So they may," said Hornblower.

"Sail ho!" yelled the masthead lookout. "Two sail on the port beam! It's the bomb-ketches, sir."

They might possibly be coming back, having been unable to pick up Vickery, but it was unlikely that in that case they would have returned so promptly. Bush was grinning broadly, with all his doubts at an end.

"I think, Captain," said Hornblower, "you might put the helm down and go to meet them."

It would not be consonant with the dignity of a Commodore to hang out a signal of inquiry as the vessels closed to visual range, for it to be read the moment a telescope in the *Harvey* could distinguish the flags. But *Nonsuch* was making a good five knots, with the water lapping cheerfully under her bows, and *Harvey* was doing the same, so that it was only a matter of waiting a few more minutes.

"*Harvey's* signalling, sir," reported the midshipman. He read the flags and hurriedly referred to the code book, "'seamen on board', sir."

"Very good. Make 'Commodore to Captain. Come on board with Mr Vickery to make your report'."

There was not much longer to wait. As the two vessels came within hail they rounded-to, and *Harvey's* gig dropped into the water and came bobbing across to *Nonsuch*. It was a weary Vickery who came up the side with Mound beside him; his face was grey, and below his eyes were marks like new scars as proof that he had not slept for three successive nights. He sat down gratefully when Hornblower gave him permission to do so as soon as they were in his cabin.

"Well?" said Hornblower. "I'll hear you first, Vickery."

"It went off very well, sir." Vickery dragged a scrap of paper out of his pocket on which apparently he had kept notes. "There was no trouble going past the boom on the night of the 15th. We saw nothing of the enemy. At dawn on the 16th we were off the mouth of the Königsberg river. There we took and destroyed the — the *Fried Rich*, coaster, of Elbing, about two hundred tons, seven of a crew, with a cargo of rye and live pigs. We

burned her, and sent the crew ashore in their own boat. Then we caught the — the — *Blitzer*, also of Elbing, about one hundred tons, laden with grain. We burned her, too. Then the *Charlotte*, of Danzig. She was ship-rigged, four hundred tons, twenty-five crew, laden with general cargo of military stores — tents, stretchers, horseshoes, ten thousand stand of small arms; we burned her. Then the *Ritter Horse*, powder barge, about seventy tons. We blew her up."

"We saw that, I think," said Hornblower. "That was *Nonsuch*'s cutter."

"Yes, sir. That was all at this end of the bay. Then we bore down to the westward. We caught the *Weece Ross* of Kolberg, two hundred tons. She carried four six-pounders and showed fight, but Montgomery boarded her over the bows and they threw down their arms. We had two men wounded. We burned her. Then there was —"

"How many altogether?"

"One ship, sir. Eleven sail of coasting vessels. Twenty-four barges. All destroyed."

"Excellent," said Hornblower. "And then?"

"By then it was nigh on dark, sir. I anchored on the north side of the bay until midnight. Then I ran over to the sandspit. We found two soldiers there, and made 'em prisoners. 'Twas easy enough crossing the spit, sir. We burned a blue light and made contact with the *Harvey*. They started taking us aboard at two a.m., and I was aboard at three, by the first light. I went back and burned the boats before I embarked, sir."

"Better still."

The enemy, then, had not even the sorry compensation of the capture of four ships' boats in exchange for the frightful destruction Vickery had wrought. He turned to Mound.

"I have nothing particular to report, sir. Those waters are shoal, without a doubt, sir. But I had no difficulty making my way to the rendezvous. After taking Mr Vickery's party on board we touched bottom, sir. We had nearly a hundred extra hands on board an' must have been drawing nigh on a foot more water. But we got off all right. I had the men run from side to side to rock the vessel, an' I threw all aback an' she came off."

"I understand."

Hornblower looked at Mound's expressionless face and smiled inwardly at his studied languid manner. Picking the way in the dark through the shoals to the rendezvous must have been something of an epic achievement. Hornblower could estimate the seamanship it called for, but it was not in the tradition to lay stress on difficulties surmounted. And a less reliable officer might have tried to suppress the fact that his ship had touched ground once. It was to Mound's credit that he had not done so.

"I shall call the attention of the Admiralty," said Hornblower, trying his best to combat the pomposity which persisted in making itself heard in his voice, "to the conduct of both of you officers. I consider it excellent. I shall, of course, require reports from you immediately in writing."

"Aye aye, sir."

Now that he was a Commodore Hornblower felt more sympathy towards senior officers who had been pompous to him; he was pompous himself — it was one way in which could be concealed the fact that he had been anxious.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Hornblower was dining by himself. He had Gibbon securely wedged against the cheese-crock on the table before him, and his legs stretched out at ease under it. To-day he was indulging himself extraordinarily with a half-bottle of wine, and the sea pie from which he was about to help himself smelt most appetizing. It was one of those days when there was nothing wrong with the world at all, when he could allow himself to sway with the rhythm of the ship without any further thought, when food tasted good and wine delicious. He dug a spoon into the sea pie just at the moment when there was a knock on the door and a midshipman entered.

"*Clam* in sight to wind'ard, sir," he said.

"Very good."

Hornblower proceeded to transfer the sea pie from the dish to his plate, and as he spread out his helping to allow it to cool his mind began to rouse itself. *Clam* would be bringing news; she had been left at St Petersburg for the very purpose of waiting for news. Maybe Russia was at war with Bonaparte now. Or maybe Alexander had made the abject surrender which would be the only thing that could save him from war. Or maybe Alexander was dead, murdered by his officers as his father had been. It would be by no means the first time that a change in Russian policy had been ushered in by a palace revolution. Maybe — maybe anything, but the sea pie was growing cold. He applied himself to it, just as the midshipman knocked at the door again.

"*Clam* signals 'Have despatches for Commodore', sir."

"How far off is she?"

"Hull-up to wind'ard, sir. We're running down to her."

"Make 'Commodore to *Clam*. Send despatches on board as soon as practicable'."

"Aye aye, sir."

There was nothing surprising about *Clam*'s message; the surprise would have been if she carried no despatches. Hornblower found himself shovelling sea pie into his mouth as if the faster he ate it the faster the despatches would come. He checked himself and took sips of his wine, but neither wine nor food had any attraction for him. Brown came in and served him with cheese, and he munched and told himself he had dined well. Cocking his ear to the noises on the deck overhead he could guess there was a boat coming alongside, and directly afterwards one more knock on the door heralded the arrival of Lord Wychwood. Hornblower rose for him, offered him a chair, offered him dinner, took over the bulky canvas-wrapped despatch which Wychwood handed him, and signed a receipt for it. He sat with it on his knee for a moment.

"Well," said Wychwood, "it's war."

Hornblower could not allow himself to ask, "War with whom?" He made himself wait.

"Alexander's done it, or rather Boney has. Boney crossed the Niemen with fifteen army corps ten days back. No declaration of war, of course. That's not the sort of courtesy one would expect of two potentates who have been blackguarding each other in every sheet in every language in Europe. War was inevitable the moment Alexander sent back his answer a month ago — the day before you left us. Now we'll see."

"Who's going to win?"

Wychwood shrugged.

"I can't imagine Boney being beaten. And from what I've heard the Russian Army did not show to advantage last year in Finland despite their reorganization. And Boney has half a million men marching on Moscow."

Half a million men; the largest army the world had seen since Xerxes crossed the Hellespont.

"At least," went on Wychwood, "it will keep Boney busy all this summer. Next year we'll see — maybe he'll lose so many men his people will bear it no longer."

"Let's hope so," said Hornblower.

He took out his penknife and ripped open his despatch.

British Embassy,
St Petersburg
June 24th, 1812.

SIR,

The bearer of this despatch, Colonel Lord Wychwood, will inform you of affairs in this country and of the state of war which now exists between His Imperial Majesty the Tsar and Bonaparte. You will, of course, take all necessary steps to render all the assistance in your power to our new ally. I am informed, and have reason to believe, that while the main body of Bonaparte's army is marching on Moscow, a very considerable detachment, believed to consist of the Prussian army corps and a French *corps d'armée*, the whole under the orders of Marshal Macdonald, Duke of Tarentum, altogether some 60,000 men, has been directed on the northern route towards St Petersburg. It is highly desirable that this army should be prevented from reaching its goal, and at the request of the Russian Imperial Staff I must call your attention to the possibility that your squadron may be able to give assistance at Riga, which the French must capture before continuing their march on St Petersburg. I wish to add my own advice to that of the Russian staff, and to press upon you as urgently as possible that you should give assistance at Riga for as long as may be compatible with your original orders.

In virtue of the powers granted me under the terms of my instructions, I must inform you that I consider it important to the national safety that the cutter *Clam*, at present under your command, shall be despatched to England in order to carry with the utmost rapidity the news of the outbreak of war. I trust and hope that you will raise no objection.

I have the honour to be, sir,

Etc., etc.,

CATHCART, *His Britannic Majesty's Minister-Plenipotentiary
and Ambassador Extraordinary to H. I. M*

"Cathcart's a good man," commented Wychwood, observing that Hornblower had completed his reading.

"Both as a soldier and as a diplomat he's worth two of Merry at Stockholm. I'm glad Wellesley sent him out."

Certainly this despatch was better worded than the last Hornblower had received, nor did Cathcart presume to give order to the Commodore.

"You will be going on in *Clam* to England," said Hornblower. "I must ask you to wait while I complete my own despatches for the Admiralty."

"Naturally," said Wychwood.

"It will only be a matter of minutes," said Hornblower. "Perhaps Captain Bush will entertain you while you are waiting. Doubtless there are many letters awaiting carriage to England. Meanwhile, I am sending my secretary back to England in *Clam* too. I shall put in your charge the papers relative to his case."

Alone in his cabin, Hornblower opened his desk and found himself pen and ink. There was little enough to add to his official despatch. He read the last words — 'I wish most strongly to call Their Lordships' attention to the conduct and professional ability of Commander William Vickery and Lieutenant Percival Mound.' Then he began a new paragraph. 'I am taking the opportunity of the departure of *Clam* to England to forward this letter to you. In accordance with the recommendation of His Excellency Lord Cathcart, I shall proceed at once with the rest of my squadron to render all the assistance in my power to the Russian forces at Riga.' He thought for a moment of adding some conventional expression like 'I trust this course of action will meet with Their Lordships' approval', and then put the notion aside. It meant nothing, was merely waste verbiage. He dipped his pen again and merely wrote, 'I have the honour to be, Your obed't servant, Horatio Hornblower, Captain and Commodore'.

He closed the letter, shouting for Brown as he did so. While he wrote the address — Edward Nepean, Esq., Secretary to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty — Brown brought him a candle and sealing wax, and he sealed the letter and laid it on one side. Then he took another sheet and began to write again.

H.M.S. *Nonsuch*, IN THE BALTIC

MY DEAR WIFE,

The cutter waits for me to complete my correspondence for England, and I have only time to write these few lines to add to the other letters which have been awaiting an opportunity to make the voyage. I am in the best of health, and the progress of the campaign remains satisfactory. The great news of the outbreak of war between Bonaparte and Russia has just reached me. I hope that the event will prove this to be Bonaparte's worst mistake, but I can only anticipate long and costly fighting, with small possibility of my returning to your dear presence, at least until the freezing of the harbours makes further operations in these waters impracticable.

I trust most sincerely that you are well and happy, and that the rigours of the London season have not proved too trying for you. I like to think of the good air of Smallbridge restoring the roses to your cheeks, so that the vagaries of costumiers and milliners will not exact too excessive a toll of your health and peace of mind.

Also I trust that Richard is comporting himself towards you with the duty and obedience you expect, and that his teeth have continued to make their appearance with as little disturbance as possible. It would be a great delight to me if he were old enough to write to me himself, especially if that would give me further news of you; only a letter from you yourself could give me greater pleasure. It is my hope that soon letters will reach me from England, and that it will be my happiness to hear that all is well with you.

When next you see your brother, Lord Wellesley, I trust you will give him my duty and respects. For you I reserve my whole love.

Your affectionate husband
HORATIO

Wychwood took the letters Hornblower gave him, and wrote out a receipt on Bush's desk with Bush's pen. Then he held out his hand.

"Good-bye, sir," he said, and hesitated; then, with a rush, he added, "God knows how this war will turn out. I expect the Russians'll be beaten. But you have done more than any one man to bring the war about. You've done your whole duty, sir."

"Thank you," said Hornblower.

He was in a disturbed and unsettled mood; he stood on the quarter-deck of the *Nonsuch* while over his head the ensign was dipped in a parting salute to the *Clam*, and he watched the cutter sail off towards England. He watched her until she was out of sight, while *Nonsuch* put up her helm and bore away for Riga and whatever new adventures awaited him there. He knew quite well what was the matter with him; he was homesick, plunged into a storm of emotional disturbance as always was when he wrote home, and, oddly enough, Wychwood's last words added to his disturbance. They had reminded him of the terrible load of responsibility that he bore. The future of the world and the survival of his country would be profoundly affected by his doings. Should this Russian adventure end in defeat and disaster everyone anxious to shuffle off responsibility would blame him. He would be condemned as inept and shortsighted. He even found himself envying Braun now on his way back to London, under arrest and awaiting probable trial and possible execution, and he remembered with longing his petty troubles at Smallbridge; he smiled at himself when he recalled that his heaviest burden there had been to receive a deputation of welcome from the village. He thought of Barbara's ready sympathy, of the intense pleasure he had known when it first dawned upon him that Richard loved him, and enjoyed and looked forward to his company. Here he had to be content with Bush's unthinking loyalty and the precarious admiration of the young officers.

Recalling himself to reality, he forced himself to remember with what a bubble of excitement he had received his orders back to active service, the light heart with which he had left his child, the feeling of — there was no blinking the matter — emancipation with which he had parted from his wife. The prospect of once more being entirely his own master, of not having to defer to Barbara's wishes, of not being discommoded by Richard's teeth, had seemed most attractive then. And here he was complaining to himself about the burden of responsibility, when responsibility was the inevitable price one had to pay for independence; irresponsibility was something which, in the very nature of things, could not co-exist with independence. This was all very well and logical, but there was no blinking the fact that he wished he were home; he could conjure up in imagination so vividly the touch of Barbara's hand on his own that it was an acute disappointment to realize that it was only in imagination. He wanted to have Richard on his knee again, shrieking with laughter over the colossal joke of having his nose pinched. And he did not want to imperil his reputation, his liberty, and his life in combined operations with these unpredictable Russians in a God-forsaken corner of the world like Riga. Yet then and there — his interest rousing itself spontaneously — he decided that he had better go below and re-read the Sailing Directions for Riga; and a close study of the chart of Riga Bay might be desirable, too.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Northern Continental summer had come speedily, as ever. Last week at Pillau there had still been a decided touch of winter in the air. To-day, with Riga just over the horizon, it was full summer. This blazing heat would have done credit to the doldrums were it not for an invigorating quality which the tropics never knew. A brassy sun shone down from a cloudless sky, although there was just enough mist to leave the distant horizon undefined. There was a gentle two-knot breeze blowing from the south-west, just enough wind to give *Nonsuch* bare steerage-way with all her canvas set, studding-sails on both sides to the royals. The squadron

was making the best speed it could, with *Lotus* hull-down on the starboard bow, *Raven* close astern, and the two bomb-ketches trailing far behind; even the clumsy *Nonsuch* could outsail them in the prevailing conditions.

Everything was very peaceful. Forward a party of seamen under the sailmaker's supervision were overhauling a mainsail for repair. In the waist another party was dragging a 'bear' up and down the deck — a huge coir mat weighted down with sand which could scrub the planking more effectively than holystones could do. On the quarter-deck the sailing-master was holding a class in navigation, his mates and the midshipmen standing round him in a semicircle, their sextants in their hands. Hornblower walked near enough to hear one of the midshipmen, a mere child whose voice had not broken, piping up a reply to the question just shot at him.

"The parallax of an object is measured by an arc of a vertical circle intercepted between a line extended from the centre of the earth and a line — and a line — a line —"

The midshipman suddenly became conscious of the awful proximity of the Commodore. His voice quavered and died away. So far he had been quoting Node's *Epitome of Navigation* with word-perfect exactitude. It was young Gerard, nephew of the second lieutenant of the *Sutherland*, whom Bush had taken into his ship for the sake of his uncle, still languishing in a French prison. The sailing-master's brows drew together in a frown.

"Come, come, Mr Gerard," he said.

Hornblower had a sudden mental picture of young Gerard bent over the breech of a gun while a lithe cane taught him at least the necessity of knowing Norie's *Epitome* by heart. He intervened in hurried pity.

"'Between a line extended from the centre of the earth'," he said, over Gerard's shoulder, "'and a line extended from the eye of the observer, through the centre of the object.' Is that correct, Mr Tooth?"

"Quite correct, sir," said the sailing-master.

"I think Mr Gerard knew it all the time. Didn't you, youngster?"

"Y — yes, sir."

"I thought so. I was just your age when I learned that same passage."

Hornblower resumed his walk, hoping that he had saved Gerard's skinny posterior from punishment. A sudden scurrying by the midshipman of the watch to grab slate and pencil told him that one of the squadron was making a signal, and two minutes later the midshipman saluted him, message in hand.

"*Lotus* to Commodore. Land in sight bearing South."

That would be Pitraga Cape, the southern headland of the entrance to the Gulf of Riga.

"Reply 'Heave to and await Commodore'," said Hornblower.

If the weather were not so thick the island of Oesel ought to be just in sight to the northward from the masthead. They were just passing the threshold of a new adventure. Some seventy miles ahead, at the bottom of the gulf, lay Riga, presumably even now being assailed by the armies of Bonaparte. With this mere pretence of a wind it would be a couple of days before he reached there. The fact that they were entering Russian waters again was making not the least ripple on the placid surface of the ship's life. Everything was progressing as before, yet Hornblower felt in his bones that many of the men now entering the Gulf of Riga would never come out from it, even if any should. Even with this hot sun blazing down upon him, under this radiant sky, Hornblower felt a sudden chill of foreboding which it was hard to throw off. He himself — it was curious to think that his dead body might be buried in Russia, of all places.

Someone — the Russians, or the Swedes, or the Finns — had buoyed effectively the channel that wound its way through the treacherous shallows of the Gulf of Finland. Even though the squadron had to anchor for the night a slight freshening and veering of the wind enabled them to ascend the whole gulf by the evening of the next day. They picked up a pilot at noon, a bearded individual who wore sea-boots and a heavy jacket even on this blazing day. He proved to be an Englishman, Carker by name, who had not set eyes on his native land for twenty-four years. He blinked at Hornblower like an owl when the latter began to fire questions at him regarding the progress of the war. Yes, some cavalry patrols of French and Prussians had shown themselves advancing towards Riga. The last news of the main campaign was of desperate fighting round Smolensk, and everyone was expecting Bonaparte to be beaten there. The town was preparing itself for a siege, he believed — at least, there were plenty of soldiers there, when he had left in his cutter yesterday, and there had been proclamations calling on the people to fight to the last, but no one could imagine the French making a serious attack on the place.

Hornblower turned away from him impatiently in the end, as a typical example of the uninformed civilian, with no real knowledge of affairs or appreciation of the seriousness of the situation. Livonia, having been for centuries the cockpit of northern Europe, had not seen an enemy during the last three generations, and had forgotten even the traditions of invasion. Hornblower had no intention at all of taking his squadron into the Dwina River (queer names these Russians used!) if there was a chance of his retreat being cut off, and he stared out through his glass at the low green shore when it came in sight at last from the deck. Almost right astern of the squadron the sun was lying on the horizon in a fiery bed of cloud, but there were two hours more of daylight left, and *Nonsuch* crept steadily closer to Riga. Bush came up to him and touched his hat.

"Pardon, sir, but do you hear anything? Gunfire, maybe?"

Hornblower strained his attention.

"Yes, gunfire, by God," he said.

It was the lowest, faintest muttering, coming upwind from the distant shore.

"The Frogs have got there before us, sir," said Bush.

"Be ready to anchor," said Hornblower. *Nonsuch* crept steadily on, gliding at three or four knots towards the land; the water around her was greyish yellow with the mud borne down by a great river. The mouth of the Dwina was only a mile or two ahead, and with the spring rains and the melting of the snows the river must be in full flood. The buoys of a middle-ground shoal enabled Hornblower to make sure of his position; he was coming within long cannon-shot of those flat green shores. As though standing in the yellow water there was a church visible on the starboard bow, with an onion-shaped dome surmounted by a cross which reflected back to him, even at that distance, the red glare of the sunset. That must be the village of Daugavgriva, on the left bank; if it were in French hands entrance to the river would be dangerous, perhaps impossible, as soon as they had big guns mounted there. Maybe they already had.

"Captain Bush," said Hornblower, "I'd be obliged if you would anchor."

The cable roared out through the hawsehole, and *Nonsuch* swung round to the wind as the hands, pouring aloft, took in the sails. The rest of the squadron came up and prepared to anchor just when Hornblower was beginning to feel he had been too precipitate, or at least when he was regretting bitterly that night had come upon him before he could open communication with the shore.

"Call away my barge," he ordered. "Captain Bush, I am shifting to *Harvey*. You will assume command of the squadron during my absence."

Mound was at the side to welcome him as he swung himself up over *Harvey's* low freeboard.

"Square away, Mr Mound. We'll close the shore in the direction of that church. Set a good hand at work with the lead."

The bomb-ketch, with anchor catted and ready to go, stole forward over the still water. There was still plenty of light from the sky, for here in 57° North, within a few days of the solstice, the sun was not very far below the horizon.

"Moon rises in an hour's time, sir," said Mound, "three-quarters full."

It was a marvellous evening, cool and invigorating. There was only the tiniest whisper of water round the bows of the ketch as she glided over the silvery surface; Hornblower felt that they only needed a few pretty women on board and someone strumming a guitar to make a yachting expedition of it. Something on shore attracted his attention, and he whipped his glass to his eye at the very moment when Mound beside him did the same.

"Lights on shore," said Mound.

"Those are bivouac fires," said Hornblower.

He had seen bivouac fires before — the fires of el Supremo's army in Central America, the fires of the landing force at Rosas. They sparkled ruddily in the twilight, in roughly regular lines. Traversing his glass round, Hornblower picked up further groups of lights; there was a dark space between one mass and the other, which Hornblower pointed out to Mound.

"That's no-man's-land between the two forces, I fancy," he said. "The Russians must be holding the village as an outwork on the left bank of the river."

"Couldn't all those fires be French fires, sir?" asked Mound. "Or Russian fires?"

"No," said Hornblower. "Soldiers don't bivouac if they can billet in villages with roofs over their heads. If two armies weren't in presence they'd all be comfortably asleep in the cottagers' beds and barns."

There was a long pause while Mound digested this.

"Two fathoms, sir," he said, at length. "I'd like to bear up, if I may."

"Very good. Carry on. Keep as close inshore as you think proper."

The *Harvey* came round with the wind abeam, half a dozen hands hauling lustily on the mainsheet. There was the moon, rising round and red over the land; the dome of the church was silhouetted against it. A sharp cry came from the forward lookout.

"Boat ahead! Fine on the port bow, sir. Pulling oars."

"Catch that boat if you can, Mr Mound," said Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir. Starboard two points! Clear away the gig. Boat's crew stand by!"

They could see the dim shape of the boat not far ahead; they could even see the splashes of the oars. It occurred to Hornblower that the rowers could not be men of much skill, and whoever was in charge was not very quick in the uptake if he wanted to avoid capture; he should have headed instantly for shoal water if he wanted to avoid capture, while as it was he tried to pit oars against sails — a hopeless endeavour even with that light breeze blowing. It was several minutes before they turned for the shore, and during that time their lead was greatly reduced.

"Hard-a-lee," roared Mound. "Away, gig!"

Harvey came into the wind, and as she lost her way the gig dropped into the water with the boat's crew falling into it.

"I want prisoners!" roared Hornblower at the departing boat.

"Aye aye, sir," came the reply as the oars tore the water.

Under the impulse of the skilled oarsmen the gig rapidly was overtaking the strange boat; they could see the distance narrowing as the two boats disappeared in the faint light. Then they saw the orange-red flashes of half a dozen pistol-shots, and the faint reports reached them over the water directly after.

"Let's hope they're not Russans, sir," said Mound.

The possibility had occurred to Hornblower as well, and he was nervous and uncomfortable, but he spoke bluffly —

"Russians wouldn't run away. They wouldn't expect to find Frenchmen at sea."

Soon the two boats, rowing slowly, emerged from the gloom.

"We've got 'em all, sir," said a voice in reply to Mound's hail.

Five prisoners were thrust up onto the deck of the *Harvey*, one of them groaning with a pistol bullet through his arm. Someone produced a lantern and shone it on them, and Hornblower heaved a sigh of relief when he saw that the star which glittered on the breast of the leader was the Legion of Honour.

"I would like to know monsieur's name and rank," he said, politely, in French.

"Jussey, chef de bataillon du corps de Génie des armées de l'Empéreur."

A major of engineers; quite an important capture. Hornblower bowed and presented himself, his mind working rapidly on the problem of how to induce the major to say all he knew.

"I regret very much the necessity of taking M. le chef de bataillon prisoner," he said. "Especially at the beginning of such a promising campaign. But good fortune may allow me the opportunity of arranging a cartel of exchange at an early date. I presume M. le chef de bataillon has friends in the French Army whom he would like informed of what has happened to him? I will take the opportunity of the first flag of truce to do so."

"The Marshal Duke of Tarentum would be glad to hear," said Jussey, brightening a little. "I am on his staff."

The Marshal Duke of Tarentum was Macdonald, the local French commander-in-chief — son of a Scottish exile who had fled after the Young Pretender's rebellion — so that it seemed likely that Jussey was the chief engineer, a bigger catch than Hornblower had hoped for.

"It was extremely bad fortune for you to fall into our hands," said Hornblower. "You had no reason to suspect the presence of a British squadron operating in the bay."

"Indeed I had none. Our information was to the contrary. These Livonians —"

So the French staff was obtaining information from Livonian traitors; Hornblower might have guessed it, but it was as well to be sure.

"Of course they are useless, like all Russians," said Hornblower, soothingly, "I suppose your Emperor has met with little opposition?"

"Smolensk is ours, and the Emperor marches on Moscow. It is our mission to occupy St Petersburg."

"But perhaps passing the Dwina will be difficult?"

Jussey shrugged in the lamplight.

"I do not expect so. A bold push across the mouth of the river and the Russians will retreat the moment their flank is turned."

So that was what Jussey was doing; reconnoitring for a suitable place to land a French force on the Russian side of the river mouth.

"A daring move, sir, worthy of all the great traditions of the French Army. But no doubt you have ample craft to transport your force?"

"Some dozens of barges. We seized them at Mitau before the Russians could destroy them."

Jussey checked himself abruptly, clearly disturbed at realizing how much he had said.

"Russians are always incompetent," said Hornblower, in a tone of complete agreement. "A prompt attack on your part, giving them no chance of steadying themselves, is of course your best plan of operations. But will you pardon me, sir, while I attend to my duties?"

There was no chance of wheedling anything more out of Jussey at the moment. But he had at least yielded up the vital information that the French had laid hands on a fleet of barges which the Russians had neglected, or been unable, to destroy, and that they planned a direct attack across the river mouth. By feigning entire indifference Hornblower felt that Jussey might be inveigled later into talking freely again. Jussey bowed, and Hornblower turned to Mound.

"We'll return to the squadron," he said.

Mound gave the orders which laid the *Harvey* close-hauled on the starboard tack — the French prisoners ducked hastily as the big mainsail boom swung over their heads, and the seamen bumped into them as they ran to the sheet. While Jussey and Hornblower had been talking two of the prisoners had cut off the sleeve of the wounded man and bandaged his arm; now they all squatted in the scuppers out of the way, while the *Harvey* crept back to where the *Nonsuch* lay at anchor.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Oars," said Brown, and the barge's crew ceased to pull. "In bows."

The bow oarsman brought his oar into the boat and grabbed for the boathook, and Brown laid the barge neatly alongside the quay while the rushing Dwina river eddied about it. An interested crowd of the people of Riga watched the operation, and stared stolidly at Hornblower as he ran up the stone steps to road level, epaulettes, star, and sword all aglitter in the scorching sunshine. Beyond the line of warehouses along the quay he was vaguely aware of a wide square surrounded by medieval stone buildings with high-pitched roofs, but he had no attention to spare for this his first close sight of Riga. There was the usual guard of honour to salute, the usual officer at its head, and beside it the burly figure of the Governor, General Essen.

"Welcome to the city, sir," said Essen. He was a Baltic German, a descendant of those Knights of the Sword who had conquered Livonia from the heathen centuries before, and the French which he spoke had some of the explosive quality of the French spoken by an Alsatian.

An open carriage, to which were harnessed two spirited horses who pawed restlessly at the ground, awaited them, and the Governor handed Hornblower in and followed him.

"It is only the shortest distance to go," he said, "but we shall take this opportunity of letting the people see us."

The carriage lurched and bounced frightfully over the cobbled streets; Hornblower had twice to straighten his cocked hat which was jerked sideways on his head, but he endeavoured to sit up straight and unconcerned as they dashed along narrow streets full of people who eyed them with interest. There was no harm in allowing the inhabitants of a beleaguered city the opportunity of seeing a British naval officer in full uniform — his presence would be a pledge that Riga was not alone in her hour of trial.

"The Ritterhaus," explained Essen, as the coachman pulled up his horses outside a handsome old building with a line of sentries posted before it.

The reception awaited them, officers in uniform, a few civilians in black, and many, many women in gala dresses. Several of the officers Hornblower had already met at the conference that morning at Dwina Maude; Essen proceeded to present the more important of the rest of the company.

"His Excellency the Intendant of Livonia," said Essen, "and the Countess —"

"It has already been my great pleasure to meet the Countess," interposed Hornblower.

"The Commodore was my partner at dinner at the Peterhof," said the Countess.

She was as beautiful and as vivacious as ever; maybe, as she stood there with her hand on her husband's arm, her glance was not so sultry. She bowed to Hornblower with a polite indifference. Her husband was tall, bony, and elderly, with a thin moustache that drooped from his lip, and short-sighted eyes that he assisted with a quizzing glass. Hornblower bowed to him, endeavouring to behave as though this were only one more ordinary meeting. It was ridiculous to feel embarrassed at this encounter, yet he was, and had to struggle to conceal it. Yet the beaky-nosed Intendant of Livonia eyed him with even more indifference than did his wife; most of the others who were presented to Hornblower were obviously delighted to meet the English naval officer, but the Intendant made no effort to hide the fact that to him, the direct representative of the Tsar and an habitu   of Imperial palaces, this provincial reception was tedious and uninteresting, and the guest of honour nobody of importance.

Hornblower had learned his lesson regarding the etiquette of a Russian formal dinner; the tables of hors d' uvres he knew now to be mere preliminaries. He tasted caviare and vodka once again, and the very pleasant combination of flavours called up a sudden host of memories. Without being able to prevent himself he glanced across at the Countess, and caught her eye as she stood chattering with half a dozen grave men in uniform. It was only for a moment, but that was long enough. Her glance seemed to tell him that she, too, was haunted by the same memories. Hornblower's head whirled a little, and he made a prompt resolve to drink nothing more that night. He turned and plunged hastily into conversation with the Governor.

"How delightfully complementary to each other are vodka and caviare," he said. "They are worthy to rank with those other combinations of food discovered by the pioneers of the gastronomic art. Eggs and bacon, partridge and Burgundy, spinach and — and —"

He fumbled for a French word for 'gammon', and the Governor supplied it, his little pig's eyes lighting up with interest in the midst of his big red face.

"You are a gastronome, sir?" he said.

The rest of the time before dinner passed easily enough then, with Hornblower well exercised in having to discuss food with someone to whom food was clearly a matter of deep interest. Hornblower drew a little on his imagination to describe the delicacies of the West Indies and of Central America; fortunately during his last period of leave he had moved in wealthy London circles with his wife and had eaten at several renowned tables, including that of the Mansion House, which gave him a solid basis of European experience with which to supplement his imagination. The Governor had taken advantage of the campaigns in which he had served to study the foods of the different countries. Vienna and Prague had fed him during the Austerlitz campaign; he had drunk resinated wine in the Seven Islands; he rolled up his eyes in ecstasy at the memory of frutti di mare consumed in Leghorn when he had served in Italy under Suvaroff. Bavarian beer, Swedish schnapps, Danzig goldwasser — he had drunk of them all, just as he had eaten Westphalian ham and Italian beccaficoes and Turkish rahat lakoum. He listened with rapt attention when Hornblower spoke of grilled flying-fish and Trinidad pepperpot, and it was with the deepest regret that he parted with Hornblower to take his place at the head of the dinner table; even then he persisted in calling Hornblower's attention to the dishes being served, leaning forward to address him across two ladies and the Intendant of Livonia, and when dinner was ended he apologized to Hornblower for the abrupt termination of the meal, complaining bitterly of the fact that he had to gulp his final glass of brandy because they were already nearly an hour late for the gala performance of the ballet where they were next due to go.

He walked heavily up the stone stairs of the theatre, his spurs ringing and his sword clattering as it trailed beside him. Two ushers led the way, and behind Hornblower and Essen walked the others of the inner circle,

the Countess and her husband and two other officials and their wives. The ushers held open the door of the box, and Hornblower waited on the threshold for the ladies to enter.

"The Commodore will go first," said Essen, and Hornblower plunged in. The theatre was brightly lighted, and parterre and gallery were crowded; Hornblower's entrance drew a storm of applause, which smote upon his ears and momentarily paralysed him as he stood there. A fortunate instinct prompted him to bow, first to one side and then to the other, as if he were an actor, as he said to himself. Then someone thrust a chair behind him and he sat down, with the rest of the party round him. Throughout the auditorium ushers immediately began to turn down the lamps, and the orchestra broke into the overture. The curtain rose to reveal a woodland scene, and the ballet began.

"A lively thing, this Madame Nicolas," said the Governor in a penetrating whisper. "Tell me if you like her. I can send for her after the performance if you desire."

"Thank you," whispered Hornblower in reply, feeling ridiculously embarrassed. The Countess was close on his other side and he was too conscious of her warmth to feel comfortable.

The music hurried on, and in the golden glow of the footlights the ballet went through its dazzling maze, skirts flying and feet twinkling. It was incorrect to say that music meant nothing to Hornblower; the monotonous beat of its rhythm, when he was compelled to listen to it for long, stirred something in the depths of him even while its guessed-at sweetness tormented his ear like a Chinese water torture. Five minutes of music left him dull and unmoved; fifteen minutes made him restless; an hour was sheer agony. He forced himself to sit still during the long ordeal, even though he felt he would gladly exchange his chair in the box for the quarter-deck of a ship in the hottest and most hopeless battle ever fought. He tried to shut his ears to the persistent insidious noise, to distract himself by concentrating his attention on the dancers, on Madame Nicolas as she pirouetted across the stage in her shimmering white, on the others as, chin on finger and the other hand supporting the elbow, they came down the stage a-tiptoe in alluring line. Yet it was of no avail, and his misery increased from minute to minute.

The Countess at his side was stirring, too. He knew, telepathically, what she was thinking about. The literature of all ages, from the *Ars Amatoria* to *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* told him theoretically of the effect of music and spectacles upon the feminine mind, and in violent revulsion he hated the Countess as much as he hated music. The only movement he made, as he sat there stoically enduring the tortures of the damned for the sake of his duty, was to shift his foot away out of reach of hers — he knew in his bones that she would endeavour to touch him soon, while her beaky-nosed husband with his quizzing glass sat just behind them. The entr'acte was only a poor respite; the music at least ceased, and he was able to stand, blinking a little as the thrown-open door of the box admitted a stream of light, and he bowed politely when the Governor presented a few latecomers who came to pay their respects to the British visitor. But in no time at all, it seemed, he was forced to seat himself again, while the orchestra resumed its maddening scraping, and the curtain rose on a new scene.

Then a distraction came. Hornblower was not sure when he first heard it; he might have missed the first premonitory shots in his determined effort to shut himself inside himself. He came out of his nightmare conscious of a new tension in the people round him; the boom of heavy artillery was very noticeable now — it even seemed as if the theatre itself were vibrating gently to the heavy concussions. He kept his head and neck still, and stole a glance out of the corner of his eye at the Governor beside him, but the Governor seemed to be still entirely engrossed in watching Mme Nicolas. Yet the firing was very heavy. Somewhere not very far away big guns were being fired rapidly and in large numbers. His first thought was for his ships, but he knew them to be safe, anchored at the mouth of the Dwina, and if the wind was still in the direction it was blowing when he entered the theatre Bush could get them out of harm's way whatever happened, even if Riga were taken by storm that very hour.

The audience was taking its cue from the Governor, and as he refused to allow the gunfire to distract him everyone made a brave attempt to appear unconcerned. But everyone in the box, at least, felt tightened nerves when rapid steps outside in the stone-flagged corridor, to the accompaniment of the ringing of spurs, heralded the entrance of an orderly officer, who came in and whispered hurriedly to the Governor. Essen dismissed him with a few words, and only when he had gone, and after a minute's interval which seemed like an hour, leaned over to Hornblower with the news.

"The French have tried to take Daugavgriva by a *coup de main*," he explained. "There is no chance of their succeeding."

That was the village on the left bank of the Dwina, in the angle between the sea and the river, the natural first objective for a besieging force that was desirous of cutting off the town from all hope of relief by sea. It was nearly an island, with the Gulf of Riga covering one flank, and the mile-wide Dwina river covering the rear, while the rest was girt by marshes and ditches and protected by breastworks thrown up by the peasant labour called in from miles round. The French would be likely to try a direct assault upon the place, because success would save them weeks of tedious siege operations, and they had no knowledge as yet of whether or not the Russians were able or willing to offer effective resistance. This was the first time Macdonald had encountered any serious opposition since he had begun his advance across Lithuania — the main Russian armies were contesting the road to Moscow in the neighbourhood of Smolensk. Hornblower had inspected the works that very morning, had observed the strength of the place and the steady appearance of the Russian grenadiers who garrisoned it, and had formed the conclusion that it was safe against anything except systematic siege. Yet he wished he could be as sublimely confident about it as the Governor was.

On the other hand, everything possible had already been done. If the village fell, it fell, and nothing more serious had happened than the loss of an outwork. If the attack were beaten off there could be no question of following up the success, not while Macdonald disposed of 60,000 men and the Russians of 15,000 at most. Of course Macdonald was bound to attempt a *coup de main* upon Daugavgriva. It was interesting to speculate what would be his next move should the assault fail. He might march up the river and endeavour to force a passage above the town, although that meant plunging into a roadless tangle of marsh and attempting a crossing at a place where he would find no boats. Or he might try the other plan and use the boats which had fallen into his hands at Mitau to pass a force across the mouth of the river, leaving Daugavgriva untaken while he compelled the Russians in Riga to choose between coming out and fighting the landing party, or retreating towards St Petersburg, or being shut in completely in the town. It was hard to guess what he would decide on. Certainly Macdonald had sent out Jussey to reconnoitre the river mouth, and although he had lost his chief engineer in doing so he might still be tempted by the prospect of being able to continue immediately his advance on St Petersburg.

Hornblower came back to himself, delighted to find that he had missed in his abstraction some substantial amount of the ballet. He did not know how long his absent-mindedness had endured, but it must be, he thought, for some considerable time. The gunfire had ceased; either the assault had failed or had been completely successful.

At that very moment the door opened to admit another orderly officer with a whispered message for the Governor.

"The attack has been beaten off," said Essen to Hornblower. "Yakoulev reports his men have hardly suffered at all, and the front of the place is covered with French and German dead."

That was to be expected, granted the failure of the attack. The losses would be dreadful in an unsuccessful assault. Macdonald had gambled, risking a couple of thousand lives against a speedy end to the siege, and he had lost. Yet an Imperial army would be exasperated rather than depressed by such a preliminary reverse. The defence could expect further vigorous attacks at any moment.

It was wonderful to discover that he had managed to sit through another whole ballet without noticing it. Here was another entr'acte, with the light shining into the box, and the opportunity to stand and stretch one's legs; it was even delightful to exchange polite banalities in French tinged with half the accents of Europe. When the entr'acte ended Hornblower was quite reconciled to reseating himself and bracing himself to endure one more ballet; yet the curtain had only just risen when he felt himself heavily nudged in the thigh by Essen, who rose and made his way out of the box with Hornblower at his heels.

"We may as well go and see," said Essen, the moment they stood outside the closed door of the box. "It would not have been well to get up and go when the firing began. But the people will not know now that we left in haste."

Outside the theatre a troop of hussars sat their horses, while two grooms stood at the heads of two more horses, and Hornblower realized that he was committed to riding in his full-dress uniform. It was not the serious business it used to be, though; Hornblower thought with pleasure of his dozen reserve pairs of silk

stockings stored away in *Nonsuch*. Essen climbed on to his horse, and Hornblower followed his example. The bright full moon filled the square with light, as, with the escort following, they trotted clattering over the cobbles. Two turns and a moderate descent brought them to the big floating bridge that spanned the Dwina; the roadway across the pontoons drummed hollow beneath the horses' hoofs. Across the river a road ran on the top of a high levée beside the water; on the far side the land was cut and seamed with ditches and ponds, around which twinkled innumerable camp-fires, and here Essen halted and gave an order which sent the hussar officer and half the escort riding ahead of them.

"I have no desire to be shot by my own men," explained Essen. "Sentries will be nervous, and riding into a village that has just suffered a night attack will be as dangerous as storming a battery."

Hornblower was too preoccupied to appreciate the point very much. His sword and his ribbon and star and his cocked hat added to his usual difficulty of retaining his seat on horseback, and he bumped ungracefully in his saddle, sweating profusely in the cool night, and grabbing spasmodically at items of his equipment whenever he could spare a hand from his reins. They were challenged repeatedly as they rode along, but despite Essen's gloomy prognostication no jumpy sentry fired at them. Finally they drew up in reply to another challenge at a point where the dome of the church of Daugavgriva stood up black against the pale sky. With the cessation of the noise of the horses' hoofs a fresh sound claimed Hornblower's attention; a wailing clamour coloured by high agonized screams; a whole chorus of groans and cries. The sentry passed them through, and they rode forward into the village, and as they did so the groans and screams were explained, for they passed on their left the torch-lit field where the wounded were being treated — Hornblower had a glimpse of a naked writhing body being held down on a table while the surgeons bent over it in the glare of the torches like the familiars of the Inquisition, while the whole field was carpeted with writhing and groaning wounded. And this had been a mere outpost skirmish, a trifling matter of a few hundred casualties on either side.

They dismounted at the door of the church and Essen led the way in, returning the salute of the bearded grenadiers at the door. Candles made a bright pool of light in the midst of the surrounding gloom, and at a table there sat a group of officers drinking tea from a samovar which hissed beside them. They rose as the Governor entered, and Essen made the introductions.

"General Diebitch, Colonel von Clausewitz — Commodore Sir Hornblower."

Diebitch was a Pole, Clausewitz a German — the Prussian renegade Hornblower had heard about previously, an intellectual soldier who had decided that true patriotism lay in fighting Bonaparte regardless of which side his country nominally assisted. They made their report in French; the enemy had attempted at moonrise to storm the village without preparation, and had been bloodily repulsed. Prisoners had been taken; some had captured an outlying cottage and had been cut off in the counter-attack, and there were other isolated prisoners from various units who had fallen into Russian hands at other points of the perimeter of the village.

"They have already been questioned, sir," said Diebitch. Hornblower had the feeling that it would be an unpleasant experience to be a prisoner submitted to questioning at the hands of General Diebitch.

"Their statements were useful, sir," added Clausewitz, producing a sheet of notes. Each prisoner had been asked what was his battalion, how many men there were in it, how many battalions in his regiment, what was his brigade and division and army corps. Clausewitz was in a fair way by now to reconstituting the whole organization of the French part of the attacking army and to estimate its numbers fairly accurately.

"We know already the strength of the Prussian corps," said Essen, and there was a moment's awkwardness while everyone avoided meeting Clausewitz's eye, for he had brought in that information.

"It is only half an hour before dawn, sir," interposed Diebitch with more tact than could have been expected of a man of his countenance. "Would you care to climb to the dome and see for yourself?"

The sky was brighter still by the time they had climbed the narrow stone stair in the thickness of the wall of the church and emerged into the open gallery that encircled it. The whole of the flat marshy countryside was revealed for their inspection, the ditches and the lakes, and the little Mitau river winding its way down from the far distance, through the village almost under the side of the church, to lose itself at the very angle where the vast Dwina entered the bay. The line of breastworks and abattis thrown up by the garrison to defend the left bank of the Dwina was plainly traced, and beyond them could be seen the scanty works which were all that the invaders had bothered to construct up to the moment. The smoke of a thousand cooking-fires drifted over the country.

"In my opinion, sir," said Clausewitz deferentially, "if the enemy should decide to proceed by regular siege that is where he will begin. He will trace his first parallel *there*, between the river and that pinewood and sap forward against the village, establishing his batteries on that neck of land *there*. After three weeks' work he could expect to bring his batteries forward on to the glacis and deliver a regular assault. He must effect the reduction of this village before proceeding to the attack on the town."

"Perhaps," said Essen.

Hornblower could not imagine a Napoleonic army 60,000 men in full march for St Petersburg condescending to spend three weeks in siege operations against an outwork without trying first every extemporary method, like the brusque assault of last night. He borrowed a telescope from one of the staff, and devoted his time to examining the maze of waterways and marshes that stretched before him, and then, walking round the dome along the gallery, he turned his attention the view of Riga, with its spires, beyond the huge river. Far off, well down the channel, he could just see the masts of his own squadron, where it swung at anchor at the point where the river blended with the Gulf. Tiny specks of ships, minute in their present surroundings and yet of such vast importance in the history of the world.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hornblower was asleep in his cabin in the *Nonsuch* when the alarm was given. Even while he was asleep — or perhaps it may be granted that he woke occasionally without knowing it — his subconscious mind had been taking note of conditions. At least, when he woke fully, he was already vaguely aware of the changes that had occurred during the night. His sleeping, or half-awakened, mind had noted the veering of the wind that had swung *Nonsuch* round to her anchor, and the brief sharp rain squalls that had pelted down on the deck. Certainly he had awakened to the sharp cry of the watch on deck, and had heard the footsteps overhead of the midshipman of the watch running to him with the news. He was fully awake by the time the midshipman pounded on the door and burst in.

"Rocket from *Raven*, sir."

"Very good," said Hornblower, swinging his legs out of his cot.

Brown, the good servant, was already in the cabin — God only knew how he had picked up the warning — with a lighted lantern to hang on the deck beam above, and he had trousers and coat ready for Hornblower to pull over his nightshirt. Hornblower rushed up to the dark quarter-deck, cannoning into another hurrying figure as he did so.

"Damn your eyes," said the figure, in Bush's voice, and then, "I beg your pardon, sir."

The ship was alive with the twittering of the pipes as the hands were summoned from their hammocks, and the main-deck resounded with the drumming of bare feet. Montgomery, officer of the watch, was at the starboard rail.

"*Raven* sent up a rocket, sir, two minutes back. Bearin' sou'-by-east."

"Wind's west-by-north," decided Bush, looking down into the tiny light of the binnacle.

A westerly wind and a dark blustery night; ideal conditions for Macdonald to try and push a force across the river mouth. He had twenty big river barges, into which he could cram 5,000 men and a few guns; if he once managed to push a force of that size across the river the Russian position would be hopelessly turned. On the other hand, if he were to lose a force of that size — 5,000 men killed or drowned or prisoners — it would be a staggering blow which might well give him pause and so gain time for the Russians. A fortified position, in the final analysis, was only a means of gaining time. Hornblower hoped most passionately that the French flotilla had been allowed to thrust its head well into the noose before Cole in the *Raven* gave the alarm.

A shout from the mast-head claimed his attention.

"Gunfire to loo'ard, sir!"

From the deck they could just see a pinpoint of flame stab the darkness far to the westward, and then another one.

"That's too far to the west'ard," said Hornblower to Bush.

"I'm afraid it is, sir."

At anchor on the very edge of the shoals in that direction was the *Raven*; it was her light draught that had dictated her position there. Vickery in *Lotus* guarded the other bank of the river, while *Nonsuch* perforce still lay anchored in the fairway. All the armed boats of the squadron were rowing guard in the mouth of the river — a navy cutter with a three-pounder could be counted on to deal with a river barge, even if the latter did carry 300 soldiers. But from the direction of the gunfire it looked as if Vickery had given the alarm prematurely. Another gun flashed to leeward; the wind prevented them from hearing the sound of it.

"Call my barge," ordered Hornblower. He felt he could not stay here in useless suspense.

The boat pushed off from the *Nonsuch*, the men tugging at the oars to move the boat in the teeth of the wind. Brown, in the darkness beside Hornblower, felt his captain's restlessness and anxiety.

"Pull, you b—!" he shouted at the rowers. The boat crawled forward over the tossing water, with Brown standing in the sternsheets with his hand on the tiller.

"'Nother gun, sir. Right ahead," he reported to Hornblower.

"Very good."

A tedious quarter of an hour followed, while the boat lurched and pitched over the steep little waves, and the hands slaved away at the oars. The wash of the seas overside and the groaning of the oars against the thole-pins made a monotonous accompaniment to Hornblower's racing thoughts.

"There's a whole lot o' guns firin' now, sir," reported Brown.

"I can see them," replied Hornblower. The darkness was pierced by shot after shot; it was evident that the guard-boats were all clustered round a single victim. "There's *Raven*, sir. Shall I make for her?"

"No. Steer for the firing."

The dark shape of the sloop was just visible ahead; Brown put his helm over a little to lay the barge on a course that would take her past the sloop at a cable's length distance, heading for the gunfire. They had drawn up abeam of the sloop when there came a flash and a roar from her side, and a shot howled close overhead.

"Jesus!" said Brown. "Ain't the fools got eyes in their heads?"

Presumably the sloop had hailed the passing boat, and, receiving no reply — the hail being carried away by the wind — had incontinently fired. Another shot came from the *Raven*, and someone in the barge squawked with dismay. It was demoralizing to be fired upon by one's own side.

"Turn towards her," ordered Hornblower. "Burn a blue light."

At any moment the sloop might fire a full broadside, with every chance of blowing the barge out of the water. Hornblower took the tiller while Brown wrestled, cursing under his breath, with flint and steel and tinder. The hand pulling at the stroke said something to try to quicken his movements.

"Shut your mouth!" snapped Hornblower.

Everything was in a muddle, and the men knew it. Brown caught a spark on the tinder, jabbed the fuse of the blue light upon it, and then blew the fuse into a glow. A moment later the firework burst into an unearthly glare, lighting up the boat and the water round it, and Hornblower stood up so that his features and his uniform should be visible to the sloop. It was poor revenge to think of the consternation in the *Raven* when they saw that they had been firing on their own Commodore. Hornblower went up the sloop's side in a state of cold fury. Cole was there to receive him, of course.

"Well, Mr Cole?"

"Sorry I fired on you, sir, but you didn't answer my hail."

"Did it occur to you that with this wind blowing I could not hear you?"

"Yes, sir. But we know the French are out. The boats fired on them an hour back, and half my crew is away in the boats. Supposing I were boarded by two hundred French soldiers? I couldn't take chances, sir."

It was no use arguing with a man as jumpy and as nervous as Cole evidently was.

"You sent up the alarm rocket?"

"Yes, sir. I had to inform you that the bridges were at sea."

"You did that the first moment you knew?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir."

"Did it occur to you that you would alarm the French as well?"

"I thought that was what you wanted, sir."

Hornblower turned away in disgust. The man in his excitement had clean forgotten every order given him. "Boat approaching from to wind'ard, sir," reported someone, his white shirt just visible in the gathering dawn. Cole ran forward excitedly, with Hornblower striding after him, catching up to him as he stood at the knightheads staring at the boat.

"Boat ahoy!" yelled Cole through his speaking trumpet.

"Aye aye" came the answering hail downwind. That was the correct reply for an approaching boat with officers on board. She was a ship's cutter under a dipping lugsail; as Hornblower watched she took in the sail with considerable clumsiness and came dropping down to the sloop under oars. Level with the bow she turned, clumsily again, and headed in to lie alongside the sloop. Hornblower could see she was crammed with men.

"Soldiers!" suddenly exclaimed Cole, pointing at the boat with an excited forefinger. "Stand to your guns, men! Sheer off, there!"

Hornblower could see shakoes and crossbelts; it must be just the kind of vision Cole's imagination had been toying with all through the night. A reassuring English voice came back to them from overside.

"Avast, there! This is *Lotus's* cutter with prisoners."

It was Purvis's voice without a doubt. Hornblower walked to the waist and looked down. There was Purvis in the stern, and British seamen in check shirts at the oars, but every inch of space was filled with soldiers, sitting in attitudes of apprehension or dejection. Right up in the eyes of the boat, round the boat's gun, four red-coated marines held their muskets at the ready; that was the way Purvis had prepared to deal with any attempt by the prisoners to regain their freedom.

"Let 'em come up," said Hornblower.

They climbed the side, greeted by the grinning seamen as they reached the deck, and stared round in the growing light. Purvis swung himself up and touched his hat to Hornblower.

"They're all Dutchmen, I think, sir. Not Frogs. We got 'em off the barge we caught. Had to fire into 'em a long time — just shot the barge to pieces, us an' the other boats. They're following us, sir, with the other prisoners."

"You only caught one barge?"

"Yes, sir. The others ran for home the moment the rocket went up. But we got two hundred prisoners, I should think, an' we had to kill nigh on a hundred more."

One single barge taken, with two hundred men, when Hornblower had hoped for a dozen barges at least and three thousand men! But Purvis in his innocence was obviously delighted with his capture.

"Here's one of their officers, sir."

Hornblower turned on the blue-coated man who was wearily climbing over the side.

"Who are you, sir?" he asked in French, and after a moment's hesitation the officer replied haltingly in the same language.

"Lieutenant von Bulow, of the Fifty-first Regiment of Infantry."

"French infantry?"

"Of the King of Prussia," said the officer, sternly, with a Teutonic explosiveness in the word 'Prusse' which indicated his annoyance at the suggestion that he would be a Frenchman.

So Macdonald had not risked French lives in this highly dangerous venture; that was to be expected, of course. Bonaparte had made war largely at the expense of his allies for the last ten years.

"I will see that you are given refreshment," said Hornblower, politely. "Please order your men to sit down against the rail there."

The officer barked the order. It was significant how at the first warning 'achtung' the dispirited soldiers came instantly to attention, standing stiff and straight. Most of them were wet and bedraggled, apparently having been in the water before surrendering. Hornblower gave orders for them to be fed, at the same time as the other boats came back downwind, each with its quota of prisoners. On the cramped decks of the *Raven* the two hundred prisoners made a fine show; Cole had the two foremost chase-guns run inboard and trained round upon them, a round of canister in each gun, the gun-captains posted with lighted matches ready to fire into them. Seamen, still grinning, went along their ranks handing out bread and beer.

"See how they eat, sir!" said Purvis. "Look at that one, layin' into his biscuit like a wolf with a bone. God damme, it's gone a'ready. It's true what they say, sir, about Boney never feeding his men."

An Imperial army was wont to gather its food from the countryside as it marched; Macdonald's sixty thousand had been stationary now for over two weeks, and in a thinly populated country. They must be on short commons. Every day the siege of Riga could be prolonged cost lives in plenty to Bonaparte, and although he was ever prodigal with lives there must come a time at last when he would have no more to spare, not even Prussian ones, or Italian ones. The greater the pity, then, that the whole division that had tried to pass the river had not been wiped out. Hornblower told himself that was his fault; he should not have entrusted any vital part of the operation to a nervous old woman like Cole. He ought instead to have stayed on board *Raven* himself. Yet it was hard to be sure of that; the other end of the line, which he had entrusted to Vickery in *Lotus*, was just as important, and it was desirable that he should be in the centre in *Nonsuch* to coordinate the activities of his two wings. If Vickery and Cole had had their positions interchanged — as would have to be done — although Vickery could have been relied upon not to spring the trap too soon, could Cole have been relied upon to keep it closed? There might be five thousand Prussians on the farther bank of the Dwina at this moment if it had been up to Cole to head them off. Hornblower found himself wishing that he had known exactly which night Macdonald would make the attempt; he might as well have wished for the moon. "Mr Cole," said Hornblower, "make a signal to *Nonsuch*, 'Commodore to Captain. Am proceeding to Riga with prisoners'. Then the guard-boats can return to their respective ships, and if you'll kindly up anchor we'll start."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Hornblower was once more up in the gallery that encircled the dome of the church of Daugavgriva.

"You see what I was telling you about, sir," said Clausewitz, pointing.

Out beyond the Russian works stretched a long line, brown against the green, the parapet of the trench the French had thrown up during the night. Macdonald must be a general with energy, for he had had this work done at the same time as he had sent the Prussians on their risky endeavour to cross the river, so that while one attempt had failed he had made a solid gain, profiting by the dark and rainy night to throw up this entrenchment far forward unobserved.

"That is his first parallel, sir, and in the centre of it is the battery he is constructing. And see there, sir? That is where he is sapping forward."

Hornblower stared through his telescope. At a point towards the end of the face of the first parallel he could see something that looked like a wall constructed of bundles of timber. The guns in the Russian works far below him were firing at it; he could see earth flying as the shots struck round it. At the end of the wall of timber was something that looked strange — a sort of shield on wheels. He was studying it when he saw it moved out suddenly, leaving a narrow gap between it and the end of the timber wall, in which for a fleeting moment he saw a couple of men in blue uniforms. It was only a fleeting moment, for immediately the gap was filled with a new bundle of timber. Above the new bundle he could see the blades of spades rising and then disappearing; apparently the bundle of timber was hollow, barrel-shaped, and as soon as it was in position the men sheltering behind it set to work to fill it up with earth dug from behind it. Hornblower realized that he was witnessing the classic method of sapping towards an enemy's position with 'gabion' and 'fascine'. That big timber basket was a gabion, now being filled with earth. Farther back, under cover of the line of filled gabions, the besiegers were revetting their breastwork with fascines, six-foot bundles of wood, and farther back still they were building the whole thing solid with earth dug from a trench behind the breastwork. As he watched, the shield was suddenly pushed forward another yard, and another gabion was put in position; the French were three feet nearer the earthworks which guarded Daugavgriva. No, not a yard, a little less, because the sap was not pointing straight at its objective, but out at its flank so that it could not be enfiladed. Soon it would change its direction, and point towards the other flank, approaching the fortress in zigzag fashion, ruthlessly and remorselessly. Of all operations of war a scientific siege was the most certain if relief did not arrive from the outside.

"See there, sir!" said Clausewitz suddenly.

From behind a high embankment had suddenly emerged a long string of horses, looking like ants at that distance, but the white breeches of the men who led them showed up clearly in the sunshine. The horses were dragging a cannon, a big piece of artillery when its apparent size was compared with that of the horses. It crawled towards the battery in the centre of the first parallel, a myriad white-breeched specks attending it. The high breastwork of the first parallel screened the operation from the sight of the Russian gunners and shielded it from their fire. When the guns had all been brought into the battery, Hornblower knew, openings — 'embrasures' — would be made in the breastwork through which the guns would open fire on the village, silencing the return fire of the defence, and then hammering a breach; meanwhile the sap would be expanded into a wide trench, the 'second parallel', from which, or if necessary from a 'third parallel', the stormers would rush out to carry the breach.

"They will have that battery armed by to-morrow," said Clausewitz. "And look! There is another gabion put in place."

Siege operations had the remorseless cold inevitability of the advance of a snake on a paralysed bird.

"Why do your guns not stop the work on the sap?" asked Hornblower.

"They are trying, as you see. But a single gabion is not an easy target to hit at this range, and it is only the end one which is vulnerable. And by the time the sap approaches within easy range their battery-fire will be silencing our guns."

Another siege-gun had made its appearance from behind the high embankment, and was crawling towards the battery; its predecessor was at that moment being thrust finally into its position at the breastwork.

"Can you not bring your ships up, sir?" asked Clausewitz. "See how the water comes close to their works there. You could shoot them to pieces with your big guns."

Hornblower shook his head; the same idea had already occurred to him, for the long glittering arm of the Gulf of Riga which reached into the land there was very tempting. But there was less than a fathom of water in it, and even his shallow bomb-ketches drew nine feet — seven at least if he emptied them of all their stores save those necessary for the action.

"I would do so if I could," said Hornblower, "but at the present moment I can see no means of getting my guns into range."

Clausewitz looked at him coldly, and Hornblower was conscious that goodwill between allies was a frail thing. Earlier that morning British and Russians had been the best of friends; Essen and Clausewitz had been thoroughly elated at the turning back of Macdonald's attempt to cross the river, and — like the unthinking junior officers in the squadron — had thought that the annihilation of a half-battalion of Prussians a notable success, not knowing of the far more far-reaching plan which Hornblower had made and which Cole's nervousness had brought to almost naught. When affairs went well, allies were the best of friends, but in adversity each naturally tended to blame the other. Now that the French approaches were moving towards Daugavgriva he was asking why the Russian artillery did not stop them, and the Russians were asking why his ships' guns did not do the same.

Hornblower made his explanation as fully as he could, but Clausewitz turned an unsympathetic ear, and so did Essen when the matter came up for discussion as Hornblower was saying goodbye to him. It was a poor showing for a Navy whose boast was that nothing was impossible; Hornblower was irritable and snappy when he returned that afternoon to the *Nonsuch*, and he had no word for Bush who came hastily to greet him as he came up the side. His cabin was unfriendly and inhospitable to his jaundiced eye when he entered it, and it was 'make and mend' day on board, with the hands skylarking noisily on the deck, so that he knew that if he went up to walk the quarter-deck his train of thought would be continually interrupted. He toyed for a moment with the idea of ordering Bush to cancel his order to make and mend and instead to put the hands to some quiet labour. Everyone would know that it was because the Commodore wanted to walk the deck in peace, and might be properly impressed with his importance, but there was never a chance of his acting on the notion. He would not deprive the men of their holiday, and the thought of swelling his importance in their eyes acted as a positive deterrent.

Instead, he went out into the quarter gallery, and, bowed below the overhanging cove above, he tried to stride up and down its twelve-foot length. It was indeed a pity that he could not bring his ships' guns to bear on the siege-works. Heavy guns at close range would play havoc with the French breastworks. And behind the high

dyke from which he had seen the guns being dragged must lie the French park and train — a few shells from the bomb-vessels would wreak havoc there, and if only he could get the ketches up the bay it would be easy to drop shells over the dyke. But over most of the bay there was only three or four feet of water, and nowhere more than seven. The thing was impossible, and the best thing he could do was to forget about it. To distract himself he stepped over the rail into the other quarter gallery, and peeped through the stern window into Bush's cabin. Bush was asleep on his cot, flat on his back with his mouth open, his hands spread wide at his sides and his wooden leg hanging in a becket against the bulkhead. Hornblower felt a twinge of annoyance that his captain should be sleeping so peacefully while he himself had so many cares on his shoulders. For two pins he would send a message in to Bush and wreck his nap for him. But he knew he would never do that, either. He could never bring himself to a wanton abuse of power.

He stepped back into his own quarter gallery, and as he did, as he stood with one leg suspended and with the rudder gudgeons creaking a little in their pintles in the stream below him, the idea came to him, so that he stood stock still for a space, with one leg in mid-air. Then he brought his leg over and walked into his cabin and shouted for a messenger.

"My compliments to the officer of the watch, and will he please signal to *Harvey* for Mr Mound to come on board at once."

Mound came down into the cabin, young and expectant, and yet with his eagerness thinly overlaid with assumed nonchalance. It suddenly dawned upon Hornblower as he greeted him that that careless lackadaisical air of Mound's was assumed in imitation of himself. Hornblower realized that he was something of a hero — more than that, very much of a hero — to this young lieutenant who was paying him the sincerest flattery of imitation. It made him grin wryly to himself even while he motioned Mound to a chair, and then it was forgotten as he plunged into the vital discussion.

"Mr Mound, do you know of the progress of the French siege-works?"

"No, sir."

"Then look at this chart with me. They have a line of trenches here, with a battery here. Their main flank and stores are behind a dyke, here. If we could bring the bomb-vessels up the bay we could shell them out of both places."

"Shoal water, sir," said Mound regretfully.

"Yes," said Hornblower, and for the life of him he could not stop himself from making a dramatic pause before uttering the crucial word. "But with camels we could reduce the draught."

"Camels!" exclaimed Mound, and as he realized all the implications his face lit up. "By George, sir, you're right."

Camels are a means of reducing the draught of a ship — loaded vessels lashed tightly one on each side and then emptied, so as to raise the centre ship farther out of the water. Mound was already grappling with the details.

"There are lighters and barges in Riga, sir. They'll give us some, sure as a gun. Plenty of sand to ballast 'em, or we can fill 'em with water and pump 'em out. With two big lighters I could lessen *Harvey's* draught by five feet easy — lift her clear out of the water for that matter. Those lighters are two hundred tons burden an' don't draw more than a couple of feet empty."

A difficulty had occurred to Hornblower while Mound was speaking, one which he had not thought of before.

"How are you going to steer 'em all?" he demanded. "They'll be unmanageable."

"Rig a Danube rudder, sir," replied Mound instantly. "Make it big enough and you could steer anything with one."

"'Give me a fulcrum and I will move the world'," quoted Hornblower.

"Exactly, sir. An' I'll pierce the lighters for sweeps, There'll be no beatin' to wind'ward any more than in a raft. I could put the men to work at once if you'll give the order, sir."

Mound might have been a boy of ten instead of one of twenty from the eagerness of his voice. The languid calm was quite forgotten.

"I'll send a note to the Governor," said Hornblower, "asking for the loan of four lighters. I'll make it six, in case of accidents. Have your plans ready in an hour's time. You can draw upon this ship and the sloops for the materials and men you'll need."

"Aye aye, sir."

There was need for haste, for that very evening there came sullenly booming across the bay the sound of heavy guns firing, not the higher-pitched incisive growl of the field-pieces they had heard before, but the deep-toned roar of siege artillery; the enemy was trying a few shots with the first of the big guns dragged up into their battery. And the next morning, just as Hornblower came out on the quarter-deck, there was a sudden loud crash ashore, like a peal of thunder, to herald the opening salvo of the enemy. Its echoes had not died away before a more ragged salvo succeeded it, and then another more ragged still, and so on until the air was ceaselessly tormented by the loud reports, like a continuous thunderstorm from which the ear waited continually for relief that was not granted it. The masthead lookout reported a long smear of smoke drifted by the breeze across the countryside from the enemy's battery.

"Call away my barge," said Hornblower.

At *Nonsuch's* boat booms there already lay an assortment of the boats of the squadron, piled high with the stores which had been taken out of the two bomb-ketches. The barge danced over the water in the sparkling dawn to where the bomb-ketches lay anchored, each with a lighter on either side, Duncan, captain of the *Moth*, was being rowed round the group in a jollyboat. He touched his hat as the barge approached.

"Morning, sir," he said, and then instantly turned back to the work in hand, raising his speaking-trumpet to his lips. "Too much by the bows! Take up the for'ward cable another paw!"

Hornblower had himself rowed on to the *Harvey*, and leaped from his barge to the lighter on her starboard side — not much of a leap, because she was laden down with ballast — without bothering officers or men for compliments. Mound was standing on his tiny quarter-deck, testing with his foot the tension of the big cable — one of *Nonsuch's* — which was wrapped round his own ship and both lighters, two turns round each, forward and aft.

"Carry on, port side!" he yelled.

In each of the lighters a large working party was stationed, the men equipped with shovels for the most part extemporized out of wood. At Mound's order the men in the port-side lighter recommenced lustily shovelling sand over the side. Clouds of it drifted astern on the faint wind. Mound tested the tension again.

"Carry on, starboard side!" he yelled again, and then, perceiving his Commodore approaching, he came to the salute.

"Good morning, Mr Mound," said Hornblower.

"Good morning, sir. We have to do this part of it step by step, you see, sir. I have the old ketch so light she'll roll over in the cables if I give her the chance."

"I understand, Mr Mound."

"The Russians were prompt enough sending out the lighters to us, sir."

"Can you wonder?" replied Hornblower. "D'you hear the French battery at work?"

Mound listened and apparently heard it for the first time. He had been engrossed too deeply in his work to pay any attention to it before; his face was unshaven and grey with fatigue, for his activity had not ceased since Hornblower had summoned him the afternoon before. In that time both ketches had been emptied of their stores, the cables roused out and got across to them, the lighters received and laid alongside in the dark, and each group of three vessels bound into a single mass with the cables hauled taut by the capstans.

"Excuse me, sir," said Mound, and ran forward to examine the forward cable.

With the shovelling-out of the sand, hove overside by a hundred lusty pairs of arms, the lighters were rising in the water, lifting the ketch between them, cables and timber all a-creaking, and it was necessary to keep the cables taut as the rising of the lighters relieved the strain upon them. Hornblower turned aft to see what another working party were doing there. A large barrel half filled with water had been streamed out astern with a line to either quarter of the ketch, conducted in each case through a fair-lead to an extemporized windlass fixed to the deck. Paying out or heaving in on the lines would regulate the pull of the barrel, were the ketch under way, to one side or the other, exerting a powerful leverage. The barrel then was intended to undertake the duties of the rudder, which was already sufficiently high out of the water to be almost useless.

"It's only a contraption, sir," said Mound, who had returned from forward. "I had intended, as I told you, sir, to rig a Danube rudder. It was Wilson here who suggested this — I'd like to call your attention to him, sir. It'll be much more effective, I'm sure."

Wilson looked up from his work with a gap-toothed grin.

"What's your rating?" asked Hornblower.

"Carpenter's mate, sir."

"As good a one as I've known, sir," interpolated Mound.

"What service?"

"Two commissions in the old *Superb*, sir. One in *Arethusa*, an' now this one, sir."

"I'll make out an acting warrant for you as carpenter," said Hornblower.

"Thankee, sir, thankee."

Mound could easily have taken the whole credit for devising this jury rudder to himself if he had wished.

Hornblower liked him all the more for not having done so. It was good for discipline and for the spirits of the men to reward good work promptly.

"Very good, Mr Mound. Carry on."

Hornblower went back to his barge and rowed over to the *Moth*. The work here was a stage more advanced; so much sand had been shovelled out of the lighters that it was only with slow effort that the working parties could heave their shovelfuls over the side, shoulder-high. A wide streak of the *Moth's* copper was already visible, so high was she riding.

"Watch your trim, Mr Duncan," said Hornblower. "She's canting a little to port."

"Aye aye, sir."

It called for some complicated adjustment of the cables, veering out and hauling in, to set *Moth* on an even keel again.

"She won't draw more'n two feet by the time we're finished with her, sir," said Duncan exultantly.

"Excellent," said Hornblower.

Duncan addressed himself to putting more men to work in the lighters, shovelling sand across from the inboard to the outboard sides, to ease the work of those actually heaving the sand over.

"Two hours more an' they'll be clear, sir," reported Duncan. "Then we'll only have to pierce the sides for sweeps."

He glanced over at the sun, still not far above the horizon.

"We'll be ready for action half an hour before noon, sir," he added.

"Put the carpenters to work piercing the sides now," said Hornblower. "So that you can rest your men and give them a chance to have breakfast. Then when they start again they can shovel through the ports and work quicker."

"Aye aye, sir."

Half an hour before noon seemed to be a more likely sort of estimate with that improvement in the programme, yet even if the completion of the work were delayed by two hours there would still be long hours of daylight left in which the blow could be struck. While the sides of the lighters were being pierced Hornblower called Duncan and Mound to him and went over their final orders with them.

"I'll be up in the church with the signalling party," he said in conclusion. "I'll see that you're properly supported. So good luck."

"Thank you, sir," they answered in unison. Excitement and anticipation masked their weariness.

So Hornblower had himself rowed over to the village, where a tiny jetty saved him and the signallers from splashing through the shallows: the roar of the bombardment and the counter-bombardment grew steadily louder as they approached. Diebitch and Clausewitz came to meet them as they mounted the jetty, and led the way towards the church. As they skirted the foot of the earthworks which ringed the village on its landward side Hornblower looked up and saw the Russian artillerymen working their guns, bearded soldiers, naked to the waist in the hot sun. An officer walked from gun to gun in the battery, pointing each piece in succession.

"There are few men in our artillery who can be trusted to lay a gun," explained Clausewitz.

The village was already badly knocked about, great holes showing in the walls and roofs of the flimsy cottages of which it was composed. As they neared the church a ricocheting ball struck the church wall, sending a cloud of chips flying, and remaining embedded in the brickwork like a plum in a cake. A moment later Hornblower swung round to a sudden unusual noise to see his two midshipmen standing staring at the headless corpse of a

seaman who a moment before had been walking at their heels. A ball flying over the earthworks had shattered his head to atoms and flung his body against them. Somers was eyeing with disgust the blood and brains which had spattered his white trousers.

"Come along," said Hornblower.

In the gallery under the dome they could look down upon the siege. The zigzag approach trench was almost half-way towards the defences, the head of it almost obscured by flying earth as the Russians fired furiously upon it. But the central redoubt which covered the entrance to the village was in bad shape, its parapets battered into nothing more than mounds, a gun lying half buried beside its shattered carriage, although the other one was still being worked by a devoted little group. The whole of the French works were obscured by the thin pall of smoke which spread from the breaching battery, but the smoke was not so thick as to hide a column of infantry marching down towards the first parallel from the rear.

"They relieve the guard of the trenches at noon," explained Clausewitz. "Where are these boats of yours, sir?"

"Here they come," said Hornblower.

They were creeping over the silvery water, fantastic in appearance, the ketches with their sails furled and the ugly bulks of the lighters beside them. The long clumsy sweeps, a dozen on each side, looked like the legs of a water-boatman on a pond, but far slower in movement as the toiling seamen who manned them tugged them through each successive endless stroke.

"Somers! Gerard!" said Hornblower, sharply. "How are your signalling arrangements working out? Lash those blocks to the cornice up there. Come along, you haven't all day to get ready in."

The midshipmen and seamen addressed themselves to the business of making a signalling station up on the gallery. The blocks were lashed to the cornice and the halliards rove through them, the Russian staff watching the operation with interest. Meanwhile the bomb-ketches came crawling up the bay, painfully slowly under their sweeps, heading crabwise on account of the gentle breeze on their bow, before which they sagged away to leeward quite perceptibly to Hornblower's eye above them. No one among the enemy seemed to be paying them the least attention; Bonaparte's armies, lords of Europe from Madrid to Smolensk, had had few opportunities of becoming acquainted with bomb-ketches. The firing from the big battery went on steadily, pounding at the crumbling Russian earthworks below, with the Russians returning the fire with desperate energy.

The *Harvey* and the *Moth* came creeping in until they were quite close to shore; Hornblower through his glass could see minute figures moving in their bows, and knew they were dropping their anchors. The sweeps worked spasmodically, first on one side and then on the other — Hornblower up in the gallery, his heart beating fast, could well picture Mound and Duncan on their quarter-decks shouting their orders to the rowers as they manoeuvred themselves about like beetles pinned to a card. They were placing themselves in position to drop other anchors at the stern, so that by veering and hauling in on their cables they could swing themselves so as to be able to point their mortars anywhere along a wide arc. Clausewitz and the staff looked on uncomprehending, having no notion of the meaning of these manoeuvres. Hornblower saw the stern anchors let go, and could see little groups of men bending to work at the capstans; the bomb-ketches turned almost imperceptibly first this way and then that as their captains trained them round by the aid of the leading marks on the shore.

"There's the 'ready' flag going up in *Harvey*," said Hornblower, the glass at his eye.

The sheave in the block above his head shrilled noisily as the halliard ran over it, bearing the acknowledgement. A big puff of smoke suddenly spurted upwards from the *Harvey*'s bows; Hornblower at that distance could see nothing of the shell in its flight, and he waited nervously, compelling himself to search the whole area round about the battery to make sure of seeing the burst. And he saw nothing, nothing at all. Reluctantly he ordered hoisted the black cone for 'unobserved' and *Harvey* fired again. This time he could see the burst, a little volcano of smoke and fragments just beyond the battery.

"That was over, sir," said Somers.

"Yes. Make that to *Harvey*."

Duncan had anchored *Moth* by now, and was flying the signal of readiness. *Harvey*'s next shell fell square in the centre of the battery, and immediately afterwards *Moth*'s first shell did the same. At once the two ketches began a systematic bombardment of the battery, dropping shells into it in constant succession, so that there

was not a moment when a fountain of smoke and earth was not apparent within its earthworks. It was a plain rectangular structure, without traverses or internal subdivisions, and there was no shelter for the men within it now that their enemy had found means to circumvent their earthworks. They only maintained their fire for a few seconds, and then Hornblower could see them running from their guns; the interior of the battery looked like a disturbed ants' nest. One of the big thirteen-inch shells landed full on the parapet, and the smoke clearing away revealed the breastwork blown flat, opening the interior of the battery to view from ground level in the village, and through the gap was visible the muzzle of a dismounted siege-gun, pointed skyward and helpless — a cheering sight for the defence. That was only the beginning. Gap after gap was blown in the earthworks; the whole interior was plastered with shells. At one moment there was a much bigger explosion than usual, and Hornblower guessed that an 'expense magazine' — the small store of gunpowder kept in the battery and continually replenished from the rear — had blown up. Down below him the defence had taken new heart, and every gun along the menaced front had reopened fire; it was a shot from the village, apparently, which hit the muzzle of the dismounted gun and flung it back upon the ground.

"Signal 'cease fire'," said Hornblower.

Thirteen-inch shells were not munitions of war that could be readily obtained in the Baltic, and there was no purpose in wasting them upon a target which was silenced and at least made temporarily useless. And then came the countermove on the part of the attack, as he had expected. A battery of field artillery was coming over the distant slope, six guns, minute at that distance, jolting and swaying after their limbers. The country was still marshy, for the summer was not yet old enough to have dried up the fields, and the artillery, hock and axle-deep in the mire, made only slow progress.

'Signal for the target to change,' ordered Hornblower.

There was no means of observing the fall of the shells on the new target, for the bomb-ketches were dropping them just over the high dyke. It was a matter of chance should they do any destruction, but Hornblower could guess that the park and depots of an army of sixty thousand men conducting a first-class siege were likely to be both extensive and crowded; a few shells dropped there might do good. The first field battery was approaching the water's edge, the horses wheeling round to leave the guns pointing at the bomb-ketches at neat geometrical intervals.

"Harvey signals she's shifting target, sir," reported Gerard.

"Very good."

Harvey was firing at the field battery; it took her a little while to get the range, and field-guns, spaced far apart in a long thin line, were not a good target for mortars, even though the fall of the shells was now under direct observation. And a second battery was coming up on the flank of the first and — Hornblower's telescope could easily make them out across the narrow extremity of the bay — there were more guns coming into action to put the bomb-vessels under a cross-fire. One of Harvey's shells burst close beside one of the guns, presumably killing every man serving it, but by chance leaving the gun itself still on its wheels. The other guns had opened fire, the smoke creeping lazily from their muzzles. Across the bay the other field batteries were coming into action, although at very long range for field artillery. There was no purpose in continuing to expose the bomb-ketches to the fire of the shore; Macdonald had two hundred field-guns, and there were only two bomb-ketches.

"Signal 'Discontinue the action'," ordered Hornblower.

Now that he had given the word it seemed to him that he had waited over-long. It seemed ages before the bomb-ketches got their anchors hoisted, and Hornblower could see, as he waited anxiously, the splashes thrown up all round them by the shots from the shore. He saw the sweeps thrust out from the sides of the lighters take a grip on the water, swinging the vessels round, and then the white sails mounted the masts, and the queer craft sailed away out of range, making vast leeway which caused them to head crab wise aslant of their course. Hornblower turned away with relief to meet the eyes of the governor, who had been standing silently watching the whole operation through a vast telescope which he had mounted upon the shoulder of a patient orderly whose back must have ached with crouching.

"Excellent, sir," said the Governor. "I thank you, sir, in the name of the Tsar. Russia is grateful to you, sir, and so is the city of Riga."

"Thank you, Your Excellency," said Hornblower.

Diebitch and Clausewitz were awaiting his attention. They were eager to discuss future operations with him, and he had to listen to them. He dismissed his midshipmen and signalling party, hoping that Somers would have the sense to interpret the glance he threw him as a warning not to let his men get hold of any Lettish spirits while they were ashore. Then he resumed the conversation, which was continually interrupted by the coming and going of orderlies with messages, and hasty orders given in languages that he could not understand. But the results of those orders were soon apparent; two regiments of infantry came filing up through the village, with bayonets fixed, lined the earthworks, and then dashed out on the glaxis with a yell. The heavy guns in the battery which should have torn them to pieces with grapeshot were all silent; Hornblower watched the sortie reach the approach trench almost without opposition; the men burst into it over the parapets, and hurriedly began to tear down the sandbags and gabions with which it was constructed, while down into the ruined battery came a French infantry force too late to stop them, even if they had been able to do so under the artillery fire of the besieged. In an hour the work was done, the approach trench levelled over large sections, the tools taken, spare gabions heaped together and set on fire.

"Thanks to you, sir," said Clausewitz, "the progress of the siege has been delayed by four days."

Four days; and the French had all the rest of the year to continue pounding the defences. It was his duty, and the Russians', to maintain them as long as might be. There was something a little depressing about the prospect of trying to maintain this outwork while Bonaparte was marching, irresistibly, into the heart of Russia. Yet the game had to be played out to the end. He parted from his hosts feeling weary and disconsolate, a dark shadow overhanging any elation he might feel regarding the success — the success that had won four days — of his attack on the French. The pipes squealed as he came over the side of the *Nonsuch*: Captain Bush and the first lieutenant and the officer of the watch were on the quarter-deck to receive him.

"Good evening, Captain Bush. Would you be kind enough to hang out a signal for Mr Duncan and Mr Mound to repair on board here immediately?"

"Yes, sir." Bush did not speak again for a second or two, but he did not turn away to obey. "Yes, sir. Mound was killed."

"What's that you say?"

"One of the last shots from the beach cut him in two, sir." Bush was trying to keep his expression harsh as usual, but it was obvious that he was deeply moved. Yet he had not grown as fond of Mound as had Hornblower. And in that one moment there came flooding over Hornblower all the torrent of regrets and doubts which he was to know for so long to come. If only he had ordered the bomb-ketches out of action earlier! Had he been wantonly reckless of human life in keeping them in action after the field batteries began to return fire? Mound had been one of the best young officers he had ever been fortunate enough to command. England had suffered a severe loss in his death, and so had he. But his feeling of personal loss was more acute still, and the thought of the finality of death oppressed him. The wave of torment was still breaking over him when Bush spoke again.

"Shall I signal for Duncan and *Harvey's* first lieutenant, sir?"

"Yes, do that, if you please, Captain Bush."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Hornblower was endeavouring to write a note in French to the Governor — a weary exercise. Sometimes it was words and sometimes it was phrases which were beyond his power to express in French, and each hitch meant retracing his steps and beginning the sentence again.

Despatches received at this moment from England — he was trying to say — inform me that the armies of His Majesty the King of Great Britain and Ireland have been successful in a great battle fought on the 14th of last month at Salamanca in Spain. Marshal Marmont, Duke of Ragusa, was wounded, and some ten thousand prisoners were captured. The British general, the Marquess of Wellesley, is, according to the advices I have received, in full march for Madrid, which is certain to fall to him. The consequences of this battle cannot be estimated too highly.

Hornblower swore a little to himself; it was not for him to recommend to the Governor what action he should take regarding this news. But the fact that one of Bonaparte's armies had been thoroughly beaten, in a battle fought between equal numbers on a large scale, was of the highest importance. If he were Governor, he would fire salutes, post proclamations, do all that he could to revive the spirits of soldiers and civilians in their weary task of holding Riga against the French. And what it would mean to the main Russian army, now drawing together in the south to defend Moscow in one last desperate battle, it was impossible to estimate. He signed and sealed the note, shouted for Brown, and handed it over to him for immediate despatch ashore. Beside him, in addition to the official despatches just received, lay a pile of fifteen letters all addressed to him in Barbara's handwriting; Barbara had written to him every week since his departure, and the letters had piled up in the Admiralty office awaiting the time when *Clam* should return with despatches, and he had opened only the last one to assure himself that all was well at home, and he picked it up again to reread it.

MY BELOVED HUSBAND,

This week the domestic news is quite overshadowed by the great news from Spain. Arthur has beaten Marmont and the whole usurping government in that country is in ruin. Arthur is to be made a Marquess. Was it in my first letter or in my second that I told you he had been made an Earl? Let us hope that soon I shall be writing to you that he has been made a Duke not because I wish my brother to be a Duke, but because that will mean another victory. All England is talking of Arthur this week, just as two weeks back all England was talking of Commodore Hornblower and his exploits in the Baltic.

The household here at Smallbridge is so much agog with all this news that our most important event bade fair to pass unnoticed. I refer to the breeching of Richard Arthur. He is in smallclothes now, and his petticoats are put away for ever. He is young for such a transformation, and Ramsbottom melted into tears at the passing of her baby; but if you could see him I think you would agree that he looks vastly well in his new clothes, at least until he can escape from supervision and indulge himself in his favourite recreation of digging holes in the ground in the shrubbery. He exhibits both physically and morally a partiality for the soil which appears odd in the son of such a distinguished sailor. When I have completed this letter I shall ring and send for him so that he can affix his mark, and I daresay he will add such grubby fingerprints as will further identify his signature.

Hornblower turned the page, and the grubby fingerprints were there, sure enough, along with the shaky X that Richard Arthur had scrawled under his stepmother's signature. Hornblower felt a desperate longing to see his son at that moment, happily muddy and spading away at his hole in the shrubbery, all-engrossed in the business of the moment with babyhood's sublime concentration of purpose. Above the X were the last few lines Barbara had written.

As always, it is my constant dream that my dear husband shall soon return victorious, when I shall be able to exert myself to increase his happiness in place of merely praying for it as I do now.

Hornblower refused to allow himself to grow sentimental, brutally strangling any emotion which he experienced. So now he had two brothers-in-law who were Marquesses, and one of them was a full General, while he himself was no more than a Knight of the Bath and — unless there should be an unusual casualty rate among his seniors — it would still be eight years before he became even a Rear Admiral, even if he should live so long and his career was not cut short by disciplinary action. He reached for the despatch which had been the first one he had opened, and read once more the passage which had the greatest bearing on the present moment.

Their Lordships desire me to call your particular notice to the fact that Government attaches the greatest importance to maintaining the defence of Riga as long as it is possible. They instruct me that they consider the safety of the squadron under your command as secondary compared with the prolongation of the siege and they charge you, on your peril, to do everything in your power to prevent the enemy from continuing his march on St Petersburg.

In other words, thought Hornblower, Riga must be defended to the last man — and ship — and they would shoot him if they thought he had not done his utmost. He shouted for his barge, locked his desk, seized his hat and, after a moment's hesitation, his pistols, and had himself rowed once more over to Daugavgriva. The village was now a mere mass of ruins, save for the church, whose solid walls had withstood the flames that had swept the place and the continual storm of ricochetting shots which came over from the bombardment of the ramparts. The place stank of death, for the dead were many and the earth over them scanty. Trenches had been driven from cellar to cellar of the ruined houses to permit of safe passage through the village, and it was by way of these that he made his way to the church. From the gallery there the view was ominous. The besiegers' second parallel was completed, no more than two hundred yards from the defences, and the approaches were continuing their remorseless progress towards the ditch. The fire from the big battery was ceaseless, and there was but small reply from the ramparts; too many gunners had been killed and too many guns knocked to pieces, and guns and artillerymen were scarce, so that it was better to try to preserve the remainder to beat off the assault when it should come. Down at the water's edge on the besiegers' side a well constructed battery displayed the guns that were ready to sweep the area where the bomb-ketches had anchored; there was no chance of repeating the surprise bombardment of the breaching battery which had prolonged the siege for four days at the cost of Mound's life.

Clausewitz commented coolly on the situation to Hornblower as they looked at all this through their glasses. To a doctrinaire soldier a siege was an intellectual exercise. It was mathematically possible to calculate the rate of progress of the approaches and the destructible effect of the batteries, to predict every move and countermove in advance, and to foretell within an hour the moment of the final assault. The time had come, now that it was impossible to maintain fire upon the head of the sap, to attempt to delay the progress of the besiegers by a sortie.

"But," expostulated Hornblower, "if the French know that a sortie is due, will not they make preparations for it?"

"Yes," said Clausewitz, his cold grey eyes expressionless.

"Would it not be better to surprise them?"

"Yes. But in a siege how is that to be done?"

"We surprised them with the bomb-vessels."

"Yes. But now —"

Clausewitz indicated the battery which denied the end of the bay to them.

"But still —" began Hornblower, and then bit off the sentence. There was no purpose in being critical without having a helpful suggestion to make at the same time. He turned his attention once more to the siege-works, looking for inspiration, while the guns roared out below him. They roared from farther up the river as well, where the French had opened another front of attack on the Mitau suburb directly across the river from Riga. The resources of the defence were being stretched very thin, and Macdonald had locked his teeth, bulldog fashion, into the siege and it would be hard to shake his hold. All the resources of Prussia were being drawn upon to supply his army with stores for the siege, and he had already proved that nothing would distract him from it, not even the fact that the Lettish and Livonian and Lithuanian peasantry had risen in revolt in his rear and had set all the country behind him in a turmoil.

"The dead are beginning to come down the river," said Clausewitz. He had big white teeth that revealed themselves at the least provocation. Hornblower looked at him without comprehension.

"From the fighting two weeks ago," explained Clausewitz. "At Vitebsk and Smolensk two hundred miles to the south of us. Some of the corpses have succeeded in making the journey. Russian corpses, many of them. But French corpses, too, and Bavarian corpses, and Westphalian corpses, and Italian corpses — many Italians. It must have been a big battle."

"Very interesting," said Hornblower, scanning the siege-works again. In the centre of the second parallel was a new battery, the fire from whose guns would cut up any force attacking frontally in the hope of destroying the works. It would be asking much of any sallying force to cross two hundred yards of naked glacis in the teeth of such a fire and then storm ditch and parapet. The flanks were secure too, one guarded by the little river and the other trending back towards the bay. The bay! The French batteries might be able to sweep the bay sufficiently effectively to prevent bomb-vessels anchoring there in daylight, but they would not be able to stop

an infantry attack launched from boats at night. Then the parallel could be rushed at dawn from the flank. Hornblower turned to Clausewitz with the suggestion, and Clausewitz adopted it instantly. These continental soldiers were always liable to forget about the sea when making their plans, but Clausewitz, Prussian though he was, was a man of sufficient elasticity of mind still to be able to see the merits of a plan based on command of the sea.

There was no time to be lost if the assault upon Daugavgriva were to be anticipated. The plan had to be given form instantly; timetables worked out, signals agreed upon, troops allocated for the landing and marched to the point where Hornblower could have boats' crews ready to man the river barges which were to carry the troops to the point selected for landing. Hornblower had to detail crews and officers, issue his orders, and make sure they were understood. Montgomery and Duncan, Purvis and Carlin, had to be sent for, brought up to the dome and shown the objectives to be aimed at — Hornblower fretted himself weary walking round the gallery while waiting for them to come ashore after he had sent for them. Mounted messengers, riding in hot haste, brought back a trio of Russian colonels to the gallery; it was their regiments which were detailed to make the landing. Hornblower explained to them in French, and then explained to his officers in English. Then he had the job of interpreting the questions which everyone wanted to ask. Half a dozen Russian subalterns, squatting on the floor of the gallery nursing pieces of board on which sheets of paper were pinned, wrote out the orders which Clausewitz dictated to them. Essen arrived in the midst of all the bustle; he had given his verbal consent at once to the proposed attack, and when, on his arrival, he found the preparations so far advanced, like a sensible man he left the elaboration of the details to the men who had devised the scheme. All this went on with the steady roar of the bombardment supplying a loud undertone to every conversation, while the Russian ramparts crumbled steadily under the hail of shot, and while the approach trenches crept steadily nearer.

It was before noon that Hornblower had made the suggestion to Clausewitz; it was eight in the evening, and the sun had set, before everything was completed, before Hornblower had had himself rowed to the Dwina mouth to inspect the boats which had been provided, and to watch the Russian grenadiers marching down to be herded into them.

"You understand your orders, Duncan?" asked Hornblower.

"Yes, sir."

"Let's see your watch. Set it by mine."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Mr Montgomery. Mr Purvis. Remember what I said about keeping the landing force together. You must strike all at once — no landing in driblets. Make sure the soldiers know the direction in which to advance when they land."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Good luck, then."

"Thank you, sir."

It was quite dark by the time Hornblower set foot again on the little jetty at Daugavgriva; dark, and there was a chilly breath in the air. So far had the year advanced since he had first cast anchor in Riga Bay. Midsummer had gone and autumn was at hand. He had to feel his way along the trenches and up to the church, and his legs felt hardly strong enough to carry him up the interminable dark stairs to the gallery. He had hardly sat down since the morning, and he had eaten nothing, and his head was swimming with fatigue and hunger. Clausewitz was still on duty, up in the gallery where the stars shone bravely down upon him, giving a light which seemed bright compared with the pitchy darkness of the stairs Hornblower had just climbed.

"The French seem unusually active to-night," was Clausewitz's greeting to him. "At dusk they changed the guard of their trenches."

A string of bright orange flames suddenly lit up the French lines, and the roar of a salvo reached their ears.

"They are periodically spraying the ditch with grape," explained Clausewitz, "to hinder our repair parties. It is what is always done, but after half a dozen rounds they lose direction and range."

If siege warfare was such a mechanical art, if every step was obvious and could be foreseen, there was always the chance of an original-minded general breaking the rules. In two days the breaches and approaches would

be ripe for an assault — what was to prevent an assailant from making his attack a little prematurely and catching the defender off his guard? Hornblower made the suggestion to Clausewitz.

"It is always possible," said Clausewitz, pontifically. "But our trench guards are unusually strong to-night because of the sortie at dawn."

Hornblower felt round in the gloom, and found one of the trusses of straw which had been carried up to the gallery in an endeavour to make this advanced headquarters more comfortable. He sat down gratefully, for his legs were actually trembling with fatigue. He wrapped his cloak closer round him against the chill of the night, and the thought of sleep became inexpressibly alluring. He stretched himself out on the crackling straw, and then heaved himself up on his elbow again to pinch up a wad of straw as a pillow.

"I shall rest a while," he announced, and lay back and closed his eyes.

There was something more than mere fatigue about this desire for sleep. Asleep, he would be quit of this siege, of its stinks and perils and bitterness; he would be free of his responsibilities; he would not be plagued with the endless reports of Bonaparte's steady advance into the heart of Russia; he would no longer be tormented with the feeling of fighting a desperate and hopeless battle against an enemy who was bound, because of his colossal might, to prevail in the end. Oblivion awaited him if he could only sleep, oblivion, nepenthe, forgetfulness. To-night he yearned to sink into sleep as a man might yearn to sink into the arms of his mistress. His nerves were curiously steady, despite the strain of the last few weeks — perhaps (such was his contrary nature) because of it. He settled himself down in the straw, and even the tumultuous dreams that assailed him were (as he was somehow aware) not nearly so serious as the thoughts from which he would have suffered had he been awake.

He awoke to Clausewitz's arm on his shoulder, and pieced himself back into the Hornblower who was aiding in the defence of Riga like a man fitting together a jigsaw puzzle.

"An hour before dawn," said Clausewitz, still only a vague shadow in the brooding darkness.

Hornblower sat up: he was stiff, and had grown cold under the inadequate cover of his cloak. The landing force, if all had gone well, must be creeping up the bay now. It was too dark to see anything as he peered over the parapet of the gallery. Another shadow loomed up at his elbow and thrust something scalding hot into his hand — a glass of tea. He sipped it gratefully, feeling its warmth penetrate into his inner recesses. The faint report of a single musket-shot reached his ears, and Clausewitz began a remark to him which was cut short by a violent outburst of firing down in no-man's-land between the trench systems. The darkness was spangled with points of flame.

"Possibly patrols with a fit of nerves," said Clausewitz, but the firing showed no signs of dying down. Instead, it grew in violence. There was a great spearhead of flame down below, pointing towards an irregular mass of flashes, where apparently a column was meeting a line. The flashes flared up and died away with the ragged volleys; soon cannons were contributing their orange flames, and immediately afterwards there was more fire as blazing-combustibles — carcasses — were flung by attackers and defenders from the parapets to illuminate their enemies. From the bay arose a curving streak of yellow fire, soaring upwards towards the sky, and then bursting into scarlet stars.

"Thank God for that!" said Hornblower, but he kept the words to himself.

The landing party had reached their station a little ahead of their time, and somebody, English or Russian, had sensibly decided to launch the flank attack immediately upon seeing the firing ashore. Clausewitz turned and rapped out an order which sent an aide-de-camp hurrying down the stairs. At almost the same moment a messenger came running up, gabbling Russian so rapidly that Clausewitz, with his limited command of the language, had to make him repeat the words more slowly. When the message was delivered he turned to Hornblower.

"The enemy is in strong force, apparently intending to make a surprise attack. He might save two days if it were successful."

A fresh tumult broke out down below; the landing party had encountered their first opposition, and the invisible landscape towards the shore was spangled with a new pattern of flashes. There was a desperate battle going on, where attackers and counter-attackers and the flank attack drove together; there was a faint light beginning to show now, enough to reveal Clausewitz, unshaven, and with his uniform covered with bits of straw in direct contrast with his usual spruce appearance. But still nothing could be seen of the fighting, save

for vague smoke-clouds drifting in the semi-darkness. Hornblower was reminded of Campbell's lines in *Hohenlinden* about the level sun at morn being unable to pierce the dun war-clouds. The clatter of musketry and the crash of artillery told of the bitter struggle, and once Hornblower heard a deep shout from many throats answered by a wild yell. That was when some attack met a counter-attack, presumably. Steadily the landscape grew brighter, and the messengers began to pour in.

"Shevstoff has stormed the battery guarding the shore," said Clausewitz, exultantly.

Shevstoff was the general commanding the landing party. If he had stormed the battery the boats' crews would be able to effect an unmolested retreat, while the arrival of a messenger from him here in Daugavgriva meant that he was in full touch with the defenders, and presumably his force had executed its orders and fallen on the flank of the French position. The firing seemed to be dying away, even though the smoke still blended with the low ground-mist of autumn and kept everything concealed.

"Kladoff is in the approaches," went on Clausewitz. "His workmen are breaking down the parapets."

The firing increased again, although now there was so much light that no flashes were visible. A frightful death-struggle was apparently going on, so desperate that the arrival of the Governor in the gallery attracted little attention from the group straining to see through the fog and smoke.

Essen gathered the details with a few quick questions to Clausewitz, and then he turned to Hornblower.

"I would have been here an hour ago," he said, "but I was detained by the arrival of despatches."

Essen's massive countenance was gloomy; he took Hornblower's arm and drew him out of earshot of the junior staff officers.

"Bad news?" asked Hornblower.

"Yes. The worst. We have been beaten in a great battle outside Moscow, and Bonaparte is in the city."

That was the worst of news indeed. Hornblower could foresee a future time when he supposed that battle would rank along with Marengo and Austerlitz and Jena, as a smashing victory which laid a nation low, and the entry into Moscow would rank with the occupation of Vienna and Berlin. A week or two more and Russia would sue for peace — if she had not begun to do so already — and England would be left alone, with the whole world in arms against her. Was there anything in the world that could stand against Bonaparte's craft and power? Even the British Navy? Hornblower forced himself to take the blow impassively, forced his face to bear no hint of his dismay.

"We shall fight it out here all the same," he said.

"Yes," said Essen, "my men will fight to the last. So will my officers."

There was almost a grin on his face as he jerked his head towards Clausewitz; that was a man who had his neck in a noose if ever a man had, fighting against his own country. Hornblower remembered Wellesley's hint to him that his squadron might well serve as a refuge for the Russian Court. His ships would be jammed with refugees fleeing from this, the last continental country in arms against Bonaparte.

The mist and smoke were thinning, and patches of the field of battle were visible now, and Hornblower and Essen turned their attention to the work in hand as if with relief from contemplating the future.

"Ha!" said Essen, pointing.

Portions of the approaches were in plain view, and here and there were jagged gaps in the parapets.

"Kladoff has carried out his orders, sir," said Clausewitz.

Until those gaps were repaired, one by one, starting with the gap nearest the first parallel, no one would be able to reach the head of the sap, and certainly no strong force could use the approaches. Another two days had been won, decided Hornblower, gauging the amount of destruction with his eye — experience had brought him facility already in appreciating siege operations. There was still heavy firing going on as the rear-guard covered the retreat of the sallying forces to the ramparts. Essen balanced his huge telescope on the shoulder of his aide-de-camp and pointed it down at the scene. Hornblower was looking through his own glass; the big barges which had brought the landing party were lying deserted on the beach, and the boats which were conveying back his crews which had manned them were already safely out of range. Essen's hand on his shoulder swung him round.

"See there, Commodore!" said Essen.

Hornblower's glass revealed to him in a flash the thing to which Essen had wanted to call his attention.

Isolated infantrymen from the besiegers were ranging over no-man's-land on their way back to their own

trenches and — Hornblower saw it done — they bayoneted the Russian wounded who lay heaped in their path. Perhaps it was only to be expected, in this long and bloody siege, that bitterness and ferocity should be engendered on this scale, especially among Bonaparte's hordes who had wandered over Europe for years now, since boyhood, living on what they could gather from the countryside with the musket and bayonet as the only court of appeal. Essen was white with anger, and Hornblower tried to share his rage, but he found it difficult. That kind of atrocity was what he had come to expect. He was perfectly prepared to go on killing Bonaparte's soldiers and sailors, but he would not flatter himself that he was executing justice by killing one man because some other man had murdered his wounded allies.

Down in the shattered remains of the village, as he walked along the trenches, those of the wounded who had been fortunate enough to drag themselves back were receiving treatment. Shuddering, Hornblower told himself that perhaps those who had been bayoneted in no-man's-land were the lucky ones. He pushed past ranks of smoke-blackened and ragged Russian soldiers, talking with the noisy abandon of men who have just emerged from a hard-won victory.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Among the mass of long-delayed mail from England were great packets of printed pamphlets, in French and in German, a few even in Dutch and in Danish. They were appeals to Bonaparte's forces to desert his standard — not suggestions for mass desertions, but intended for the individual soldier, telling him that he could be sure of a welcome if he were to come over. They denied the statements that Bonaparte was continually making in his proclamations, to the effect that England confined her prisoners in floating hells of hulks, and that deserters were forced by ill-treatment to take service in England's mercenary regiments. They offered a life of ease and security, with the honourable alternative, only if requested, of enlistment in the British forces, to those who wished to strike a blow against the tyrant. The French pamphlet was certainly well written, and presumably the others were too; maybe Canning, or that fellow — what was his name, now? — Hookham Frere, had had a hand in composing them.

The letter that accompanied the pamphlets, charging him to do his utmost to get them into the hands of Bonaparte's forces, had an interesting enclosure — a copy of a letter from Bonaparte to Marmont, intercepted presumably somewhere in Spain, in which the Emperor raged against this new evidence of British falseness and perfidy. He had seen some of the first pamphlets, apparently, and they had touched him on a sore spot. Judging by the wording of his letter, he was driven quite frantic at this attempt to seduce his men from their allegiance. If the violence of the Imperial reaction was any guide, then this method of warfare was likely to be effective. The usually well-fed and well-cared-for Prussians under Macdonald's command were on meagre rations now that the country round had been stripped bare by foragers; an offer of a life of well-fed ease combined with an appeal to their patriotism might bring in deserters in plenty. Hornblower mapped out in his mind a formal letter to the Governor in which he would suggest that a few pedlars be sent into the French camp ostensibly to sell luxuries but really to distribute these pamphlets. Here where Bonaparte's men were suffering real hardship and meeting with small success the appeal might carry more weight than with Bonaparte's main army in Moscow; Hornblower was inclined to distrust the flamboyant Russian bulletin about the burning of Moscow, and Alexander's fervent public declaration that he would never make peace while a Frenchman was on Russian soil. In Hornblower's opinion French morale was likely to be still high enough, and Bonaparte's strength still great enough, to force peace at the bayonet's point from Russia in the Russian capital, be the destruction of Moscow never so great — even as great as Moscow said it was.

Someone knocked at the door.

"Come in," bellowed Hornblower, irritated at the interruption, for he had intended to spend all day catching up on his arrears of paper work.

"A letter from the beach, sir," said the midshipman of the watch.

It was a brief note from the Governor with its point compressed into a single sentence —

I have some new arrivals in the city who I think will interest you if you can spare the time for a visit.

Hornblower sighed; his report to London would never be finished, apparently, but he could not ignore this invitation.

"Call away my barge," he said to the midshipman, and turned to lock his desk.

God knew who these 'new arrivals' would be. These Russians were sometimes so portentously mysterious about trifles. It might be a fool's errand, but on the other hand he must find out what this new development was before sending off his despatch to England. As his barge danced over the water he looked over at the siege-lines; the battering guns were still volleying away — he had grown so used to the noise that he only noticed it when his attention was called to it — and the usual long pall of smoke lay over the flat country there.

Then the boat entered the mouth of the river and Daugavgriva's ruins were hidden from view save for the dome of the church where he had so often stood. Riga came steadily nearer and nearer, and they had to keep close to the bank to avoid the worst of the Dwina's rapid current, until at last the oars ceased and the barge slid against the steps of the river-wall. At the head of them waited the Governor with his staff and a spare horse for Hornblower.

"It is only a short ride," said Essen, "and one I think you will consider worth the making."

Hornblower climbed on to his horse, with a nod of thanks to the groom who held its head, and then they all wheeled and dashed away through the clattering streets. A postern was opened for them in the eastern fortifications — so far no enemy had shown his face on this bank of the Dwina — and they rode out over a drawbridge spanning the ditch. On the glacis beyond the ditch was a large force of soldiers, squatting and lying in rank; as soon as the cavalcade appeared they came hastily to their feet, dressed their lines, and then, in obedience to a shrill chorus of bugles, presented arms, their regimental colours fluttering in the little breeze. Essen reined up, returning the salute.

"Well, what do you think of them, sir?" he asked Hornblower with a chuckle.

They were ragged soldiers — bare skin showed frequently in the ranks through holes in the blue or dirty grey uniforms. They were shambling, unsoldierly soldiers, too; any troops who had seen hard service might be ragged, but Hornblower, looking along the ranks, had the impression of voluntary dirt and disorder. Essen was still chuckling, and Hornblower looked the harder to find the reason for this mirth. Essen would not have brought him out here just to see ragged soldiers — Hornblower had seen enough of those in the past three months to last him the rest of his life. There were several thousand men, a strong brigade or a weak division; Hornblower glanced at the regimental standards to ascertain the number of units present, and then he nearly lost his precarious seat with surprise. Those flags were red and yellow, the national colours of Spain, and the moment this dawned upon him he realized that the ragged uniforms were the remains of the Bourbon white and blue he had come so much to hate ten years ago during his captivity at Ferrol. Not only that, but on the left of the line there was a single standard of silver and blue — the Portuguese flag, held aloft before a single shrunken battalion of scarecrows.

"I thought you would be surprised, sir," said Essen, still chuckling.

"Who are these men?" asked Hornblower.

"Some of Bonaparte's willing allies," replied Essen, ironically. "They were in St Cyr's Corps at Polotsk. One day they found themselves on the very fringe of the outpost line, and fought their way down the river to join us. Come and meet their general."

He urged his horse forward, and he and Hornblower cantered up to where a ragged officer sat a bony white horse at the head of an even worse-mounted staff.

"I have the honour to present," said Essen, formally, "His Excellency the Conde de los Altos — His Excellency Commodore Sir Horatio Hornblower."

The Conde saluted; it took Hornblower a few moments to make himself think in Spanish — the last time he had used that language was during the abortive attack on Rosas, two years ago.

"It is highly gratifying to meet Your Excellency," he said.

The Conde's expression revealed his startled pleasure at being addressed in his own tongue, and he replied rapidly.

"You are the English Admiral, sir?"

Hornblower did not see fit to enter into explanations regarding the difference between an Admiral and a Commodore. He merely nodded.

"I have asked that my men and the Portuguese be returned by sea to Spain, there to fight against Bonaparte on our own soil. They tell me that as this can only be done by sea your consent must be secured. You will grant it, of course, sir?"

That was asking a good deal. Five thousand men at four tons a man meant twenty thousand tons of shipping - a large convoy; it would be straining his powers for him to pledge his government to provide twenty thousand tons of shipping to carry the Spaniards from Riga to Spain. There never were enough ships. And there was also the question of the moral effect on the garrison of Riga if they were to see this seasonable reinforcement which had dropped from the clouds, so to speak, shipped away again as soon as it arrived. Yet on the other hand there was a chance that Russia might make peace with Bonaparte, and in that case the sooner these Spaniards were beyond the clutches of either country the better. Five thousand men would make a considerable army in Spain — where the Spaniards were likely to do their best — while it was only a trifling force in this continental war of millions. But none of this was of nearly as much importance as the moral side. What would be the effect on the other unwilling allies of Bonaparte, the Prussians and the Austrians, the Bavarians and the Italians, when they heard not merely that a national contingent had fought its way to join the allies, but had been received with open arms, fêted and made much of, and finally shipped back to their native land with the least possible delay? Hornblower expected a tremendous revulsion of feeling among Bonaparte's satellites, especially if the Russians executed their determination to keep on fighting through the winter. This might be the beginning of the crumbling of Bonaparte's Empire.

"I shall be very happy to send you and your men to Spain as quickly as it can be arranged," he said. "I will issue orders to-day for shipping to be collected."

The Conde was profuse in his thanks, but Hornblower had something to add.

"There is one thing I ask in return," he said, and the Conde's countenance fell a little.

"What is it, sir?" he asked. The embittered suspicion resulting from years of being a victim of international double-dealing, of lies and deception and threats — from Godoy's pitiful subterfuges to Bonaparte's mailed-fisted bullying — showed instantly in his face.

"Your signature to a proclamation, that is all. I shall endeavour to circulate among Bonaparte's other forced allies the news of your joining the cause of liberty, and I would like you to attest its truth."

The Conde darted one more keen look at Hornblower before he agreed.

"I will sign it," he said.

That immediate consent was a pretty compliment, first to Hornblower's obvious honesty of purpose, and second to the reputation the Navy had acquired of always fulfilling its engagements.

"There is nothing more to be done, then," said Hornblower, "save to draw up the proclamation and to find ships for your forces."

Essen was fidgeting in his saddle beside them while this conversation was going on in Spanish; he clearly knew no word of that language and was restless in consequence — Hornblower found it gratifying, for during the past few months he had had to be an uncomprehending listener to so many conversations in Russian and German. This was some slight revenge.

"Has he told you about conditions in Bonaparte's army?" asked Essen. "Have you heard about the hunger and the disease?"

"Not yet," said Hornblower.

The story came out rapidly, staccato, drawn from the Conde's lips by explosive promptings from Essen.

Bonaparte's army had been dying on its feet long before it reached Moscow; hunger and disease had thinned its ranks as Bonaparte hurried it by forced marches across the desolated plains.

"The horses are nearly all dead already. There was only green rye to give them," said the Conde.

If the horses were dead it would be impossible to drag supplies in to the main body of the army; it would have to scatter or starve, and as long as the Russians had any sort of army in existence it would be impossible for the main body to scatter. As long as Alexander's nerve held, as long as he maintained the struggle, there was still hope. It began to seem certain that Bonaparte's army in Moscow had spent its strength, and the only way

in which the French could bring fresh pressure upon Alexander would be by advancing upon St Petersburg with the army here before Riga. That made it more imperative still to hold on here. Hornblower felt considerable doubt as to Alexander's constancy if he were to lose both his capitals.

The wretched Spanish infantry had been standing presenting arms during all this long conversation, and Hornblower felt uncomfortable about them. He let his attention wander to them obviously, recalling the Conde to a sense of his duty. The Conde gave an order to his staff, and the colonels repeated it; the regiments ordered arms awkwardly and then stood easy, the latter to the manner born.

"His Excellency tells me," said the Conde, "that you have recently served in Spain, sir. What is the news of my country?"

It was not easy to give a thumbnail sketch of the complicated history of the Peninsula for the last four years, to a Spaniard who had been cut off from all news during that time. Hornblower did his best, glossing over the innumerable Spanish defeats, laying stress on the devotion and efficiency of the guerrilleros, and ending on a hopeful note as he told of Wellington's recent capture of Madrid. The Spanish staff pressed more and more closely round him as he spoke. For four long years, ever since the Spanish people had declared their will, ceasing to be subservient allies and becoming the most bitter enemies of the Empire, Bonaparte had seen to it that these Spanish troops of his, three thousand miles from home, had received not a single word which might tell them of the real situation in Spain. They had had only the lying Imperial bulletins on which to base their vague theories. It was a strange experience to talk to these exiles; Hornblower felt a curious sensation, as if there were an actual movement inside his brain, as he remembered the conditions in which he himself had learned of the Spanish change of front. That had been on the deck of the *Lydia*, in the uncharted tropical Pacific. For a few seconds his brain was a battleground of memories. The blue and gold of the Pacific, the heat and the storms and the fighting there, el Supremo and the Governor of Panama — he had to tear himself away from them to bring himself back to this parade ground on the shores of the Baltic.

An orderly officer was galloping madly towards them, the dust flying from beneath the ringing hoofs of his charger. He reined up before Essen with a perfunctory salute, the words of his message pouring from his lips before his hand had left his forehead. A word from the Governor sent him flying back whence he came, and Essen turned to Hornblower.

"The enemy is massing in his trenches," he said. "They are about to assault Daugavgriva."

Essen began blaring orders to his staff; horses wheeled and pranced as spurs were struck into their sides and the cruel bits dragged their heads round. In a moment half a dozen officers were galloping in different directions with the messages flung at them.

"I'm going there," said Essen.

"I shall come too," said Hornblower.

Hornblower found it hard to stay in the saddle as his excited horse swung round beside the Governor's; he had to resettle himself, his hand on the pommel, and regain his lost stirrup as they clattered along. Essen turned his head with another order shouted to one of the few remaining orderlies accompanying them, and then spurred his horse yet again; as the brute sprang forward with increased speed the low muttering of the bombardment increased in intensity. They clattered through the streets of Riga, and the timber road-bed of the boat bridge roared under their horses' hoofs. The sweat was running from Hornblower's face in the clear autumn sunshine, his sword leaped against his thigh, and time and again his cocked hat rode precariously up his forehead and was only saved by a hurried grab at the last moment. Hornblower was conscious of the swirling water of the Dwina as they crossed the bridge, and then on his right land as they galloped along the quays. The roar of the bombardment grew louder and louder, and then suddenly died away.

"It is the moment of the assault!" bellowed Essen, bending his clumsy body forward in an effort to get more speed out of his labouring horse.

Now they were in the village itself, among the ruins of the cottages, and here they met broken troops, stumbling back pell-mell, blue uniforms grey with dust, with cursing officers trying to rally them, and beating the stupefied men with the flats of their swords. Essen's voice blared out again, like a tuneless trumpet; he was waving his sword over his head and spurring forward into the press. At the sight of him the men began to rally, turning back to face the enemy, and instinctively closing together into line.

Down through the ruins came a disordered column of the enemy — it must have come up over the breach like a whirlwind. By now it was more of a mob than a column, officers capering at the head of their men, waving their hats and swords. A standard waved over them. The appearance of a formed line caused a momentary hesitation, and ragged firing broke out on both sides; Hornblower saw one of the capering officers fall dead as he called to his men to come on. He looked over at Essen, but he was still towering high in the smoke. Hornblower wheeled his horse towards the flank; his mind was working with the ecstatic speed of excitement, bullets were singing by him, and he knew that this was the crisis of the assault. Halt an attacking column for one moment, and then any trifle might turn the scale, and it would go back as fast as it had advanced. He reached the door of the church just as a flood of men came pouring out of it — the garrison of the building hastening to make good their retreat before they should be cut off and isolated. Hornblower tore his sword from its sheath, miraculously retaining his seat in the saddle.

"Come on!" he yelled, waving the weapon.

They did not understand his words, as they blinked at this vision in blue and gold before them, but anyone could understand his gestures. At the back of the group Hornblower caught a momentary glimpse of Clausewitz and Diebitch, who should have taken command here, but there was no time for argument, and racing through Hornblower's brain went the conviction at the same time that although they might be scientific soldiers they would be useless in a physical rough-and-tumble like this.

"Come on!" yelled Hornblower again, pointing with his sword at the flank of the assaulting column.

They turned to follow him — no one could have resisted the inspiration of his example and gestures. Column and line were still exchanging ragged volleys, the column still moving forward little by little, the line wavering and falling back.

"Form line!" yelled Hornblower, turning in his saddle, his spread arms and gesticulating fists telling the Russians what he wanted them to do. "Load your muskets!"

They formed their line, marching up after him, hands busy with their ramrods — a couple of hundred men at most, jostling each other as they stumbled over the ruins of the cottages. Now they were right on the flank of the column; Hornblower saw faces turn towards them. He was even near enough to see surprise and dismay in the attitudes of the men who suddenly realized that a new force was about to assail their flank.

"Fire!" yelled Hornblower, and some sort of volley crashed out from the ragged line he led.

He saw two ramrods sail forward in soaring arcs, fired out of their muskets by excited men who had been caught in the act of loading by his order, and who had incontinently put their weapons to their shoulders and pulled their triggers. One ramrod buried itself like an arrow in the body of a French soldier. The column wavered and staggered — not one man in a hundred there had expected this attack on the flank; all their attention had been taken up by Essen's line in front of them.

"Charge!" yelled Hornblower, waving his sword and urging his horse forward.

The Russians followed him with a cheer; the whole column of the enemy, Hornblower saw, was wavering and melting away, the disordered ranks crumbling. They were turning their backs, and the memory streaked through his excited mind of a saying he had heard somewhere to the effect that the knapsacks of the enemy were the most cheering sight a soldier could behold. Then he saw one of the enemy swing back again and level his musket at him. As the smoke gushed from the barrel his horse gave a convulsive leap and then put his nose to the ground and somersaulted; for a moment Hornblower felt himself flying through the air; he was too excited and exalted to feel any fear, so that the crash with which he hit the earth came as a startling surprise to him. But even though the breath was dashed from his body and the jar shook every bone in it, his fantastic mind still thought clearly, and he heard and felt the flank attack which he had led sweep cheering over him. Only when he rose to his feet did he come to the sudden realization that he was bruised and weak, so that it was hard to balance on his legs — they nearly gave way under him as he hobbled forward to pick up his sword which lay shining on the dusty earth between two dead men.

He felt suddenly alone, but the feeling had hardly time to take hold of him when he was engulfed in a wave of humanity, Essen and his staff roaring with exaltation and delight. He stood there, bruised and torn, his sword dangling from his hand, as they overwhelmed him with incomprehensible congratulations. One of the officers leaped down from his horse, and Hornblower was hauled and pushed up into the saddle, and they cantered forward, the horses picking their way delicately over the dead and wounded, over the tortured ground,

towards the ramparts. The last remnants of the assaulting forces were being driven back through the breach to the accompaniment of a straggling musketry fire. As they neared the fortifications the guns of the foiled besiegers re-opened fire, and a shot or two came howling overhead, Essen reined up, like a sensible man, and then walked his horse out of the line of fire.

"That was a moment to remember," he said, looking round at the area where the clash had occurred. Hornblower's head was still clear. He realized what a bitter blow this reverse must be to the besiegers. After all the fierce preliminary fighting they had sapped up to the ramparts, made their breach, and launched the assault which should have captured the place, only to be flung back when the breach was in their hands. He knew that Macdonald would have the greatest difficulty in inducing his men to assault again — a bloody failure like this would make them sulky and grudging of their lives. Certainly Macdonald would have to allow a considerable time to elapse, and would have to continue his battering for several more days, and multiply his approaches and parallels, before he could risk another assault. Maybe the town would hold. Maybe that attack would be the last. Hornblower felt prophetic, inspired. He remembered how he had heard the news of Massena's retreat from before Lisbon — that had been the first of the ebb of the Empire in the South, and now Wellington was in Madrid and threatening France. Maybe Riga would mark the limits of the Empire in the North. Maybe that penetration through the breach would be remembered as the farthest north Bonaparte's men would ever attain. At that rate — Hornblower's pulse beat quicker — the flank attack he had led, that unforeseen charge of a couple of hundred men hurriedly gathered up in the tumult, had been the blow which had thwarted Bonaparte's schemes to conquer the world. That was what he had done. And it would look extraordinarily well in *The Times* that 'Commodore Sir Horatio Hornblower, K.B., had his horse killed under him while leading a charge.' Barbara would be pleased.

Exultation and inspiration ended abruptly, and Hornblower felt suddenly weak and ill. He knew that if he did not dismount quickly he would fall from his saddle. He took hold of the pommel and kicked his right foot clear of the stirrup, swung his leg over, and then as his feet touched ground the ground came up to meet him. He only recovered some indefinite number of minutes later, to find himself seated on the ground, his stock unbuckled, and his face clammy with cold sweat. Essen was bending anxiously over him, and someone, apparently a surgeon, was kneeling at his side. His sleeve was oiled up above the elbow, and the surgeon, lancet in hand, as about to open a vein to bleed him. Hornblower withdrew his arm abruptly, for he did not want to be touched by that thing, nor by those hands which were black with other men's blood.

The assembled staff raised their voices in protest, but Hornblower disregarded them with the sublime abstraction of a sick man. Then Brown appeared, cutlass at his side and pistols in his belt, followed by other members of the barge's crew. Apparently he had seen his captain ride over the bridge, and, like the good subordinate he was, had brought the boat across after him. Brown's face was contorted with anxiety, and he threw himself, too, on his knees beside Hornblower.

"Wounded, sir? Where is it? Can I —"

"No, no, no," said Hornblower pettishly, pushing Brown away and getting to his feet, swaying. "It's nothing." It was extraordinarily maddening to see a look of admiration come over Brown's face. Anyone would think he was being heroic instead of merely sensible. Not far away — at the foot of the breach, apparently — a trumpet was pealing, high challenging notes, and this served to distract the crowd from their solicitude. Everyone looked in the direction of the sound, and presently a group of Russian officers approached them, leading a blindfold figure dressed in the blue trimmed with grey astrakhan of the French Imperial Staff. A word from Essen removed the bandage, and the officer — he wore a grey Hussar moustache — saluted with dignity. "The chef d'escadron Verrier," he said, "aide-de-camp to Marshal the Duke of Tarentum. I am ordered by the Marshal to suggest a suspension of hostilities for two hours. The breach is covered with the wounded of both sides, and it would be only humane to remove them. Each side can remove its own."

"There are more French and German wounded than Russian, I am sure," said Essen, in his horrible French.

"French or Russian, sir," said the parlementaire, "they will die unless they receive speedy aid."

Hornblower's mind was beginning to work again. Ideas were leaping to the surface like wreckage from a sunken ship. He caught Essen's eye and nodded meaningly, and Essen, like a good diplomatist, gave no sign of having received the hint as he shifted his glance back to Verrier.

"The request is granted, sir," he said, "in the name of humanity."

"I thank Your Excellency, in the name of humanity," said Verrier, saluting, and then looking round for someone to blindfold him again and lead him through the breach.

The moment he was gone Hornblower turned to Brown.

"Take the barge back to the ship," he ordered. "Hurry. My compliments to Captain Bush, and I would like you to bring back Lieutenant von Bulow to me. One of the lieutenants of equal rank will have to accompany him. Hurry!"

"Aye aye, sir."

That was all that was necessary with Brown or Bush, thank God. A simple order brought simple yet intelligent obedience. Hornblower saluted Essen.

"Would it be possible, Your Excellency," he asked, "to bring the Spanish troops over to this side of the river? I have a German prisoner whom I am going to return to the enemy, and I should like him to see the Spaniards with his own eyes first."

Essen grinned with blubber lips.

"I do my best not merely to comply with every one of your wishes, sir, but even to anticipate them. The last order I gave on the other side of the river was for the Spaniards to be brought over — they were the nearest formed troops and I intended to use them as garrison for the warehouses on the quay. I have no doubt they are there already. You would like them marched in this direction?"

"If you would be so kind, sir."

Hornblower was casually waiting for nothing in particular at the jetty when the boat touched at it, and Lieutenant von Bulow, of the Fifty-first Regiment of Prussian Infantry, stepped ashore under the escort of Mr Tooth and Brown and his men.

"Ah, Lieutenant," said Hornblower.

Bulow saluted him stiffly, clearly puzzled at this new development, which had snatched him from his confinement aboard ship and dumped him at a moment's notice in the ruined village.

"There is an armistice at the moment," explained Hornblower, "between your army and ours. No, it is not peace — merely to clear the wounded from the breach. But I was going to take this opportunity of returning you to your friends."

Bulow looked questions at him.

"It will save much formality with cartels and flags of truce," explained Hornblower. "At this moment you have merely to walk down the breach and join the men of your own army. Naturally, you have not been properly exchanged, but you can, if you wish, give me your word that you will not serve against his Britannic Majesty nor against His Imperial Russian Majesty until an exchange has been effected."

"I give you my word," said Bulow, after a moment's thought.

"Excellent! Then perhaps I might give myself the pleasure of walking with you as far as the breach?"

As they left the jetty and began the brief walk through the ruins of the village Bulow was darting the quick glances of a professional soldier about him; he was perfectly entitled, under any military code, to take every advantage of carelessness on his enemy's part. His professional curiosity would have led him to stare about him in any case. Hornblower made polite conversation as they strolled.

"Your assault this morning — I daresay you heard the hubbub even on board? — was made by picked grenadiers, as far as I could judge by the uniforms. Most excellent troops — it is indeed a pity they suffered such loss of life. I trust that when you rejoin your friends you will convey to them my deepest condolences. But they had not a chance, of course."

At the foot of the church tower there was a Spanish regiment, the men lying down in their ranks. At the sight of Hornblower the colonel called his men to their feet and saluted.

Hornblower returned the salute, conscious as he did so that Bulow at his side had, suddenly changed his gait; stealing a glance out of the tail of his eye he saw that Bulow was ponderously goose-stepping as long as the salutes were being exchanged. Yet it was very noticeable that even though Bulow's formal training forced him into a goose-step at a moment of military courtesy, he had not failed to notice the troops. His eyes were bulging with unasked questions.

"Spanish troops," said Hornblower, casually. "A division of Spaniards and Portuguese joined us from Bonaparte's main army a little while ago. They fight well — in fact they were responsible for the final repulse

of the last assault. It is interesting to notice how Bonaparte's dupes are falling away from him now that the hollowness of his power is revealed."

Bulow's astonished reply must either have been inarticulate or in German, for Hornblower could not understand it, but his tone conveyed his meaning well enough.

"It goes without saying," said Hornblower casually, "that I would like to see the magnificent Prussian Army ranged among Bonaparte's enemies and England's allies, too. But naturally your King knows his own policy best — unless, of course, surrounded as he is by Bonaparte's men, he is not free to choose."

Bulow stared at him in amazement; Hornblower was putting forward a viewpoint which was quite new to him, but Hornblower still made himself talk with the utmost casualness, as if he were doing no more than making polite conversation.

"That's high politics," he said with a laugh and a wave of his hand. "But one day in the future we might look back on this conversation as prophetic. One cannot tell, can one? Some time when we meet as plenipotentiaries I will be able to remind you of this talk. And here we are at the breach. It irks me to have to say goodbye, at the same moment as it gives me pleasure to restore you to your friends. My heartiest good wishes, sir, for you for the future."

Bulow saluted stiffly again, and then, as Hornblower held out his hand, shook hands with him. To the Prussian it was a remarkable occurrence for a Commodore to condescend to shake hands with a mere subaltern. He picked his way down the breach, over the tortured earth where the stretcher-bearers still swarmed, like disturbed ants, gathering in the wounded. Hornblower watched him until he reached his own men, and then turned away. He was dreadfully tired, quite weak with fatigue, in fact, and he was angry at himself for his weakness. It was all he could do to walk back with dignity to the jetty, and he swayed as he sat in the sternsheets of his barge.

"Are you all right, sir?" asked Brown, solicitously.

"Of course I am," snapped Hornblower, amazed at the man's impertinence.

The question irritated him, and the irritation made him mount the ship's side as fast as he could, and acknowledge merely coldly the salutes he received on the quarter-deck; down in his cabin his irritation persisted, and prevented him from obeying his first impulse to throw himself across his cot and relax. He paced about for a moment. For something to do he peered into the mirror. There was some excuse for Brown after all, and his foolish questions. The face he looked at was grimy with dust caked upon sweat, and there was a smear of blood over one cheekbone from a slight scratch. His uniform was filthy, with one epaulette awry. He looked like someone who had just emerged from the fury of a battle to the death.

He peered more closely. That face was lined and drawn, the eyes red-rimmed; with a sudden increase of attention he looked again, turning his head. On his temples his hair was quite white. Not merely did he look like someone fresh from battle; he looked like someone who had been under frightful strain for a long time. So he had, indeed, he realized, half wondering at himself. He had been bearing the burden of this horrible siege for months now. It had never occurred to him that his face, Hornblower's face, would tell tales about him as other men's faces told tales about them. He had striven all his life to restrain his features from revealing his feelings. There was something ironic and interesting about the fact that he could not prevent his hair from greying nor the grim lines from deepening about his mouth.

The desk under his feet was swaying, as if the ship were in the open sea, and yet even his veteran sea-legs had difficulty in keeping him upright, so that he had to hold on to the bracket before him. Only with extreme care could he let go his hold and pick his way to his cot, and fall across it, face downward.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The new problem which Hornblower was debating as he walked his quarter-deck, while H.M.S. *Nonsuch* swung at anchor in Riga Bay, was one which he had long foreseen, but which lost none of its urgency for all that. Here was winter coming; there had been heavy frosts at night for as far back as he could remember, and the last two days had brought flurries of snow, which had temporarily whitened the landscape and had left a few drifts

which even now showed as white streaks on the northern faces of the dykes. The days were growing short and the nights long, and the brackish water of Riga Bay was covered with a thin scum of ice. If he stayed much longer his ships would be frozen in. Essen had assured him that for at least two more weeks he would be able to make his exit along a channel sawn in the ice by labourers whom Essen would supply, but Hornblower was not so sure. A northerly gale — and one might arise at any moment — could keep him wind-bound while at the same time it would freeze everything up and jam the narrow exit to the Bay, between Oesel and the mainland, with piled-up drift ice that neither saws nor even explosives could pierce. A squadron frozen in was a squadron immobilized until next spring; and a squadron frozen in was one which was a certain prey to the French if Riga should fall. Twenty years ago a Dutch squadron at Amsterdam had been captured by French hussars charging over the ice. What a thundering bulletin of triumph Bonaparte would make of it if a British squadron, under the notorious Commodore Hornblower, should fall into his hands in the same way! Hornblower turned in his stride a yard before he had reached the limit of his walk. Prudence dictated an immediate withdrawal.

The breechings of that carronade were frayed. When Bush noticed it someone was in for a bad quarter of an hour. And yet he could not withdraw. When he had mentioned the possibility Essen had shown positive dismay. If his men were to see the British ships go away they would be quite sure the place was doomed. They would lose heart completely. The British naval officer who had led the final charge at Daugavgriva had grown into a legendary figure in their minds, a mascot, a symbol of good luck. If he were to leave them that would be a proof, in the men's minds, that he had lost hope. He could not possibly withdraw. He might compromise; he might send most of the squadron out and retain only a sloop and a gunboat; he might send everything out and remain himself, but to separate himself from his command was in direct violation of the Articles of War. Here was a fool of a midshipman in his way dodging about in front of him as though bent on distracting him from his train of thought. It would be the masthead for him; God knew the commission had lasted long enough for every single person on board to have learned that the Commodore must not be distracted when he was walking the deck.

"What the hell — ?" he bellowed at the blenching midshipman.

"B-b-boat approaching, sir," stammered the youth. "M-Mr Hurst told me to tell you. He thinks the Governor's on board."

"Why wasn't I told before?" said Hornblower. "Have you sent for Captain Bush, Mr Hurst? Call the guard!"

"Aye aye, sir!" said Hurst, and Hornblower saw Bush appear on the quarter-deck as the words left Hurst's lips, and the marine guard was already forming up abaft the mizzen-mast.

Of course Hurst had done all these things without waiting for orders; roused abruptly from his reverie Hornblower had not had the sense to realize it. He strode to the side. The Governor was approaching in a big pulling-boat, which was steering towards them along the clear channel through the thin ice which the last eddies of the Dwina river still kept clear before they lost themselves in the Bay. As the Governor caught sight of him he sprang up into the sternsheets waving his cocked hat, he even tried to dance, precariously, both arms extended over his head, at imminent risk of falling overboard.

"Something's up, sir," said Bush at Hornblower's side.

"That looks like good news," said Hornblower.

The Governor arrived on the quarter-deck, hat still in hand. He flung his arms round Hornblower and hugged him, swinging his lean body up into the air so that his feet left the deck. Hornblower could imagine the grins that were being exchanged around him as he kicked in the air like a baby. The Governor put him down, clapped his hat on his head, and then seized first Hornblower's hand and then Bush's, and tried to dance a sort of ring-a-ring-of-roses with the two Englishmen. There was no more controlling him than one could control a bear.

"What is the news, Your Excellency?" asked Hornblower; Essen's grip on his hand was painful.

"Oh," said Essen, flinging the Englishman's hands away so as to spread his arms again. "Bonaparte has started to retreat."

"Has he, by God!" said Hornblower.

"What does he say, sir?" asked Bush, quite incapable of understanding Essen's French, but Hornblower had no time for Bush, because the Governor was pouring out his news in a torrent of gutturals, drawing upon the

vocabularies of half Europe for his words so that even Hornblower could hardly understand what he was saying.

"He left Moscow five days back," roared Essen. "We beat him at Malo-Jaroslavetz. Beat him in a pitched battle, and now he's running as hard as he can for Smolensk and Warsaw. And he won't get there before the snows! He'll be lucky if he gets there at all! Chichagov is marching hard to cut off his retreat at the Beresina. He's ruined. They're dying in thousands every night already! Nothing to eat, and winter's here!"

Essen stamped grotesquely about the deck, more like a dancing bear than ever.

"Please, sir, *please*. What does he say?" asked Bush pathetically.

Hornblower translated to the best of his ability, the other quarter-deck officers eavesdropping shamelessly. As the wonderful nature of the good news dawned upon them, they began to cheer; down on the main-deck they caught the infection, and all through the ship men were cheering and tossing their hats in the air, even though they hardly knew what they were cheering about, save for the hurried words that flew from lip to lip —

"Boney's beaten!"

"We can get out of this bay before the ice comes, by God!" said Bush, snapping his fingers; it was obvious that if he had not a wooden leg he would be dancing too.

Hornblower looked across at the mainland.

"Macdonald's shown no sign of retreating yet," he said. "If he had the Governor would have mentioned it."

"But don't you think he'll have to, sir?" Bush's expressive face showed anxiety now instead of joy. A moment before anything delightful had been possible — escape from Riga Bay, possibly even escape from this landlocked Baltic altogether, maybe even a return to England, but now Bush was back again to the cold reality that the siege of Riga was still going on.

"He may have to retreat," said Hornblower, "but until then we stay here, unless I receive orders to the contrary."

Essen caught sight of their sober faces and turned on them again. He slapped Bush on the back so that he staggered with the force of the blow; he snapped his fingers under Hornblower's nose, and pirouetted with the grace of a performing seal. It was absurd that with all this going on, with Bush asking questions regarding the future, with Essen acting like a lunatic, and with the whole ship forgetting discipline in a mad outburst of cheering, Hornblower's brain should be planning and thinking still, with that swift clarity and that fevered rapidity which he knew by now portended some new development. Bonaparte in retreat, Bonaparte beaten, meant a tremendous revulsion of feeling throughout Europe. All the world knew that Wellington was threatening France from the south; and now the Empire was in peril from the east. It would hardly be possible for Bonaparte's shattered army to hold on to Poland once it had begun its retreat; the next campaign would see the allies on the frontiers of Prussia and Austria, and it was likely that both Prussia and Austria would in that case be glad to change sides, The King of Prussia was practically a prisoner in French hands, but the Prussian army — the greater part of the force now besieging Riga — could act as a free agent if it wished. The desertion of the Spaniards had shown them the way, and the pamphlets which he had had printed in Riga and distributed among the besiegers by Russian pedlars would not let them forget the lesson. Bulow would be able to bear witness to the truth of his assertions — Hornblower was glad he had set him free.

"I am sending Diebitch out to beat up the besiegers' lines with a sally," Essen was saying. "I must see how *they* take this news. Would you care to accompany me, sir?"

"Of course," said Hornblower, coming out abruptly from his dreaming. What with fatigue — he was always weary now — and rapid thinking and excitement he was still a little 'mazy', as they said of fuddled men in the village when he was a boy. He announced his departure to Bush.

"You're worn out, sir," protested Bush. "You're no more than a shadow. Send someone else, sir. Send me. Send Duncan. You've done all that's necessary, sir."

"I haven't yet," said Hornblower, but he stooped so far as to risk delay by offering Essen refreshment, with the suggestion that they should drink a toast to celebrate this glorious news.

"Thank you, no," said Essen, to Hornblower's relief. "Diebitch will attack at dusk, and the days are short now."

"You'll take your barge, sir, won't you?" persisted Bush. "Take Brown."

Bush was like a fussy parent with a venturesome child — like a hen with one chick. He was always nervous about entrusting his precious Hornblower to these unpredictable Russians; Hornblower grinned at Bush's solicitude.

"Anything to keep you happy," he said.

Hornblower's barge followed the Governor's pulling-boat along the channel through the ice; Hornblower sat with the Governor in the stern of the Russian boat. There was a chill wind blowing, and the skies were grey.

"We shall have more snow," said Essen, looking up at the clouds. "God help the French."

In the absence of any sunshine there was a mortal chill in the air. Hornblower thought of the French marching over the desolate plains of Russia, and was sorry for them. And the snow came indeed, that afternoon, sweeping over river and village, making white innocuous mounds of the battered parapets and the shattered guns and the graves which were scattered through the village. It was already prematurely dark when the ever-patient Russian grenadiers lined the trenches and then sallied forth upon the enemy's lines. They were not more than half-way across no-man's-land before the guns began to fire upon them, stabbing the falling snow with their bright orange flashes.

"No sign of any retreat there," was Clausewitz's comment as he watched the fierce struggle from the gallery of the church beside Essen and Hornblower.

And if confirmation was needed the attacking party could supply it when it came drifting back in the darkness, decimated. The besiegers had met their sally with spirit; they had had patrols out in no-man's-land, and the trenches were adequately guarded. In retaliation, the besiegers opened fire with their breaching batteries; the ground shook to the rumble of the discharges, and the black night was stabbed again by the flames of the guns. It was impossible to maintain good aim or elevation in the darkness; it was only a short time before the shots were flying wild, all over the village, so that the defenders as far back as the Dwina river had to keep low in their trenches. Shells were coming over, too, curving in high arcs from the mortar batteries which the besiegers had established in their second parallel. They fell and burst here, there, and everywhere, one every two or three minutes, in fountains of fragments and flame, save when chance guided them into deeper snow which extinguished the fuses.

"They have plenty of ammunition to waste," grumbled Essen, shivering in his cloak.

"Perhaps they plan a counter-assault in the darkness," said Clausewitz. "I have kept the trenches fully manned in case they try it."

Immediately under Hornblower's gaze there was a battery of four heavy pieces, firing regular salvoes at short intervals. He noted the four bursts of flame over and over again, so that when there was a longer interval he was surprised first by the absence of sound and then by its unexpected coming. The flashes endured their brief moment, to be succeeded again by night, but Hornblower found himself wondering what difference there had been between this salvo and the last, apart from the longer interval which had preceded it. One flash — the right-hand one — had not been as distinct as the other three, longer and yet intense. Some error in loading, perhaps. Then came the next salvo, and only three flashes; the right-hand gun had not fired. Maybe it had 'unbushed' itself — blown out its vent fitting, as guns sometimes did. Another long interval, and then another salvo — two sharp flashes, and one longer one. The next salvo only two guns fired, and Hornblower realized what had been going on. He plucked at Essen's sleeve.

"They are destroying their guns over there," he said. "They are firing some shots at us while at each salvo they fire a shot against the trunnions of one of the guns. There were four guns over there, Your Excellency. Now — see — there are only two."

"Possibly," admitted Essen, staring into the darkness.

"The firing is dying away," agreed Clausewitz, "but perhaps they are only growing tired of wasting ammunition."

There was only one flash from the battery next time, and there was something clearly odd about it.

"The last gun in the battery," commented Essen. "Probably they burst it by overloading."

He trained his telescope in the darkness.

"Look over there at their main camps," he added. "Watch those fires. They seem to be burning brightly, but —"

Hornblower directed his gaze to the distant rows of camp-fires, sparkling very dimly in the thick night. He looked backwards and forwards along one of the rows, trying to keep track of them all. He thought he saw one fire wink and go out, but he could not be sure. His eyes were watering with the cold and with the strain, and as he rubbed them Essen shut his telescope with a snap.

"They are dying down," he said. "I'm sure of it, and no troops would allow their camp-fires to die down on a night like this. Clausewitz, get your men ready to attack again. Diebitch —"

The Governor began rapping out orders. Hornblower had a momentary feeling of pity for the Russian soldiers, huddled in their freezing trenches, dispirited by their recent repulse and losses, now ordered to go out again to what would seem to them to be certain disaster in the night. The wind suddenly shrieked down upon them, piercing him to the bone, despite the cloak he clutched round himself.

"Ere you are, sir," said Brown's voice unexpectedly in his ear. "I've brought you up a blanket. Let's put it round you under your cloak. And 'ere's your gloves, sir."

Deftly in the darkness Brown draped the blanket over him, so that his cloak held it down over his shoulders. It would look fantastic in daylight, but fortunately it was still dark. Hornblower was shivering, and he stamped his frozen feet in an endeavour to warm them.

"Aren't those men of yours *ever* going to attack, Clausewitz?" grumbled Essen. "What's the time? One o'clock? Send down to your brigadier and tell him I'll have him cashiered if he does not pull his men together for an immediate advance."

There was a long freezing interval, before the darkness before them was pricked by a few little pin-points of flame — musket-shots in the second parallel.

"Ha!" said Essen.

There was another long wait before the message came back. The sortie had found the advanced trenches abandoned save for a few posts. They were pushing forward now through the snow and the darkness towards the main camp.

"They're going, then," said Essen. "Have the cavalry paraded two hours before dawn. I'll catch their rear-guard at daylight. I want all troops across the river then. And now a glass of tea, for the love of God."

Warming himself at the fire burning on the flagged floor of the church, drinking hot tea through his chattering teeth, Hornblower looked round at these men of iron who showed no sign of fatigue and hardly any of cold. He himself was too chilled, and, oddly, too fatigued, to gain much benefit from the chance of resting for a couple of hours on the trusses of straw laid out beside the high altar, but Essen snored volcanically until the moment when his aide-de-camp shook him awake. Outside it was still dark, and colder than ever, when the horses were brought up to the church door for them to mount.

"I better come with you, sir," said Brown. "I got myself a 'orse."

How Brown had done that Hornblower could not imagine, seeing the difficulties of language. Hornblower supposed Brown had learned to ride in those incredibly distant days at Smallbridge. The cavalcade moved slowly in the darkness towards the Mitau suburb, the horses slipping and stumbling in the snow; Hornblower found himself wishing he had been able to retain his blanket when he mounted, for it was colder than ever in the faint grey light. Suddenly from far ahead of them came a sullen flat thud, and another, and another — field-guns firing a long way off.

"Diebitch is up to their rear-guard," said Essen. "Good!"

There was enough light now to reveal the desolation of their surroundings as they approached the deserted siege-works. They could look down into the littered trenches; there were the batteries, with the shattered siege-guns standing drunkenly at the embrasures, and here was a dead horse, lying on its back, its belly shrouded with snow, out of which its legs pointed stiffly at the grey sky. And here was the main camp, rows and rows of little huts; mostly only two or three feet high, with the dead remains of camp-fires already buried in snow. Outside one hut, larger than the others, lay a soldier swathed in the grey capote of the French Army. He was face downwards and not dead, for they saw his feet move.

"Have they been fighting here?" conjectured Essen, puzzled; there was no sign of blood.

Someone dismounted and turned him over; his face was mottled with mulberry-coloured marks, and his eyes, though open, were unseeing.

"Keep a way!" shouted one of the aides-de-camp suddenly. "That is the plague!"

Everyone drew away from the dying man, and then they realized that the plague was all around them. One of the huts was full of dead, another was full of the dying. Essen shook his horse into a trot, and the party jingled away.

"It is in our ranks already," said Essen to Hornblower. "Kladoff had ten cases in his division two days ago."

This, the first march in retreat of the invading army, was already finding out the weaklings. There were dead men, sick men, dying men alongside the track they were following, despite the fact that no fighting had taken place along it — Diebitch at the head of the pursuing force was on the Mitau road away on the left front, where the guns were still firing occasionally. When at last they reached the point where the track joined the high road the signs of real fighting began; dead and wounded soldiers, Russian, French, and German, where the Russian advance-guard had clashed with the rear-guard. Then they caught up with the Russian columns plodding sturdily up the road, and trotted past their interminable length, one division and then another; the men were silent with the exertion of stepping out as fast as their legs would carry them under their heavy knapsacks, and this ten miles of fast marching had greatly modified the first jubilation of pursuit.

"Macdonald has made a good retreat," said Clausewitz, "at the cost of leaving his sick and his guns behind. I wonder how long he will be able to keep this pace up?"

Hornblower did not trouble to enter into the discussion. Saddle soreness was making him abstracted, apart from his fatigue and his general feeling of *malaise*. But he had to be able to report to his government that he had followed up the retreating army for at least one march on its way back to Germany; it would be better if it were two or three. And there was something else. He wanted to catch up with the Prussians, even if it were the last thing he did — and it was odd that he had this feeling that it was the last thing he was ever going to do. His head was whirling, and there was something comforting about the knowledge that Brown was just back there with the mounted orderlies.

A messenger brought back news from the advance-guard, and Hornblower heard Clausewitz's explanation as if in a dream.

"The Prussians are making a stand at the fork in the roads ahead," he said. "They are covering the retreat while the other two army corps get away by the two roads."

It was strange that this was just what he was expecting, as if it were a story he had already heard being retold.

"The Prussians!" he said, and without willing it he pressed his legs against his horse's sides to urge it to a faster pace towards where the flat reports of the guns showed where the Prussians were holding back the advance-guard. The headquarters party was clear of the main body now, trotting along the deeply-rutted road, hemmed in here by a dense wood of coniferous trees. Beyond the wood the desolate landscape opened up to reveal a low ridge up which the road mounted ahead of them. On either side of the road here a brigade of the Russian advance-guard was halted, a battery of artillery was in action, and up on the ridge could be seen the Prussian infantry columns, black blocks against grey fields. Over on the right a grey-clad Russian column was plodding across country to turn the flank of the position, while between the two forces Russian horsemen — Cossacks — trotted in ones and twos on their shaggy ponies, their long lances vertical at their sides. A watery sun broke through the clouds at this moment, seeming merely to accentuate the gloominess of the landscape. A general came up to salute Essen, but Hornblower did not want to listen to what he had to say. He wanted to press forward towards the Prussians, and as the horses of the party followed the example of his own they moved steadily up the road, Essen half unconscious of the movements of his horse as he listened to the general's report. He was only recalled to his surroundings by the howl of a cannon-shot which pitched at the roadside near him, throwing snow and earth in all directions.

"What do we think we're doing?" he asked. "We'll be getting ourselves shot in a moment."

Hornblower was staring forward at the Prussian army, at the glitter of bayonets and the flags black against the snow.

"I want to go up to the Prussians," he said.

The discharge of the battery close at hand drowned the words Essen said in reply, but what he meant to say was plain enough.

"I am going," said Hornblower stubbornly. He looked round and caught Clausewitz's eye. "Are you coming too, Colonel?"

"Of course he cannot," expostulated Essen. "He cannot risk being taken."

As a renegade, a man fighting against his own country, Clausewitz was likely to be hanged if ever the Prussians laid hands on him.

"It would be better if he came," said Hornblower, woodenly.

This was a strange feeling of simultaneous clairvoyance and illness.

"I'll go with the Commodore," said Clausewitz suddenly, making what was probably the bravest decision of his life. Perhaps he was carried away by Hornblower's automaton-like recklessness.

Essen shrugged his shoulders at this madness which had descended upon them.

"Go, then," he said. "Perhaps I may be able to capture enough generals to exchange for you."

They trotted forward up the road; Hornblower heard Essen bellow an order to the battery commander to cease fire. He looked back; Brown was trotting after them, a respectful five lengths behind. They passed close to some of the Cossack light horse, who looked at them curiously, and then they were in among Prussian skirmishers, who, from the shelter of rocks and inequalities in the ground, were taking long shots at the Cossacks. No one fired at them as they rode boldly through. A Prussian captain beside the road saluted them, and Clausewitz returned the salute. Just beyond the skirmishing line was the first formed infantry, a Prussian regiment in battalion columns of companies, two on one side of the road and one on the other. The colonel and his staff were standing in the road staring at the odd trio approaching them — the British naval officer in his blue and gold, Clausewitz in his Russian uniform with the row of medals, and the British seaman with cutlass and pistols at his belt. The colonel asked a question in a loud dry tone as they approached, and Clausewitz answered it, reining in.

"Tell them we must see the general," said Hornblower in French to Clausewitz.

There was a rapid exchange of dialogue between Clausewitz and the colonel, ending in the latter calling up two or three mounted officers — his adjutant and majors, perhaps — to accompany them up the road. Here they saw a larger infantry force formed up, and a line of guns, and here was a party on horseback, the feathers and braid and medals and mounted orderlies indicating the presence of a general's staff. This must be the general — Yorck, Hornblower remembered his name to be. He recognized Clausewitz at once, and addressed him abruptly in German. A few words on each side seemed only to add to the tension of the situation, and there was a short pause.

"He speaks French," said Clausewitz to Hornblower, and they both turned and waited for him to speak.

"General," said Hornblower; he was in a dream, but he made himself speak in his dream. "I represent the King of England, and Colonel Clausewitz represents the Emperor of Russia. We are fighting to free Europe from Bonaparte. Are you fighting to maintain him as a tyrant?"

It was a rhetorical question to which no answer was possible. Silent perforce, Yorck could only await the rest of what Hornblower had to say.

"Bonaparte is beaten. He is retreating from Moscow, and not ten thousand of his army will reach Germany. The Spaniards have deserted him, as you know. So have the Portuguese. All Europe is turning upon him, having found out how little his promises mean. You know of his treatment of Germany — I need not tell you about that. If you fight for him you may keep him on his tottering throne for a few days longer. You may drag out Germany's agony by that length of time. But your duty is to your enslaved country, to your King who is a prisoner. You can free them. You can end the useless pouring-out of the blood of your men now, at this moment."

Yorck looked away from him, over the bleak countryside, at the Russian army slowly deploying, before he replied.

"What do you suggest?" he said.

That was all Hornblower wanted to hear. If Yorck was willing to ask questions, instead of immediately making prisoners of them, the matter was as good as settled. He could leave the discussion to Clausewitz, and sink back into the weariness which was rising round him like a tide. He brought Clausewitz into the conversation with a glance.

"An armistice," said Clausewitz. "An immediate suspension of hostilities. The definitive terms can be settled easily enough at leisure."

Yorck still hesitated for a moment. Hornblower, despite his weariness and illness, could study him with a renewed flicker of interest; the hard face, sunburned to mahogany, the white hair and moustache in strange

contrast. Yorck was on the edge of his fate. At present he was a loyal subject of the King of Prussia, a comparatively undistinguished general. He had only to say two words, and they would make him a traitor now and conceivably an historic figure in the future. Prussia's defection — at any rate, the defection of the Prussian army — would reveal the hollowness of the Napoleonic Empire in a way nothing else could do. It rested with Yorck.

"I agree," said Yorck.

That was all Hornblower wanted to hear. He could lapse into his dream — his nightmare — now, let the rest of the discussion take whatever course it would. When Clausewitz turned back down the road Hornblower's horse followed him without any guidance from Hornblower. Brown appeared, just his face; there was nothing else that Hornblower could see.

"Are you all right, sir?"

"Of course I am," said Hornblower automatically. The earth that Hornblower found himself treading was soft, as though he were walking on feather beds or on a loosely stretched bit of sailcloth. It might be better to lie down. And Hornblower was suddenly conscious that there was something beautiful about music after all. He had gone all his life thinking that it was only an irritating muddle of noises, but revelation had come to him at last. It was lovely, ecstatic, this music that he heard, peals and peals of it, great soaring melodies. He had to raise up his voice to join in with it, to sing and sing and sing. And then the music ended in a final crashing chord, leaving a silence in which his voice sounded hoarse, like a crow's. He stopped, feeling rather embarrassed. It was as well that somebody else was available to take up the song. The boatman was singing as he pulled at his sculls.

"Row, row, row you together to Hampton Court —"

A delightful tenor voice; on account of it Hornblower was ready to excuse the wherryman for such an impertinence as singing while he rowed up the river.

"Rowing in sunshiny weather —"

Barbara beside him was laughing deliciously. The sunshine was beautiful and so were the green lawns on the river banks. He had to laugh too, laugh and laugh. And here was little Richard climbing over his knees. What the devil was Brown doing, staring at him like this?



Lord Hornblower

by C. S. FORESTER





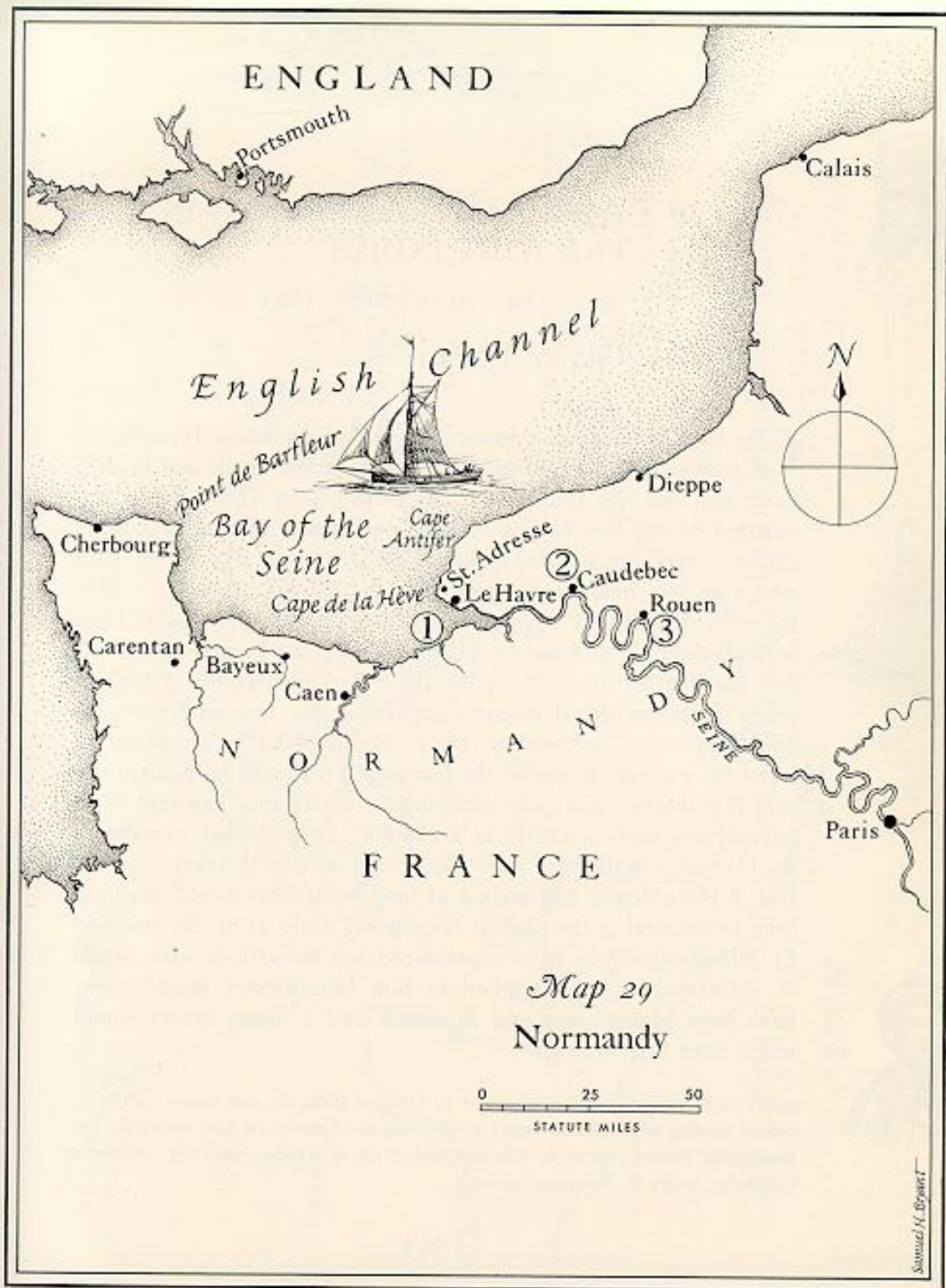
HORNBLOWER

LORD
HORNBLOWER



"Enthralling." —NEW YORK TIMES

C. S. FORESTER



Lord Hornblower

Chapters 1 to 16 October, 1813 to May, 1814
Map 29 - Normandy

① First sighting of *Flame*.

② Captain Bush killed.

③ News of the fall of the Empire.

Lord Hornblower

C. S. Forester
(1946)

CHAPTER I

The chapel stall of carved oak on which Sir Horatio Hornblower was sitting was most uncomfortable, and the sermon which the Dean of Westminster was preaching was deadly dull. Hornblower fidgeted like a child, and like a child he peered round the chapel and at the congregation to distract his mind from his physical troubles. Over his head soared the exquisite fan tracery of what Hornblower soberly decided was the most beautiful building in the world; there was something mathematically satisfactory in the way the spreading patterns met and re-met, a sort of inspired logic. The nameless workmen who had done that carving must have been far-sighted, creative men.

The sermon was still going on, and Hornblower feared that when it was finished there would be some more singing, more of those high-pitched noises from the surpliced choirboys which would distress him painfully again, more painfully than the sermon or the oaken stall. This was the price he had to pay for having a ribbon and star to wear, for being a Knight of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath; as he was known to be on sick leave in England — and fully convalescent — he could not possibly evade attendance at this, the most important ceremonial of the Order. Certainly the chapel looked effective enough, the dull sunshine which made its way through the windows being reflected and multiplied into a soul-stirring glow by the knights' crimson mantles and flashing orders. There was at least this to be said for this pomp and vanity; it was certainly beautiful in a strange, effective way, even without regard to historical associations. Maybe the stall on which he sat had in earlier years caused the same discomfort to Hawke or Anson; maybe Marlborough, in crimson and white similar to his own, had fidgeted and fretted through a similar sermon.

The important-looking person over there with a silver gilt crown on his head and velvet tabard embroidered in the royal arms was merely Bath King-at-Arms, some well-connected fellow who had this well-paid sinecure and could doubtless comfort himself, while sitting through the sermon, with the thought that he was earning his living by doing so once a year. Beside him was the Prince Regent, the Sovereign of the Order, his scarlet face at odds with the crimson of his mantle. And there were soldiers, generals and colonels, with whose faces he was unfamiliar. But elsewhere in the chapel there were men with whom he was proud to share the brotherhood of the Order — Lord St. Vincent, huge and grim, the man who took his fleet down into the heart of a Spanish squadron twice its strength; Duncan, who destroyed the Dutch Navy at Camperdown; and a dozen more of admirals and captains, some of them even junior to him in the Navy List — Lydiard, who captured the *Pomona* off Havannah; Samuel Hood, who commanded the *Zealous* at the Nile; and Yeo, who stormed the fort at El Muro. There was something pleasant and heartwarming at being a member of the same chivalrous Order as men like these — ridiculous, but true. And there were three times as many heroes as these, brother-knights also still at sea (for the ones present here were only those with shore appointments or on leave) making the final desperate effort to tear down the Napoleonic Empire. Hornblower felt a surge of patriotic emotion within him; his spirit soared, and then he incontinently began to analyse this wave of emotion and to wonder how much of it was due to the romantic beauty of his surroundings.

A uniformed naval lieutenant had made his way into the chapel, and stood hesitating for a moment before discovering Lord St. Vincent and hastening to him, offering him the large despatch (whose seals were already broken) which he held in his hand. No one was paying any attention to the sermon now — the cream of the Royal Navy were all craning round, peering at St. Vincent as he read the despatch, which had clearly arrived from the Admiralty at the other end of Whitehall. The Dean's voice wavered, and then he rallied gamely, droning on to deaf ears, and ears which remained deaf for a long time, for St. Vincent, having read the

despatch through once without any change of expression in his craggy face, immediately turned back to the beginning and read it through again. St. Vincent who had so boldly risked the fate of England on a single prompt decision at the battle which gave him his title was nevertheless not a man to plunge hastily into action where there was time to think.

He finished his second reading, folded the despatch, and then swept his gaze round the chapel. Two score Knights of the Bath stiffened with excitement and hoped to catch his eye. St. Vincent rose to his feet and clasped his crimson cloak about him; he threw a word to the waiting lieutenant, and then, seizing his plumed hat, proceeded to hobble stiffly out of the chapel. Attention immediately transferred itself to the lieutenant, who was watched by every eye as he walked across the transept, and Hornblower stirred uncomfortably, his heart beating fast, as he realised that the lieutenant was beading straight for him.

"His Lordship's compliments, sir," said the lieutenant, "and he would like a word with you immediately."

Now it was Hornblower's turn to fasten his mantle and to remember to pick up his plumed hat. He must at all costs appear nonchalant, and give to the assembled Knights no chance to smile at him for appearing flustered at this summons from the First Lord. He must look as if he was accustomed to this sort of thing every day. He stepped negligently out of his stall; his sword made its way between his legs and only by the mercy of Providence was he saved from tumbling headlong. He recovered himself with a clatter of spurs and scabbard, and set himself to stalk with slow dignity down the aisle. Every eye was on him; the Army officers present must be feeling merely a disinterested curiosity, but the Navy — Lydiard and the others — must be wondering what new fantastic turn the naval war had taken, and envying him the adventures and distinction which must await him. At the back of the chapel, in the seats reserved for the privileged public, Hornblower caught sight of Barbara making her way out of her pew to meet him. He smiled nervously at her — he could not trust himself to speak with all those eyes on him — and gave her his arm. He felt the firm touch of her hand upon it, and heard her clear, incisive voice; of course Barbara would not be awed by the fact that everyone was watching them.

"Further trouble, I suppose, dear?" said Barbara.

"I suppose so," mumbled Hornblower.

Beyond the door St. Vincent was awaiting them, the little wind tossing the ostrich feathers of his hat and ruffling the crimson cloak of silk. His massive legs bulged the white silk trunk hose; and he was pacing up and down on huge, gouty, deformed feet that distorted the white silk shoes. But the fantastic costume in no way detracted from the grim dignity of the man. Barbara slipped her arm out of Hornblower's and discreetly dropped back to allow the two men to converse in private.

"Sir?" said Hornblower, and then, remembering — he was not used yet to dealings with the peerage — "My lord?"

"You're ready for active service now, Hornblower?"

"Yes, my lord."

"You'll have to start tonight."

"Aye aye, sir — my lord."

"When they bring my damned coach up I'll take you to the Admiralty and give you your orders." St. Vincent lifted his voice in a bellow that had hailed the maintop in West Indian hurricanes. "Haven't they got those damned horses in *yet*, Johnson?"

St. Vincent caught sight of Barbara over Hornblower's shoulder,

"Your servant, ma'am" he said; he took off the plumed hat and held it across his breast as he bowed; age and gout and a lifetime at sea had not deprived him of the courtly graces, but the business of the country still had first call upon his attention, and he turned back immediately to Hornblower.

"What is the service, my lord?" asked the latter.

"Suppression of mutiny," said St. Vincent grimly. "Damned bloody mutiny. It might be '94 over again. Did you ever know Chadwick — Lieutenant Augustine Chadwick?"

"Midshipman with me under Pellew, my lord."

"Well, he's — ah, here's my damned coach at last. What about Lady Barbara?"

"I'll take my own carriage back to Bond Street," said Barbara, "and I'll send it back for Horatio at the Admiralty. Here it comes now."

The carriage, with Brown and the coachman on the box, drew up behind St. Vincent's coach, and Brown sprang down.

"Very good, then. Come on, Hornblower. Your servant, ma'am, again."

St. Vincent climbed in heavily, with Hornblower beside him, and the horses' hoofs clashed on the cobbles as the heavy vehicle crawled forward. The pale sunlight flickered through the windows on St. Vincent's craggy face as he sat stoop-shouldered on the leather seat; some urchins in the street caught sight of the gaily attired individuals in the coach and yelled 'Hooray', waving their tattered caps.

"Chadwick had *Flame*, eighteen-gun brig," said St. Vincent. "The crew's mutinied in the Bay of the Seine and are holding him and the other officers hostage. They turned a master's mate and four loyal hands adrift in the gig with an ultimatum addressed to the Admiralty. The gig made Bembridge last night, and the papers have just reached me — here they are."

St. Vincent shook in his gnarled hand the despatch and the enclosures which he had clasped since he received them in Westminster Abbey.

"What's the ultimatum, my lord?"

"Amnesty — oblivion. And hang Chadwick. Otherwise they turn the brig over to the French."

"The crazy fools!" said Hornblower.

He could remember Chadwick in the *Indefatigable*; old for a midshipman then, twenty years ago. He must be in his fifties now, and only a lieutenant. He had been a vile-tempered midshipman; after being passed over continually for promotion he must be a worse-tempered lieutenant. He could make a little vessel like the *Flame*, in which probably he was the only commissioned officer, a perfect hell if he wanted to. That might be the basis of the mutiny. After the terrible lessons of Spithead and the Nore, after Pigott had been murdered in the *Hermione*, some of the worst characteristics of the naval service had been eliminated. It was still a hard, cruel life, but not one to drive men into the suicidal madness of mutiny unless there were some special circumstances involved. A captain both cruel and unjust, a determined and intelligent leader among the men — that combination might make a mutiny. But whatever the cause, mutiny must be suppressed instantly, visited with extreme punishment. Smallpox or the plague were no more infectious and no more fatal than mutiny in a fighting service. Allow one mutineer to escape punishment, and he would be remembered by every next man with a grievance, and his example followed.

And England was at the very climax of her struggle with the French despotism. Five hundred ships of war at sea — two hundred of them ships of the line — were striving to keep the seas clear of enemies. A hundred thousand men under Wellington were bursting over the Pyrenees into southern France. And all the motley armies of eastern Europe, Russians and Prussians, Austrians and Swedes, Croats and Hungarians and Dutch, were being clothed and fed and armed by England's exertions. It seemed as if England could not put forth one single further effort in the struggle; even as if she must falter and break down under the dreadful strain. Bonaparte was fighting for his life, with all the cunning and ferocity one might expect of him. A few more months of constancy, a few more months of fierce exertion, might bring him crashing down and restore peace to a mad world; a moment's wavering, a breath of doubt, and tyranny might be clamped upon mankind for another generation, for uncounted generations to come.

The coach was wheeling into the Admiralty yard, and two wooden-legged naval pensioners were stumping out to open the doors. St. Vincent climbed out, and he and Hornblower, in their brilliant crimson and white silk, walked through to the First Lord's room.

"There's their ultimatum," said St. Vincent, throwing a paper upon the desk.

Written in a poor hand, was Hornblower's first mental note — not the work of some bankrupt tradesman or lawyer's clerk caught by the pressgang.

On board H.M.S. *Flame* off Havre
7th October 1813

We are all loyal hearts and true here, but Lieutenant Augustine Chadwick has flogged us and starved us, and has turned up all hands twice a watch for a month. Yesterday he said that today he would flog every third man of us and the rest of us as soon as the others was healed. So we have him under lock and key in his cabin, and there's a whip rove at the fore yardarm waiting for him for he ought to be strung up after what he did to the

boy James Jones, he killed him and we think he said in his report that he died of fever. We want their Lordships at the Admiralty to promise us to try him for his crimes and give us new officers and let bygones be bygones. We want to fight on for England's liberties for we are loyal hearts and true like we said but France is under our lee and we are all in this together and we are not going to be hanged as mutineers and if you try to take this vessel we shall run him up to the yardarm and go in to the French. We are all signing this.

Humbly and respectfully yours,

All round the margin of the letter were the signatures, seven of them, and several score of crosses, with a note against each cross — 'Henry Wilson, his mark'; 'William Owen, his mark', and so on; they indicated the usual proportion of literates and illiterates in an average ship's company. Hornblower looked up at St. Vincent when he finished examining the letter.

"Mutinous dogs," said St. Vincent.

Maybe they were, thought Hornblower. But they had a right to be, he also thought. He could imagine perfectly well the sort of treatment to which they had been subjected, the unending wanton cruelty added to the normal hardship of life in a ship on blockading service; miseries which only death or mutiny could bring to an end — no other way out at all.

Faced with the certainty of a flogging in the immediate future, they had risen in mutiny, and he could not blame them. He had seen enough backs cut to ribbons; he knew that he himself would do anything, literally anything, to avoid such torture for himself if he were faced with the prospect of it. His flesh crept as he made himself seriously consider how he would feel if he knew he were to be flogged next week. The men had moral right on their side; it was not a matter of justice, but one of expediency, that they should be punished for their justifiable crime. The national existence of the country depended greatly on seizing the mutineers, hanging the ringleaders, flogging the rest; cauterising before the disease could spread farther this new plague spot which had appeared in England's right arm. They must be hanged, morally innocent or not — it was a part of war, like the killing of Frenchmen who were possibly admirable husbands and fathers. But it would be as well not to let St. Vincent guess at his sentiments — the First Lord obviously hated mutineers just as mutineers, without troubling to think more deeply about their case.

"What orders do you have for me, my lord?" asked Hornblower.

"I'll give you *carte blanche*," replied St. Vincent. "A free hand. Bring *Flame* back safe and sound, and the mutineers along with her, and you can set about it any way you choose."

"You will give me full powers — to negotiate, for instance, my lord?"

"I didn't mean that, damn it," replied St. Vincent. "I meant you could have any force you asked for. I could spare you three ships of the line, if you want them. A couple of frigates. Bomb-vessels. There's even a rocket-vessel if you think you could use it — this fellow Congreve wants to see his rockets in action again."

"It doesn't appear to be the kind of situation in which great force would be of much use, my lord. Ships of the line would seem to be superfluous."

"I know that too, damn it." The struggle in St. Vincent's mind was evident in his massive face. "Those insolent rascals can slip into the Seine's mouth in two shakes of a duck's tail at the first sign of danger to themselves. It's brains that are needed here, I know. That's why I sent for *you*, Hornblower."

A nice compliment. Hornblower preened himself a little; he was talking here on terms almost of equality to one of the greatest admirals who had ever hoisted his flag, and the sensation was extraordinarily pleasant. And the internal pressure which was mounting inside the First Lord suddenly forced out of him a yet more astonishing statement.

"And the men like you, Hornblower," exploded St. Vincent. "Damn it, I don't know a man who doesn't. They'll follow you and listen to you. You're one of the officers the men talk about among themselves. They trust you and expect things of you — so do I, damn it, as you can see."

"But if I talk to the men it will imply that I am negotiating with them, my lord."

"No negotiations with mutineers!" blared St. Vincent, striking the desk with a fist like a leg of mutton. "We had enough of that in '94."

"Then the *carte blanche* that you give me is no more than the usual naval officer's orders, my lord," said Hornblower.

This was a serious matter; he was being sent out on an extremely difficult task, and would have to bear all the odium of failure should he be unsuccessful. He had never imagined himself bandying arguments with a First Lord, yet here he was actually doing so, impelled by sheer necessity. He realised in a moment of clairvoyance that he was not arguing on behalf of himself, after all; he was not trying to safeguard his own interests. He was debating purely impersonally; the officer who was to be sent out to recapture *Flame* and whose future might depend upon the powers given him was not the Hornblower sitting in this carved chair, dressed in crimson and white silk, but some poor devil he was sorry for and whose interests he had at heart because they represented the national interests. Then the two beings merged together again, and it was he, Barbara's husband, the man who had been at Lord Liverpool's dinner-party last night and had a slight ache in the centre of his forehead today in consequence, who was to go out on this unpleasant task, where not a ha'porth of glory or distinction was to be won and the gravest risk was to be run of a fiasco which might make him the laughing-stock of the Navy and an object of derision through the country.

He studied St. Vincent's expression again attentively; St. Vincent was no fool and there was a thinking brain behind that craggy brow — he was fighting against his prejudices, preparing to dispense with them in the course of his duty.

"Very well then, Hornblower," said the First Lord at length. "I'll give you full powers. I'll have your orders drawn up to that effect. You will hold your appointment as Commodore, of course."

"Thank you, my lord," said Hornblower.

"Here's a list of the ship's company," went on St. Vincent. "We have nothing here against any of them. Nathaniel Sweet, bos'un's mate — here's his signature — was first mate of a Newcastle collier brig once — dismissed for drinking. Maybe he's the ringleader. But it may be any of 'em."

"Is the news of the mutiny public?"

"No. And please God it won't be until the courtmartial flag is hoisted. Holden at Bembridge had the sense to keep his mouth shut. He put the master's mate and the hands under lock and key the moment he heard their news. *Dart's* sailing for Calcutta next week — I'll ship 'em out in her. It'll be months before the story leaks out." Mutiny was an infection, carried by words. The plague spot must be isolated until it could be cauterised. St. Vincent drew a sheaf of papers to himself and took up his pen — a handsome turkey-feather with one of the newfangled gold nibs.

"What force do you require?"

"Something handy and small," said Hornblower.

He had not the remotest idea how he was going to deal with this problem of recovering a vessel which had only to drop two miles to leeward to be irrecoverable, but his pride made him assume an appearance of self-confidence. He caught himself wondering if all men were like himself, putting on a brave show of moral courage when actually they felt weak and helpless — he remembered Suetonius' remark about Nero, who believed all men to be privately as polluted as himself although they did not admit it publicly.

"There's *Porta Coeli*," said St. Vincent, raising his white eyebrows. "Eighteen-gun brig — sister to *Flame*, in fact. She's at Spithead, ready to sail. Freeman's in command — he had the cutter *Clam* under your command in the Baltic. He brought you home, didn't he?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Would she serve?"

"I think so, my lord."

"Pellew's commanding the mid-Channel squadron. I'll send him orders to let you have any help you may request."

"Thank you, my lord."

Here he was, committing himself to a difficult — maybe an impossible — enterprise without any attempt to leave himself an avenue of retreat, neglecting utterly to sow any seed of future excuses which might be reaped to advantage in case of failure. It was utterly reckless of him, but that ridiculous pride of his, he knew, was preventing him. He could not use 'ifs' or 'buts' to men like St. Vincent or to any man at all, for that matter. He wondered if it was because the First Lord's recent compliments had gone to his head, or maybe it was because of the casual remark that he could 'request' help of Pellew, a Commander-in-Chief, who had been his

captain twenty years ago when he was a midshipman. He decided it was not either of these reasons. Just his nonsensical pride.

"Wind's nor'westerly and steady," said St. Vincent, glancing up at the dial which repeated the indications of the weather-vane on the Admiralty roof. "Glass is dropping, though. The sooner you're off the better. I'll send your orders after you to your lodgings — take this chance to say goodbye to your wife. Where's your kit?"

"At Smallbridge, my lord. Almost on the road to Portsmouth."

"Good. Noon now. If you leave at three; po'chaise to Portsmouth — you can't ride post with your sea-chest. Eight hours — seven hours, the roads aren't poached yet at this time o' year — you can be under way at midnight. I'll send Freeman his orders by post this minute. I wish you luck, Hornblower."

"Thank you, my lord."

Hornblower gathered his cloak round him, hitched up his sword, and took his leave. Before he had quitted the room a clerk had entered at the summons of St. Vincent's jangling bell to take dictation of his order. Outside the northwesterly wind of which St. Vincent had spoken blew freshly, and he felt chilled and forlorn in his gay crimson and white silk. But the carriage was there waiting for him, as Barbara had promised.

CHAPTER II

She was waiting for him when he arrived at Bond Street, steady of eye and composed of feature, as was to be expected of one of a fighting race. But she could only trust herself to say a single word.

"Orders?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Hornblower, and then gave vent to some of the powerful mixed emotions within him. "Yes, dear."

"When?"

"I sail tonight from Spithead. They're writing my orders now — I must leave as soon as they reach me here."

"I thought it would be like that, from the look on St. Vincent's face. So I sent off Brown to Smallbridge to pack your kit. It'll be ready for you when we get there."

Capable, farsighted, levelheaded Barbara! Yet "Thank you, dear" was all he could say. There were often these difficult moments even now, after all this time with Barbara; moments when he was overflowing with emotion (maybe that was the reason) and yet could not find words.

"May I ask where you are going, dear?"

"I cannot tell you if you do," said Hornblower, forcing a smile. "I'm sorry, dear."

Barbara would say no word to anyone, nor convey by any hint or sign upon what kind of mission he was setting out, but, all the same, he could tell her nothing. Then if news of the mutiny leaked out Barbara could not be held responsible; but that was not the real reason. It was his duty to keep silent, and duty allowed of no exceptions. Barbara smiled back at him with the brightness that duty demanded. She turned her attention to his silken cloak, and draped it more gracefully over his shoulders.

"A pity," she said, "that in these modern days there are so few opportunities for men to dress beautifully. Crimson and white sets off your good looks, dear. You are a very handsome man — did you know that?"

Then the brittle artificial barrier between them broke and vanished as utterly as a punctured soap bubble. His was a temperament that longed for affection, for the proofs of love; but a lifetime of self-discipline in an unrelenting world had made it difficult, almost impossible, for him to let the fact appear. Within him there was always the lurking fear of a rebuff, something too horrible to risk. He always was guarded with himself, guarded with the world. And she; she knew those moods of his, knew them even while her pride resented them. Her stoic English upbringing had schooled her into distrusting emotion and into contempt for any exhibition of emotion. She was as proud as he was; she could resent being dependent on him for her life's fulfilment just as he could resent feeling incomplete without her love. They were two proud people who had made, for one reason or another, self-centred self-sufficiency a standard of perfection to abandon which called for more sacrifice than they were often prepared to make.

But in these moments, with the shadow of separation looming over them, pride and resentment vanished, and they could be blessedly natural, each stripped of the numbing armour the years had built about them. She was in his arms, and her hands under his cloak could feel the warmth of his body through the thin silk of his doublet. She pressed herself against him as avidly as he grasped at her. In that uncorseted age she was wearing only the slightest whalebone stiffening at the waist of her gown; in his arms he could feel her beautiful body limp and yielding despite the fine muscles (the product of hard riding and long walking) which he had at last educated himself to accept as desirable in woman, whom he had once thought should be soft and feeble. Warm lips were against warm lips, and then eyes smiled into eyes.

"My darling! My sweet!" she said, and then lip to lip again she murmured the endearment of the childless woman, to her lover "My baby. My dear baby!"

The dearest thing she could say to him. When he yielded to her, when he put off his protective armour, he wanted to be her child as well as her husband; unconsciously he wanted the reassurance that, exposed and naked as he was, she would be true and loyal to him like a mother to her child, taking no advantage of his defenceless condition. The last reserve melted; they blended one into the other in that extremity of passion which they could seldom attain. Nothing could mar it now. Hornblower's powerful fingers tore loose the silken cord that clasped his cloak; the unfamiliar fastenings of his doublet, the ridiculous strings of his trunk hose — it did not break into his mood to have to deal with them. Some time Barbara found herself kissing his hands, the long beautiful fingers whose memory sometimes haunted her nights when they were separated, and it was a gesture of the purest passion without symbolism. They were free for each other, untrammelled, unhindered, in love. They were marvellously one, and one even when it was all over; they were complete and yet not sated. They were one even when he left her lying there, when he glanced into the mirror and saw his scanty hair madly tousled.

His uniform hung on the dressing-room door; Barbara had thought of everything during the time he had been with St. Vincent. He washed himself in the hand-basin, sponging his heated body, and there was no thought of washing away impurity — the act was one of simple pleasure. When the butler knocked at the door he put his dressing-gown over his shirt and trousers and came out. It was his orders; he signed the receipt for them, broke the seal, and sat down to read them through to make sure there were no misunderstandings which ought to be cleared up before he left London. The old, old formulas — 'You are hereby requested and required'; 'You are therefore strictly charged' — the same ones under whose authority Nelson had gone into action at Trafalgar and Blake at Tenerife. The purport of the orders was plain, and the delegation of power unequivocal. If read aloud to a ship's company — or to a court martial — they would be readily understood. Would he ever have to read them aloud? That would mean he had opened negotiations with mutineers. He was entitled to do so, but it would be a sign of weakness, something that would mean lifted eyebrows throughout the Navy, and which would cast a shadow of disappointment over St. Vincent's craggy face. Somehow or other he had to fool and trick a hundred English seamen into his power, so that they could be hanged and flogged for doing something he knew very well he would have done himself in the same circumstances. He had a duty to do; sometimes it was his duty to kill Frenchmen, and sometimes it might be another duty. He would prefer to have to kill Frenchmen if someone had to be killed. And how in Heaven's name was he to set about this present task?

The door to the bedroom opened and Barbara came in, radiant and smiling. Their spirits rushed together as their eyes met; the imminence of physical separation, and Hornblower's contemplation of his new distasteful duty, were not sufficient to disrupt the mental accord between them. They were more united than they had ever been before, and they knew it, the fortunate pair. Hornblower rose to his feet.

"I shall be ready to leave in ten minutes," he said. "Will you come with me as far as Smallbridge?"

"I was hoping you would ask me to do so," said Barbara.

CHAPTER III

It was the blackest imaginable night, and the wind, backing westerly, was blowing half a gale and promising to blow harder. It blew round Hornblower, flapping his trouser-legs about his knees above his sea-boots and tugging at his coat, while all round and above him in the blackness the rigging shrieked in an insane chorus, as though protesting at the madness of mankind in exposing frail man-made equipment to the violence of the world's forces. Even here, in the lee of the Isle of Wight, the little brig was moving in lively fashion under Hornblower's feet as he stood on the tiny quarter-deck. Somewhere to windward of Hornblower someone — a petty officer, presumably — was cursing a seaman for some unknown error; the filthy words reached Hornblower's ears in gusts. A lunatic, thought Hornblower, must know these mad contrasts, these sudden changes of mood, these violent alterations in the world about him; in the one case it was the lunatic who changed, but in his own case it was his surroundings. This morning, hardly more than twelve hours ago, he had been sitting in Westminster Abbey with the Knights of the Bath, all dressed in crimson and white silk; he had dined with the Prime Minister the night before. He had been in Barbara's arms; he had been living in Bond Street luxury, with every whim that might arise ready to be satisfied at the mere pulling of a bell-cord. It was a life of self-indulgent ease; a score of servants would be genuinely shocked and upset if the slightest thing occurred to disturb the even way of the life of Sir Horatio — they ran those two words together, of course, making a curious bastard word like *Surroratio* out of them. Barbara had watched over him all through the summer, to make sure that the last seeds of the Russian typhus which had brought him home sick were eradicated. He had wandered in the sunshine through the gardens at Smallbridge hand in hand with little Richard, with the gardeners backing respectfully away and pulling at their hats. There had been that golden afternoon when he and Richard had lain side by side on their bellies beside the fish-pond, trying to catch golden carp with their hands; returning to the house with the sunset glowing all about them, muddy and wet and gloriously happy, he and his little child, as close together as he had been with Barbara that morning. A happy life; too happy.

At Smallbridge this afternoon, while Brown and the postboy were carrying out his sea-chest to the chaise, he had said goodbye to Richard, taking hold of his hand to shake it as man to man.

"Are you going back to fight, Father?" Richard asked.

He said one more goodbye to Barbara; it was not easy. If he had good fortune, he might be home again in a week, but he could not tell her that, for it might reveal too much about the nature of his mission. That little bit of deception helped to shatter the mood of unity and union; it made him a little cold and formal again.

Hornblower had had a strange feeling as he turned away from her of something lost for ever. Then he had climbed into the chaise with Brown beside him and rolled away, skirting the autumnal Downs to Guildford in the gathering evening, and then down the Portsmouth Road — the road along which he had driven on so many momentous occasions — through the night. The transition was brief from luxury to hardship. At midnight he set foot in the *Porta Coeli*, welcomed by Freeman, square, stocky, and swarthy as ever, with black hair hanging to his cheeks, gipsy-fashion; one noted almost with surprise that there were no rings in his ears. Not more than ten minutes was necessary to tell Freeman, under seal of secrecy, the mission upon which the *Porta Coeli* was to be despatched; in obedience to his orders received four hours earlier Freeman already had the brig ready for sea, and at the end of that ten minutes the hands were at the capstan getting in the anchor.

"It's going to be a dirty night, sir," said Freeman out of the darkness beside him. "Glass is still dropping."

"I expect it will be, Mr. Freeman."

Freeman suddenly raised his voice to one of the loudest bellows that Hornblower had ever heard — that barrel-shaped chest could produce a surprising volume of sound.

"Mr. Carlow! Have all hands shorten sail. Get that maintopmast stays'l in! Another reef in the tops'ls! S'uth-east by south, quartermaster."

"Southeast by south, sir."

The deck under Hornblower's feet vibrated a little with the rush of the hands over the planking; otherwise there was nothing to show him in the darkness that Freeman's orders were being obeyed; the squeal of the sheave-pulleys in the blocks was swept away in the wind or drowned in the howling of the cordage, and he could see nothing of the rush of the men up the rigging to reef the topsails. He was cold and tired after a day

which had begun — unbelievably, it seemed now — with the arrival of the tailor to dress him in the ceremonial costume of a Knight of the Bath.

"I'm going below, Mr. Freeman," he said. "Call me if necessary."

"Aye aye, sir."

Freeman slid back the sliding hatch that covered the companion-way — *Porta Coeli* was flush-decked — and a faint light emerged, revealing the stair; a faint light, but dazzling after the intense blackness of the night. Hornblower descended, bowing almost double under the deck-beams. The door to his right opened into his cabin, six feet square and four feet ten high; Hornblower had to crouch down on his haunches to survey it by the wavering light of the lantern swinging from the deck above. The crampedness of these, the finest quarters in the brig, was nothing compared with the conditions in which the other officers lived, he knew, and twenty times nothing compared with the conditions in which the hands lived. Forward the height between decks was just the same as this — four feet ten — and there the men slept in two banks of hammocks, one suspended above the other, with the noses of the men of the upper tier scraping the deck above and the tails of the men in the lower tier bumping the deck below, and noses meeting tails in the middle. The *Porta Coeli* was the best fighting machine of her tonnage that could sail the seas; she carried guns that could smash any opponent of her own size; she had magazines that could supply those guns during hours or days of fighting; she carried provisions enough to enable her to keep the sea for months without touching land; she was staunch and stout enough to face any weather that blew; the only thing that was wrong with her was that to achieve these results in 190 tons the human beings who lived in her had to be content with living conditions to which no careful farmer would ever subject his livestock. It was at the cost of human flesh and blood that England maintained the countless small vessels which kept the seas safe for her under the protecting shield of the ponderous ships of the line.

The cabin, small though it was, housed a prodigious stink. The first thing the nostrils noticed was the sooty, stuffy smell of the lamp, but they immediately became aware of a whole gamut of supplementary odours. There was the flat bilge smell, tolerable, in fact almost unnoticed by Hornblower, who had smelt bilge for twenty years. There was a penetrating smell of cheese, and as if to set that off there was a perceptible smell of rats. There was a smell of wet clothing, and finally there was a mixture of human odours, the long-confined body-odour of unwashed men predominating.

And all this mixture of smells was balanced by a battery of noises. Every timber resonated the shrieking of the rigging; to be inside the cabin was to be like a mouse inside a violin while it was being played. Overhead the continual footfalls on the quarter-deck and the clatter of ropes being thrown down made it seem — to continue the analogy — as if someone else were tapping the body of the violin at the same time with small mallets. The wooden sheathing of the brig creaked and crackled with the vessel's motion in the water like a giant's knuckles rapping on the exterior; and the shot in the racks rolled just a trifle with each movement, too, thumping solemnly and unexpectedly just at the end of the roll as they fetched up.

Hornblower had hardly entered his cabin when the *Porta Coeli* suddenly heeled over unexpectedly far; apparently as she was just emerging into the open Channel the full force of the westerly breeze caught her and laid her. Hornblower was taken by surprise — it always was a slow process recovering his sea-legs after a long stay ashore — and was precipitated forward, fortunately towards the cot, on which he was thrown face downward, and as he lay spreadeagled upon the cot his ears caught the assorted noises as the various loose objects always not properly secured at the outset of a voyage cascaded to the decks at this, the first big roll. Hornblower squirmed round onto the cot, bumped his head on the deck-beams above as another roll took him by surprise again, and fell back onto the coarse pillow, sweating in the wet stuffiness of the cabin both as a result of his exertions and with the beginnings of sea-sickness. He was cursing feebly and yet with all his heart; an intense hatred for this war, the more bitter for being completely hopeless, surged up inside him. What peace might be like he could hardly imagine — he had been a mere child when last the world was at peace — but he longed with uncontrollable yearning for peace as a cessation from war. He was weary of war, overweary of it, and his weariness was accentuated and embittered by the experiences of the last year. The news of the complete destruction of Bonaparte's army in Russia had early roused hopes of immediate peace; but France had shown no signs of wavering, had raised new armies, and had stemmed the torrent of the Russian counterattack far from any vital point of the Empire. The wiseacres had pointed to the severity and all-

embracing nature of Bonaparte's conscription, to the harshness of the taxation he exacted, and predicted an early upheaval in the interior of the Empire, backed maybe by a revolt of the generals. Ten months had elapsed since those predictions began generally to be made, and there was not a sign as yet of their coming true. When Austria and Sweden joined the ranks of Bonaparte's enemies, men looked again for immediate victory. They hoped that when Bonaparte's unwilling allies — Denmark, Holland, and the rest — fell away from their allegiance this presaged a prompt breaking-up of the Empire, and they were disappointed each time. For long it had been predicted by thoughtful men that when the tide of war washed back into the Empire itself, when Bonaparte should be compelled to make war support war on the soil of his subjects and not on that of his enemies or tributaries, the struggle would end almost automatically. Yet three months had elapsed since Wellington with a hundred thousand men had swept over the Pyrenees within the sacred frontiers, and still he was locked in a death grapple in the far south, still seven hundred miles from Paris. There seemed to be no end to Bonaparte's resources or determination.

To Hornblower in his present despairing mood it seemed as if the struggle must continue until every last man in Europe was dead, until the whole of England's substance was irrevocably consumed; and for himself that until old age should set him free he would be condemned, on account of the mad determination of one single man, to the loss of his liberty, to spending his days and his nights in hideous surroundings like the present, torn from his wife and his son, sea-sick and cold, depressed and unhappy. For almost the first time in his life he began to wish for a miracle, or for some unsought turn of good fortune — that a stray bullet should kill Bonaparte, or that some prodigious mistake would permit the gaining of an indisputable and decisive victory; that the people of Paris should rise successfully against the tyrant, that the French harvest should fail utterly, that the Marshals, to preserve their fortunes, should declare against the Emperor and succeed in inducing their soldiers to follow them. And none of these things, as he knew, was in the least likely; the struggle must go on and on, and he must remain a sea-sick prisoner in the chains of discipline until his hair turned white. He opened his tightly closed eyes to find Brown standing over him.

"I knocked, sir, but you didn't hear me."

"What is it?"

"Is there anything I can get for you, sir? They're just goin' to douse the galley fire. A cup o' coffee, sir? Tea? A hot grog?"

A good stiff dose of liquor might put him to sleep, would drown his morbid and gloomy thoughts, give him some respite from the black depression which was engulfing him. Hornblower found himself actually dallying with the temptation, and was genuinely shocked at himself. That he, who had not drunk to make himself drunk for nearly twenty years, who detested intoxication in himself even more than in other people, should give even a moment's favourable consideration to such a thought startled him in addition to appalling him. It was a new depravity that he had never known existed in him, made worse by the knowledge that he was on a secret mission of great importance, where a clear head and ready judgment would be vitally necessary. He spurned himself in bitter self-contempt.

"No," he said. "I shall go back on deck."

He swung his legs down from the cot; the *Porta Coeli* was now well clear of the land, and was rolling and plunging like a mad thing in the choppy waters of the Channel. The wind on her quarter was laying her over so that as Hornblower rose to his feet he would have slid down to the opposite bulkhead if Brown had not put out a brawny hand and saved him. Brown never lost his sea-legs; Brown was never sick; Brown had the vast physical strength that Hornblower had always coveted. He stood on his straddled legs like a rock, quite unmoved by the antics of the brig, while Hornblower swayed uncertainly. He would have hit his head against the swinging lamp if Brown's firm hand on his shoulder had not deflected him.

"A dirty night, sir, an' it'll be a long sight worse afore it's better."

Job had the same sort of comforters. Hornblower snarled sidelong at Brown in pettish bad temper, and the bad temper was only made worse by seeing Brown being philosophical about it. It was infuriating to be treated like a child in a tantrum.

"Best wear that scarf Her Ladyship made you, sir," went on Brown, unmoved. "'Twill be mortal cold by morning."

In a single movement he flipped open a drawer and produced the scarf. It was a square of priceless silk, light and warm, maybe the most costly thing Hornblower had ever owned, even taking into account his hundred-guinea sword. Barbara had embroidered upon it, with infinite pains — she detested fiddling with needle and thimble, and the fact that she had done so was the prettiest compliment she could pay him. Hornblower put it round his neck inside the collar of his pea-jacket, and was reassured by it, by its warmth and softness and by the memories of Barbara that it conjured up. He steadied himself, and then plunged for the door and up the five steps to the quarter-deck.

It was utterly dark up there, and Hornblower was blinded, emerging from even the miserable light of his cabin. All round him the wind roared hugely; he had to bend his head to meet it. The *Porta Coeli* was lying right over on her side, even though the wind was not abeam but over her quarter. She was both rolling and pitching. Spray and spindrift mixed with the rain that flew across her deck, stinging Hornblower's face as he clawed his way up to the weather bulwarks. Even when his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness he could hardly make out the dim narrow rectangle of the reefed maintopsail. The little vessel leaped under his feet madly, like a horse; the sea was violent — even through the din of the gale Hornblower could hear the groan of the tiller-ropes as the quartermaster at the wheel fought to keep her from falling away into the trough.

Hornblower sensed the presence of Freeman somewhere near him, and ignored him. There was nothing to say, and even if there had been anything to say the violence of the wind would have made it difficult. He hitched his elbow on the hammock-netting to steady himself and gazed into the darkness. Just overside the white top of each advancing wave was momentarily visible before the *Porta Coeli* lifted to it. Forward the hands were at work on the pumps; Hornblower's ear could catch the flat clatter of them at intervals. There was nothing surprising at that, because with the violent working of the vessel in the waves the seams must be gaping and closing like mouths. Somewhere in this black night ships would be sailing, worn down by the gale; somewhere ships would be driving ashore, and seamen would be dying in the surf with this pitiless wind howling over them. Anchors would be dragging and lines parting. And this wind would be blowing over the miserable bivouacs of embattled Europe, too. The million anonymous peasant soldiers huddled round the camp-fires which they could hardly keep alight would curse the wind and the rain as they lay sleepless and hungry awaiting tomorrow's battle. It was strange to think that upon them, upon these inconsiderable unknowns, depended, to a large part, his release from his present thralldom. He vomited excruciatingly into the scuppers as his sea-sickness reached a climax.

Freeman was speaking to him with unintelligible words. He could not understand them, and Freeman had to yell louder.

"It seems as if I shall have to heave-to, sir." Freeman had spoken in a moderate tone at first, a trifle embarrassed. It was a difficult position for Freeman; by the law and custom of the sea he was captain of this ship and Hornblower, although so far superior in rank, was no more than a passenger. Only an admiral could take command out of the hands of the officer appointed for that purpose, without a long and difficult process; a captain, even one who held Commodore's rank as did Hornblower, could not do so. Legally, and under the rulings of the Articles of War, Hornblower could only direct the *Porta Coeli*'s operations; Freeman was solely responsible for the manner in which Hornblower's orders were carried out. Legally it was entirely for Freeman to decide whether to heave-to or not; but no mere lieutenant commanding an eighteen-gun brig could happily disregard the wishes of a Commodore on board, especially when the Commodore happened to be Hornblower, with his reputation of impatience of delay and eagerness to set about the tasks before him — no lieutenant with a thought for his own future could do so, at any rate. Hornblower grinned to himself through his nausea at Freeman's dilemma.

"Heave-to if you wish, Mr. Freeman," he bellowed back, and as soon as he had said the words Freeman was shouting his orders through his speaking-trumpet.

"Heave-to! Get the foretops'l in! Set the maint'mast stays'l. Quartermaster, bring her to."

"Bring her to, sir."

The furling of the foretopsail eased her, and the staysail steadied her, and then she came to the wind. Until now she had fought against it; now she yielded to it, like a woman giving way at last to an importunate lover. She rose to an even keel, turning her starboard bow to the choppy seas, rising and falling to them with something of rhythm instead of her previous unpredictable plunges over the quartering waves. The starboard

mainshrouds gave something of a lee to Hornblower where he stood against the starboard bulwark, so that even the force of the wind seemed to be a little moderated.

CHAPTER IV

Everything was much more comfortable, no doubt, much safer. There was no danger now of the *Porta Coeli* losing spars or canvas or working her seams considerably open. But it did not bring her any nearer to the *Flame* and her mutinous crew; on the contrary, it meant that every moment she was drifting farther away, and to leeward. To leeward! Hornblower's mind, like that of every sailor, was obsessed with the importance of keeping to windward of one's destination. He grudged bitterly every yard of leeway made, far more bitterly than any miser grudged paying out his pieces of gold. Here in the Channel in the late autumn, where westerly gales were to be expected daily, any drift to the eastward might have to be bought back at compound interest. Every hour of leeway would have to be regained when the wind moderated, by two or three hours of beating back to windward, unless the wind should come easterly, which one could not expect.

And every hour might count; no one could guess what might be the next mad action of the desperate men on board *Flame*. At any moment they might be led by panic to hand themselves over to the French; or the ringleaders might abandon the vessel and seek refuge in France, never to be regained for the hangman's rope. And at any moment the news might begin to seep through the Navy that a king's ship had successfully thrown off the bonds of discipline, that downtrodden seamen were negotiating, as one power with another, with the Lords of the Admiralty. Hornblower could guess only too well what might be the effect of that news. The sooner *Flame* was dealt with in exemplary fashion the better; but he was still without any idea as to how to deal with her. This present gale would hardly discommode her — she would be able to ride it out in the lee of the Normandy peninsula. A vessel of her tonnage could venture anywhere in the Bay of the Seine; on the one hand she could run for Le Havre, on the other to Caen river.

The batteries of the Cotentin coast would protect her; the chasse-marées and the Seine gunboats would be ready to come to her aid. Both at Cherbourg and at Le Havre there were French frigates and ships of the line, half manned and unready for sea, but always able at a pinch to push out a few miles from port and cover the escape of the *Flame*. At the approach of superior force she would certainly run; she might stand and fight an equal, such as this *Porta Coeli*, but Hornblower found himself hesitating at the prospect of meeting on equal terms a British ship manned by English sailors filled with the courage of despair. Victory would be dearly bought — what a triumphant clamour Bonaparte would raise through Europe at the news of a battle between two British ships! There would be many dead — what would be the effect on the Navy at the news of British sailors killing each other? What would be the results in Parliament? And the chances were certainly large that the two brigs would cripple each other so badly as to fall easy victims to the chasse-marées and gunboats. And worse than that, there was the chance of defeat. Equal ships, equal crews; a chance as arbitrary as the spin of a coin might decide the action. No, only as a last resort, perhaps not even then, would he fight a simple action against the *Flame*. But what the devil was he to do?

Hornblower shook himself into consciousness of the world about him, backing out of the blind alley of thought in which he had found himself. The wind was still shrieking round him, but it was no longer an avalanche of darkness. Before his eyes the lean rectangle of the reefed maintopsail was distinctly visible against the sky. There was a faint grey light about him; the white-flecked waves over which the brig was uneasily rising were plain to his sight. Morning was coming. Here he lay, hove-to in mid-Channel, out of sight of land. And it was still less than twenty-four hours since he had sat in silks amid the Knights of the Bath in Westminster Abbey, and much less than twenty-four hours since Barbara had — that was another line of thought from which he had hastily to shake himself free. It was raining again, the chill drops blowing into his face. He was cold through and through; as he moved he felt Barbara's scarf about his neck sopping wet with the water that had run down from his face. Freeman was beside him; the day-old beard that sprouted on Freeman's cheeks was an additional convincing touch in his gipsy appearance.

"The glass stays low, sir," said Freeman. "No sign of the weather moderating."

"I can see none myself," said Hornblower.

There was scanty material for conversation, even if Hornblower had wanted to enter into conversation with his subordinate. The grey sky and the grey sea, the shrieking wind, the chill that enveloped them, the pessimistic gloom which clouded Hornblower's thoughts, all these helped Hornblower to maintain the deliberate taciturnity which he had so long cultivated.

"Have me called at the first sign of a change, Mr. Freeman," he said.

He walked over to the hatchway; it was only with an effort that he could set one foot before the other, and he could hardly bend at all to get his hands on the hatch coaming as he descended. His joints groaned as he crept under the threatening deck-beams into his cabin. He was utterly numb with cold and fatigue and sea-sickness. He was just conscious, resentfully, that he must not fall, as he longed to do, fully clothed upon his cot — not for fear of rheumatism, but because there might be no chance for days of drying the cot's bedding if once he made it wet. And then here came Brown, materialising suddenly at his side — he must have been alert in the wardroom pantry on the watch for him.

"Let me take your coat, sir," said Brown. "You're cold, sir. I'll untie that scarf. Those buttons, sir. Sit down now and I'll be able to get those boots off, sir."

Brown was stripping him of his wet clothes as if he were a baby. He produced a towel as if by magic, and chafed Hornblower's ribs with it; Hornblower felt life returning through his veins at the touch of the coarse material. Brown slipped a flannel nightshirt over his head, and then knelt on the swaying deck to chafe his legs and feet. Through Hornblower's dazed mind there passed a momentary amazement at Brown's efficiency. Brown was good at everything to which he turned his hand; he could knot and splice, and he could drive a pair of horses; he could carve model ships for Richard, and be tutor and nursemaid to the boy as well; heave the lead, hand and reef, and wait at table; take a trick at the wheel or carve a goose; undress a weary man and — just as important — know when to cut off his flow of soothing remarks and lay him down in silence and pull the blankets over him, leaving him alone without any trite or irritating words about hoping he slept well. In Hornblower's last tumultuous thoughts before exhaustion plunged him into sleep he decided that Brown was a far more useful member of society than he himself was; that if in his boyhood Brown had been taught his letters and his figures, and if chance had brought him to the quarter-deck as a king's letter-boy instead of to the lower deck as a pressed man, he would probably be a captain by now. And, significantly, hardly a trace of envy tinged Hornblower's thoughts of Brown; he was mellow enough by now to admire without resentment. Brown would make some woman a fine husband, as long as there was no other woman within reach. Hornblower smiled at that, and went on smiling in his sleep, sea-sickness and the plunging of the *Porta Coeli* over the short seas notwithstanding.

He woke later feeling refreshed and hungry, listened benevolently to the tumult of the noisy ship about him, and then poked his head out of the blankets and shouted for Brown. The sentry outside the cabin door took up the cry, and Brown came in almost immediately.

"What's the time?"

"Two bells, sir."

"In which watch?"

"Afternoon watch, sir."

He might have known that without asking. He had been asleep for four hours, of course — nine years as a captain had not eradicated the habits acquired during a dozen years as a watchkeeping officer. The *Porta Coeli* stood up first on her tail and then on her nose as an unusually steep sea passed under her.

"The weather hasn't moderated?"

"Still blowin' a full gale, sir. West-sou'west. We're hove-to under maintopmast stays'l and maintops'l with three reefs. Out o' sight o' land, an' no sail visible neither, sir."

This was an aspect of war to which he should have grown used; endless delay with peril just over the horizon. He felt marvellously fortified by his four hours' sleep; his depression and his yearning for the end of the war had disappeared, not eradicated but overlain by the regained fatalism of the veteran. He stretched luxuriously in his heaving cot. His stomach was decidedly squeamish still, but, rested and recumbent as he was, it was not in active rebellion, whatever it might promise should he become active. And there was no need to be active! There was nothing for him to do if he should rise and dress. He had no watch to keep; by law he was merely a

passenger; and until this gale blew itself out, or until some unforeseen danger should develop, there was nothing about which he need trouble his head. He had still plenty of sleep to make up; probably there were anxious and sleepless nights ahead of him when he should come to tackle the duty to which he had been assigned. He might just as well make the most of his present languor.

"Very good, Brown," he said, imparting to his voice the flat indifference after which he always strove. "Call me when the weather moderates."

"Breakfast, sir?" The surprise in Brown's voice was apparent and most pleasurable to Hornblower; this was the one reaction on his restless captain's part which Brown had not anticipated. "A bite o' cold beef an' a glass o' wine, sir?"

"No," said Hornblower. His stomach would not keep them down, he feared, in any case.

"Nothing, sir?"

Hornblower did not even deign to answer him. He had shown himself unpredictable, and that was really something gained. Brown might at any time grow too proprietorial and too pleased with himself. This incident would put him in his place again, make him not quite so sure of his acquaintance with all his captain's moods. Hornblower believed he could never be a hero to Brown; he could at least be quirky. He gazed placidly up at the deck-beams over his nose until the baffled Brown withdrew, and then he snuggled down again, controlling an expostulatory heave of his stomach. Contented with his lot, he was satisfied to lie and doze and daydream. At the back of the west wind a brig full of mutineers awaited him. Well, although he was drifting away from them at a rate of a mile or two in the hour, he yet was approaching them as fast as it was in his power to do so. And Barbara had been so sweet.

He was sleeping so lightly at the end of the watch that he was roused by the bos'un's calls turning out the watch below, a sound to which he should have been thoroughly used by now. He shouted for Brown and got out of bed, dressing hurriedly to catch the last of the daylight. Plunging out on deck, his eyes surveyed the same desolate scene as he had expected — an unbroken grey sky, a grey sea flecked with white, furrowed into the short steep rollers of the Channel. The wind still blew with gale force, the officers of the watch bending into it with their sou'westers pulled low over their eyes, and the watch crouching for shelter under the weather bulwarks forward.

Hornblower was aware, as he looked about him, of the commotion aroused by his appearance on deck. It was the first opportunity the ship's company of the *Porta Coeli* had had of seeing him in daylight. The midshipman of the watch, at a nudge from the master's mate, dived below, presumably to report his appearance to Freeman; there were other nudges observable among the hands forward. The huddle of dark tarpaulins showed a speckling of white as faces turned towards him. They were discussing him; Hornblower, who sank the *Natividad* in the Pacific, and fought the French fleet in Rosas Bay, and last year held Riga against all Boney's army.

Nowadays Hornblower could contemplate with a certain equanimity the possibility of being discussed by other people. There were undeniable achievements on his record, solid victories for which he had borne the responsibility and therefore deservedly wore the laurels. His weaknesses, his sea-sickness and his moodiness, could be smiled at now instead of being laughed at. The gilded laurels were only tarnished to his own knowledge, and not to that of others. They did not know of his doubts and his hesitations, not even of his actual mistakes — they did not know, as he did, that if he had only called off the bomb-vessels at Riga five minutes earlier — as he should have done — young Mound would be still alive and a distinguished naval officer. Hornblower's handling of his squadron in the Baltic had been described in Parliament as 'the most perfect example in recent years of the employment of a naval force against an army'; Hornblower knew of the imperfections, but apparently other people could be blind to them. He could face his brethren in the profession, just as he could face his social equals. Now he had a wife of beauty and lineage, a wife with taste and tact, a wife to be proud of and not a wife he could only gloweringly dare the world to criticise — poor Maria in her forgotten grave in Southsea.

Freeman came climbing out of the hatchway, still fastening his oilskins; the two of them touched their hats to each other.

"The glass has begun to rise, sir," shouted Freeman, his hands making a trumpet before his mouth. "This'll blow itself out soon."

Hornblower nodded, even while at that moment a bigger gust flogged his oilskins against his legs — the gustiness itself was a sign that the gale was nearing its end. The light was fast fading out of the grey sky; with sunset perhaps the wind would begin to moderate.

"Will you come round the ship with me?" yelled Hornblower, and this time it was Freeman's turn to nod. They walked forward, making their way with difficulty over the plunging, dripping decks, with Hornblower looking keenly about him. Two long guns forward — six pounders; the rest of the armament twelve-pounder carronades. The breachings and preventer tackles were in good shape. Aloft, the rigging, both standing and running, was properly set up and cared for; but the best proof that the vessel was in good order lay in the fact that nothing had carried away during the weather of the last twenty-four hours. Freeman was a good captain; Hornblower knew that already. But it was not the guns, not even the vessel's weatherly qualities, which were of first importance in the present expedition. It was the human weapons that most mattered; Hornblower darted quick glances from side to side under his brows as he inspected the material of the brig — taking pains to observe the appearance and demeanour of the men. They seemed patient, not sullen, thank God. They were alert, seemingly ready for any duty. Hornblower dived down the fore hatchway into the unspeakable din and stink of the battened-down 'tween-decks. There were sailors asleep in the fantastic fashion of the British tarpaulin — snoring heavily as they lay on the bare deck, despite the din about them. There were men huddled in gaming groups. He saw sleeves tugged and thumbs pointed as men caught sight of him — their first sight of the almost legendary Hornblower. An exchange of a nod and a wink. Hornblower, shrewdly estimating the feeling about him, guessed with pleasure that there was expectancy rather than resignation or reluctance. It was an odd fact, but one whose existence could not be doubted, that men were pleased at the prospect of serving under him, Hornblower; the Hornblower, that is (qualified Hornblower), whom they thought existed, not the real actual Hornblower who wore the coat and trousers he was wearing. They hoped for victory, excitement, distinction, success; the poor fools. They did not stop to think that men died where Hornblower took command. The clear-headedness resulting from sea-sickness and an empty stomach (Hornblower could not remember when last he had eaten) allowed free play to a whole conflict of emotions within him; pleasure at being so gladly followed, pity for the thoughtless victims; a thrill of excitement at the thought of future action, and a wave of doubt regarding his ability to pluck success this time from the jaws of chance; pleasure, reluctantly admitted, at finding himself at sea and in command again, and regret, bitter and soul-searching, for the life he had just left, for Barbara's love and little Richard's trusting affection. Hornblower, noting his inward turmoil, cursed himself for a sentimental fool at the very moment when his sharp eye picked out a seaman who was knuckling his forehead and bobbing and grinning with embarrassed pleasure.

"I know you," said Hornblower, searching feverishly through his memory. "Let me see now. It must have been in the old *Indefatigable*."

"That's right, sir. We was shipmates then, sir. And you worn't more'n a nipper, then, sir, beggin' your pardon, sir. Midshipman of the foretop, you was, sir."

The seaman wiped his hand on the leg of his trousers before gingerly accepting the hand which Hornblower held out to him.

"Harding's your name," said Hornblower, his memory coming to his rescue, with a tremendous effort. "You taught me long splicing while we were off Ushant."

"That's right, sir. 'Deed you're right, sir. That were '92, or wore it '93?"

"Ninety-three. I'm glad to know you're on board, Harding."

"Thank you kindly, sir, I'm sure. Thank you kindly."

Why should the whole vessel buzz with pleasure because he had recognised an old shipmate of twenty years back? Why should it make a ha'porth of difference? But it did; Hornblower knew it and felt it. It was hard to say whether pity or affection for his weak fellow-men held first place in the new complex of emotions which the incident aroused. Bonaparte might be doing the same thing at that same moment, recognising in some German bivouac some old comrade in arms in the ranks of the Guard.

They had reached the after part of the brig now, and Hornblower turned to Freeman.

"I am going to dine, now, Mr. Freeman," he said. "Perhaps after that we may be able to make some sail on the brig. I shall come on deck to see, in any case."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Dinner; eaten seated on the small locker against the bulkhead. Cold salt beef — quite a good cut, tasty to a palate long accustomed to it and yet deprived of it for the last eleven months. 'Rexam's Superfine Ships' Biscuits' from a lead-lined box discovered and provided by Barbara — the best ships' bread which Hornblower had ever tasted, costing maybe twenty times as much as the weevily stuff he had eaten often enough before. A bite of red cheese, tangy and seasoned, admirably suited to accompany the second glass of claret. It was quite absurd that he should feel any satisfaction at having to lead this sort of life again, and yet he did. Undeniably, he did.

He wiped his mouth on his napkin, climbed into his oilskins, and went up on deck.

"The wind's dropped a little, Mr. Freeman, I fancy."

"I fancy it has, sir."

In the darkness the *Porta Coeli* was riding to the wind almost easily, with a graceful rise and swoop. The seas overside could not be nearly as steep as they had been, and this was rain, not spray, in his face, and the feel of the rain told him that the worst of the storm was over.

"With the jib and the boom-mains'l both reefed, we can put her on the wind, sir," said Freeman, tentatively.

"Very well, Mr. Freeman. Carry on."

There was a special skill about sailing a brig, especially, of course, on a wind. Under jib and staysails and the boom-mainsail she could be handled like a fore-and-aft rigged vessel; Hornblower knew it all theoretically, but he also knew that his practice would be decidedly rusty, especially in the dark and with a gale blowing. He was well content to remain in the background and let Freeman do what he would. Freeman bellowed his orders; with a mighty creaking of blocks the reefed boom-mainsail rose up the mast while men on the dizzy yard got in the maintopsail. The brig was hove-to on the starboard tack, and as the effect of the jib made itself felt she began to pay off a little.

"Mains'l sheets!" bellowed Freeman, and to the man at the wheel, "Steady as you go!"

The rudder met and counteracted the tendency of the *Porta Coeli* to fall off, and the boom-mainsail caught the wind and forced her forward. In a moment the *Porta Coeli* changed from something quiescent and acquiescent into something fierce and desperate. She ceased to yield to wind and sea, ceased to let them hurtle past her; now she met them, she fought against them, battled with them. She was like some tigress previously content to evade the hunters by slinking from cover to cover, but now hurling herself on her tormentors mad with fighting fury. The wind laid her over, the spray burst in sheets across her bows. Her gentle rise and swoop were transformed into an illogical jerky motion as she met the steep waves with immovable resolution; she lurched and she shuddered as she battered her way through the waves. The forces of the world, the old primitive powers that had ruled earth and water since the creation, were being set at defiance by man, weak, mortal man, who by virtue of the brain inside his fragile skull was able not merely to face the forces of the world but to bend them to his will, compel them to serve him. Nature sent this brisk westerly gale up the Channel; subtly and insidiously the *Porta Coeli* was making use of it to claw her way westward — a slow, painful, difficult way, but westward all the same. Hornblower, standing by the wheel, felt a surge of exultation as the *Porta Coeli* thrashed forward. He was like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods; he was the successful rebel against the blind laws of nature; he could take pride in being a mere mortal man.

CHAPTER V

Freeman bent over the tallow that armed the bottom of the lead; a seaman held a lantern at his shoulder so as to let the light fall upon it. The master's mate and midshipman of the watch completed the group, a vignette of blackness and light in the massive darkness all around. Freeman was not hasty in reaching his decision; he peered at the sample brought up from the bottom of the sea first from one angle and then from another. He sniffed at it; he applied a forefinger to it and then carried the finger to his tongue.

"Sand and black shell," he mused to himself.

Hornblower held back from the group; this was something Freeman could do better than he, although it would be nearly blasphemy to say so in public, seeing that he was a captain and Freeman a mere lieutenant.

"Maybe we're off Antifer," said Freeman at length. He looked out of the light into the darkness towards where Hornblower was standing.

"Lay her on the other tack, if you please, Mr. Freeman. And keep the lead going."

Creeping about in the night off the treacherous Normandy coast was a nervous business, even though in the past twenty-four hours the wind had moderated to nothing more than a strong breeze. But Freeman knew what he was about; a dozen years spent in handling vessels in the soundings round the fringes of Europe had given him knowledge and insight obtainable in no other way. Hornblower had to trust Freeman's judgment; he himself with compass and lead and chart might do a good workmanlike job, but to rate himself above Freeman as a Channel pilot would be ridiculous. 'Maybe', Freeman had said; but Hornblower could value that 'maybe' at its true worth. Freeman was confident about it. The *Porta Coeli* was off Cape Antifer, then, a trifle farther to leeward than he wished to be when dawn should come. He still had no plan in his head about how to deal with the *Flame* when he met her; there was no way round, as far as he could see, the simple geometrical difficulty that the mutineers, with Le Havre open to them on one side and Caen on the other, could not be cut off from taking refuge with the French if they wished to; for that matter, there were a dozen other inlets on the coast, all heavily protected by batteries, where the *Flame* could find a refuge. And any forcing of the matter might result easily enough in Chadwick being hoisted up to his yardarm, to dangle there as a dead man — the most horrible and dangerous incident in the history of the Navy since the murder of Pigott. But contact had to be made with the mutineers — that was clearly the first thing to do — and there was at least no harm in trying to make that contact at a point as advantageous as possible. Some miracle might happen; he must try and put himself across the course of wandering miracles. What was that Barbara had said to him once? 'The lucky man is he who knows how much to leave to chance.' Barbara had too good an opinion of him, even after all this time, but there was truth in what she said.

The *Porta Coeli* went smartly about, and reached to the north westward, close-hauled to the southwesterly wind.

"The tide starts to make about now, Sir Horatio," said Freeman, beside him.

"Thank you."

That was an additional bit of data in the problem of the morrow which was not yet fully revealed to him. War was as unlike spherical trigonometry as anything could be, thought Hornblower, grinning at the inconsequence of his thoughts. Often one approached a problem in war without knowing what it was one wanted to achieve, to prove, or construct, and without even knowing fully what means were available for doing it. War was generally a matter of slipshod, makeshift, hit-or-miss extemporisation. Even if it were not murderous and wasteful it would still be no trade for a man who enjoyed logic. Yet maybe he was taking too flattering a view of himself; maybe some other officer — Cochrane, say, or Lidyard — would, if in his position, already have a plan worked out for dealing with the mutineers, a plan that could not fail to bring satisfactory results.

Four bells rang out sharply; they had been over half an hour on this tack.

"Kindly go about on the other tack, Mr. Freeman. I don't want to get too far from land."

"Aye aye, sir."

If it was not for the war, no captain in his senses would dream for a moment of plunging about in the darkness on this shoal coast, especially when he was extremely doubtful of his exact position — their present estimate was the sum of a series of guesses, guesses about the leeway made while hove-to, guesses at the effects of the tides, guesses at the correspondence between soundings taken overside and soundings marked on the chart.

"What do you think the mutineers will do, sir, when they sight us?" asked Freeman.

The fact that Hornblower had unbent enough to give an explanation of why he wanted to go about must have encouraged Freeman to this familiarity; Hornblower was irritated, but most of all because he had no thoughts on the matter.

"There's no profit in asking questions which time will surely answer, Mr. Freeman," he said, tartly.

"Yet speculation is a fascinating thing, Sir Horatio," replied Freeman, so unabashed that Hornblower stared at him in the darkness. Bush, if Hornblower had spoken to him in that fashion, would have retired wounded into his shell.

"You may indulge yourself in it if you so desire, Mr. Freeman. I have no intention of doing so."

"Thank you, Sir Horatio."

Now was there, or was there not, a hint of mockery behind the hint of subservience in that reply? Was it possible that Freeman could actually be smiling inwardly at his superior officer? If so, he was running a fearful risk; a suggestion of dissatisfaction in Hornblower's future report to the Admiralty would put Freeman on the beach for life. But Hornblower knew, the moment the thought came into his head, that he would do no such thing. He could never blast an able man's career just because that man had not treated him with slavish respect.

"Water's shoaling fast, sir," said Freeman, suddenly — both he and Hornblower had subconsciously been listening to the cry of the leadsman in the chains. "I should like to go about again."

"Certainly, Mr. Freeman," said Hornblower, formally.

They were creeping round Cape de la Hève, the northerly point of the Seine estuary, just within which lies Le Havre. There was a chance, a tiny one, that they might find themselves at dawn both to leeward of the *Flame* and between her and France so that she would have no means of escape at all. And the night was wearing on; it would not be long now before daylight.

"You have a good man at the masthead, Mr. Freeman?"

"Yes, Sir Horatio."

He would have to tell the hands about the mission on which they had been sent, even though that meant violating the secrecy surrounding the mutiny. Normally there would be little enough need to confide in the hands; British seamen, fatalistic after twenty years of war, would fire into Frenchmen or Americans or Dutchmen without much thought about the rights or wrongs; but to ask them to fight against a sister-ship, to fire into a British vessel, which might, for all he knew, still be wearing her commissioning pendant and her White Ensign, might cause hesitation if he called upon them to do so without some preliminary warning. A careful officer would in ordinary circumstances never breathe the word 'mutiny' to his men; no lion-tamer would ever remind the lion that the lion was stronger than he. It was almost daylight.

"Would you be so good as to turn up the hands, Mr. Freeman? I wish to address them."

"Aye aye, sir."

The pipes wailed through the brig, and the watch below came streaming up through the hatchway, pouring sleepily aft; the poor devils were losing an hour of sleep because of the inconsiderate way in which dawn did not correspond with the end of the watch. Hornblower looked round for some point of vantage from which he could address them; in a flush-decked vessel like the *Porta Coeli* he had not the advantage of speaking down into a waist from a quarterdeck. He swung himself up onto the weather bulwark, balancing himself with a hand on the mainbackstay.

"Men," he said, "are you wondering what has sent you out here?"

Maybe they were, but the rather sleepy, apathetic, breakfastless lines before him showed little sign of it.

"Are you wondering what has sent me out to sea with you?"

By God, they *were* wondering that. There must have been speculation on the lower deck as to why a full commodore — and not only a commodore, but Hornblower of the legendary past — should have been sent to sea in a mere eighteen-gun brig. It was flattering to see a movement of interest in the lines, a lifting of heads, even while Hornblower cursed at fate for having to make use of rhetorical tricks, and more for having to exploit his own personal renown.

"There is villainy afloat," said Hornblower. "British seamen have disgraced themselves. They have mutinied in the very presence of the enemy."

He had the men's interest now, without a doubt. He had said the word 'mutiny' to these slaves of the lash and the whistle. Mutiny, the remedy for all their ills, which would give them freedom from the hardship of their lives, the cruelty and the danger, the foul food and the severance from all the amenities of life. One crew had mutinied. Why should not they do so too? He would have to tell them about the *Flame*, remind them that close at hand lay the shores of France, where Bonaparte would gladly heap wealth and luxury upon any British seaman who brought a British ship of war over to him. Hornblower let a note of contempt creep into his voice.

"The crew of the *Flame*, our own sister-ship, has done this thing. Now they are sheltering here in this very bay of the Seine. Every man's hand is against them. The French have no use for mutineers, and it is our mission to dig these rats from their holes. They have betrayed England, forgotten their duty to King and Country. I expect most of them are honest but stupid, led astray by a few designing villains. It is those villains who must pay the

price of their villainy, and we must see they have no chance of escape. If they are mad enough to offer fight, then we must fight them. If they surrender without bloodshed, that fact will be remembered in their favour when they are brought to trial. I want no bloodshed if I can help it — you know as well as I do that a cannon-shot will kill a man without stopping to ask whether he is a villain or just a fool. But if they want bloodshed, then we shall let them have it."

Hornblower ended his speech, and looked over to Freeman to dismiss the men. It was a cheerless business making a speech to hungry men in a grey dawn, but Hornblower, darting glances at the men as they went about their business, saw that there was nothing to fear from the ship's company. They were buzzing with talk, of course, but news of mutiny would set any crew a-buzz, just as a village would be set a-buzz by news of a local murder. But it was only gossip talk, he could see; the men were not making any deductions from the news. He had presented the case to them in such a way as to make it obvious to them that he expected them to obey his orders for dealing with the mutineers, and he had let no hint creep into his speech of his fear that they should be tempted to follow their example. That had not occurred to them yet — but it might, if they were allowed to ruminate over it. He must see that they were kept busy; the ordinary ship's routine was attending to that at the moment, for they were at work on the opening business of every naval day, washing down the decks before being piped to breakfast.

"Land!" yelled a voice from the masthead. "Land on the port bow."

It was rather thick weather, typical Channel weather for the end of the year, but in the growing light Hornblower could see the dark line against the grey. Freeman was scrutinising the coast through his glass.

"That's the south shore of the Bay," said Freeman. "There's the Cane river."

Hornblower was only just beginning to realise that Freeman was anglicising the pronunciation of 'Caen' when Freeman trained his telescope round and gave a string of more surprising examples still of what an Englishman can do to French names.

"Yes, there's Cape dee lay Heave, and Harbour-Grace," he said.

The growing light revealed the *Porta Coeli's* position, over towards the southern shore of the estuary of the Seine.

"That was an excellent piece of navigation last night, Mr. Freeman."

"Thank you, Sir Horatio."

Hornblower would have added more words of warmer praise, if it had not been for Freeman's rather chilling manner; he supposed Freeman was entitled to be short-tempered before breakfast if he wished. And any capable lieutenant was entitled to be jealous of a captain; in the opinion of every ambitious lieutenant a captain was just a lieutenant who had been lucky and who would continue to be lucky, drawing three times a lieutenant's pay and prize-money, reaping the harvest of the lieutenant's labours, and secure in the knowledge that time would make an admiral of him in the end while the lieutenant's promotion still depended on the whims of his superiors. Hornblower could remember feeling just the same when he was a lieutenant; for Freeman to show it was natural even though foolish.

The leadsman's cry in the chains indicated that the water was shoaling again; they had left the middle ground far behind them and had now crossed the southerly channel of the estuary. There was still plenty of water for the *Porta Coeli*; she had been expressly designed for this very purpose of penetrating into inlets and estuaries, carrying the war as close to Bonaparte's shores as might be. Bonaparte's dominion stopped short at the line which the shot from his shore batteries could reach, and beyond that line England ruled supreme and unchallenged.

"Sail on the lee bow!" yelled the lookout.

Freeman swung himself up to the lee main-shrouds with the agility of an ape; braced against the ratlines, he trained his glass forward.

"A brig, sir," he hailed down to Hornblower, and a few seconds later "That's *Flame* all right, sir."

"Put the helm up and we'll bear down on her, Mr. Freeman, if you please."

Flame was exactly where one would expect to find her, close up under the lee of the land, sheltered from any gale from northwest round to east; and free to consult her own safety whether attacked by British or French. Soon Hornblower's own glass picked her out from the grey murk. A trim, beautiful little vessel, lying hove-to on the edge of the shoals. She showed no signs, at that distance at least, of any disorder on board. Hornblower

wondered how many telescopes there were being trained upon the *Porta Coeli*, what anxious debate was being held on board by men recognising the new arrival as the first move on the part of their Lordships of the Admiralty in reply to their suicidal ultimatum. Those men had ropes round their necks.

"She's waiting for us to come down to her," said Freeman.

"I wonder for how long," answered Hornblower.

"What are you men standing chattering there for?" suddenly blared out Freeman, addressing a group of excited seamen lining the bulwark forward. "Master-at-arms! Master-at-arms! Take those men's names and bring them to me at the end of the watch! You bos'un's mate, there! Collier! Keep those men of yours at work! This is a King's ship, not a blasted school for young ladies!"

A thin beam of watery sunshine broke through the greyness and lit up the *Flame* as she lay in the circle of Hornblower's glass. He suddenly saw her yards swing round; she put herself before the wind and began to move in the direction of Honfleur. Her foretopsail was conspicuously patched — a light cross against the darker material, as if she were some Crusading ship.

"They won't stand and wait for us," said Freeman.

"Sail ho!" yelled the lookout again. "Sail on the lee quarter!"

Telescopes swung round as if all were actuated by a single machine. A big ship with all plain sail set to the royals had appeared out of the mist beyond the middle ground, on a course rapidly diverging from that of the *Porta Coeli*. Hornblower recognised her instantly for what she was, and did not need Freeman's identification.

"French West Indiaman," said Freeman. "With a clear run to Harbour-Grace."

One of the rare ships to run the continental blockade, bearing an invaluable cargo of grain and sugar to ease Bonaparte's distress; she had taken advantage of the recent gale, which had blown the blockading squadrons from their stations, to dash up the Channel. A cargo delivered into the Seine, where centred the Imperial power, and whence diverged the whole road and canal systems, was worth two brought into some isolated inlet on the Biscay coast. The small British vessels of war, like the *Porta Coeli* and the *Flame*, had been constructed and stationed to prevent this very thing.

"There'll be no catching her before she reaches Harbour-Grace," muttered Freeman.

"Let her go, Mr. Freeman," said Hornblower, loudly. "Our duty's with *Flame* at present. There goes ten pounds a man prize-money."

There were enough hands within earshot to hear that speech; they would repeat it to the rest of the crew. No one who thought of the lost prize-money would feel any better disposed towards the mutineers.

Hornblower turned his attention back to the *Flame*; she was standing steadily and without hesitation on a course which would take her into Honfleur. It would not be long before she was in French power, and it would be foolish to press matters to such an extreme, even though it was a bitter pill to swallow, to admit a check.

"Oh, heave-to, Mr. Freeman, please. Let's see what she does then."

The *Porta Coeli* came up into the wind in response to sail and helm, Hornblower training round his glass to keep *Flame* under observation. The moment the *Porta Coeli*'s manoeuvre became apparent, the *Flame* imitated it, coming up into the wind and lying motionless, the white cross conspicuous on her foretopsail.

"Try bearing down on them again, Mr. Freeman."

Flame turned away instantly towards France.

"A wink's as good as a nod, Mr. Freeman. Heave-to again."

Clearly the mutineers had no intention of allowing the *Porta Coeli* to come any nearer than she was at present, well beyond cannonshot. She would hand herself over to the French sooner than permit any closer approach.

"Mr. Freeman, will you be so good as to have a boat hoisted out for me? I'll go and parley with the villains."

That would be a sign of weakness, but the mutineers could be in no doubt about the weakness of his position and the corresponding strength of their own. It would be telling them nothing they did not know already, that they held Hornblower and the Lords of the Admiralty and the British Empire itself in a cleft stick. Freeman showed no signs of his doubts regarding the advisability of a valuable captain putting himself in the power of mutineers. Hornblower went below to pocket his orders; it might even be necessary to show the mutineers the full powers with which he had been entrusted — but it would be only in the last resort that he would do so; that would be letting the mutineers too much into their Lordships' confidence. The boat was overside with

Brown at the tiller when Hornblower came on deck again; Hornblower went down the side and settled himself into the sternsheets.

"Give way!" ordered Brown; the oars bit the water and the boat began to crawl towards the *Flame*, dancing over the little waves of the estuary.

Hornblower watched the brig as they approached; she lay hove-to, but Hornblower could see that her guns were run out and her boarding-nettings rigged, and she had clearly no intention of being taken by surprise. The hands were at their guns, there were lookouts aloft, a warrant officer aft with a telescope under his arm — not a sign in the world of mutiny on board.

"Boat ahoy!" came the hail across the water.

Brown held up his four fingers, the universal signal that there was a captain in the boat — four fingers for the four side-boys demanded by ceremonial.

"Who are ye?" hailed the voice.

Brown looked round at Hornblower, received a nod from him, and hailed back.

"Commodore Sir Horatio Hornblower, K.B."

"We'll allow Commodore Hornblower on board, but no one else. Come alongside, and we've cold shot here to drop into you if you play any tricks."

Hornblower reached for the main-chains and swung himself up into them; a seaman raised the boarding-nettings so that he could struggle under them to the deck.

"Kindly tell your boat to sheer off, Commodore. We're taking no risks," said a voice.

It was a white-haired old man who addressed him, the telescope under his arm marking him out as officer of the watch. White hair fluttered about his ears; sharp blue eyes in a wrinkled face looked at Hornblower from under white brows. The only thing in the least bizarre about his appearance was a pistol stuck in his belt.

Hornblower turned and gave the required order.

"And now may I ask your business here, Commodore?" asked the old man.

"I wish to speak to the leader of the mutineers."

"I am captain of this ship. You can address yourself to me, Nathaniel Sweet, sir."

"I have addressed myself to you as far as I desire, unless you are also the leader of the mutineers."

"Then if you have done so, you can call back your boat and leave us, sir."

An impasse already. Hornblower kept his eyes on the blue ones of the old man. There were several other men within earshot, but he could sense no wavering or doubt among them; they were prepared to support their captain. Yet it might be worth while speaking to them.

"Men!" said Hornblower, raising his voice.

"Belay that!" rapped out the old man. He whipped the pistol out of his belt and pointed it at Hornblower's stomach. "One more word out of turn and you'll get an ounce of lead through you."

Hornblower looked steadily back at him and his weapon; he was curiously unafraid, feeling as if he were watching move and counter-move in some chess game, without remembering that he himself was one of the pawns in it with his life at stake.

"Kill me," he said with a grim smile, "and England won't rest until you're swinging on a gallows."

"England has sent you here to swing me on a gallows as it is," said Sweet, bleakly.

"No," said Hornblower. "I am here to recall you to your duty to King and Country."

"Letting bygones be bygones?"

"You will have to stand a fair trial, you and your confederates."

"That means the gallows, as I said," replied Sweet. "The gallows for me, and I should be fortunate compared with some of these others."

"A fair and honest trial," said Hornblower, "with every mitigating circumstance taken into consideration."

"The only trial I would attend," replied the old man, "would be to bear witness against Chadwick. Full pardon for us — a fair trial for Chadwick. Those are our terms, sir."

"You are foolish," said Hornblower. "You are throwing away your last chance. Surrender now, with Mr. Chadwick unbound and the ship in good order, and those circumstances will weigh heavily in your favour at your trial. Refuse, and what have you to look for? Death. That is all. Death. What can save you from our country's vengeance? Nothing."

"Begging your pardon, Captain, but Boney can," interposed the old man, dryly.

"You trust Bonaparte's word?" said Hornblower, rallying desperately before this unexpected counter-attack.

"He'd like to have this ship, no doubt. But you and your gang? Bonaparte won't encourage mutiny — his power rests too much on his own army. He'll hand you back for us to make an example of you."

It was a wild shot in the dark, and it missed its bull's-eye by an unmeasurable distance. Sweet stuck his pistol back into his belt and produced three letters from his pocket, waving them tauntingly in front of Hornblower.

"Here's a letter from the Military Governor of Harbour-Grace," he said. "That only promises us welcome. And here's a letter from the Prefect of the Department of the Inferior Seine. That promises us provisions and water should we need them. And here's a letter from Paris, sent down to us by post. It promises us immunity from arrest, civil rights in France, and a pension for every man from the age of sixty. That is signed 'Marie Louise, Empress, Queen, and Regent'. Boney won't go back on his wife's word, sir."

"You've been in communication with the shore?" gasped Hornblower. It was quite impossible for him to make any pretence at composure.

"We have," said the old man. "And if *you* had the chance before you, Captain, of being flogged round the fleet, you would have done the same."

It was hopeless to continue the present discussion. At least at the moment, the mutineers were unassailable. The only terms to which they would listen would be their own. There was no sign of doubt or dissension on board. But maybe if they were allowed more time to think about it, maybe if they had a few hours in which to consider the fact that Hornblower himself was on their trail, doubt might creep in. A party might form determined to save their necks by recapturing the ship; they might get at the liquor — Hornblower was completely puzzled by the fact that a mutinous British crew was not all roaring drunk — *something* might happen. But he must make a fighting retreat, not ignominiously crawl overside with his tail between his legs.

"So you are traitors as well as mutineers?" he blared. "I might have expected it. I might have guessed what kind of curs you are. I won't foul my lungs by breathing the same air as you."

He turned to the side and hailed for his boat.

"We're the kind of curs," said the old man, "who will let you go when we could clap you down below in the orlop with Chadwick. We could give you a taste of the cat, Commodore Sir Horatio Hornblower. How would you like *that*, sir? Remember, tomorrow, that the flesh is still on your ribs because we spared you. Good morning to you, Captain."

There was sting and venom in those last words; they called up pictures in Hornblower's imagination that made his flesh creep. He did not feel in the least dignified as he wriggled under the boarding-netting.

The *Flame* still rode peacefully to the wind as the boat danced back over the waves. Hornblower gazed from the *Flame* to the *Porta Coeli*, the two sister-ships, identical in appearance save for the white cross-shaped patch on the *Flame*'s foretopsail. It was ironical that not even a trained eye could see any difference in appearance between the brig that was loyal to the King and the brig that was in open rebellion against him. The thought increased his bitterness; he had failed, utterly and completely, in his first attempt to win over the mutineers. He did not think there was the least possibility of their abating their terms; he would have to choose between agreeing to them, between promising the mutineers a free pardon and driving them into the hands of Bonaparte. In either case he would have failed in his mission; the merest least experienced midshipman in the Navy could have done as much. There was still some time to spare, for there was still little chance of news of the mutiny leaking out, but unless time brought dissension among the mutineers — and he saw no chance of that — it would be merely wasted time as far as he could see.

The boat was now half-way between the two brigs; with those two vessels under his command he could wage a lively war against the Normandy coast; he felt in his bones that he could set the whole Seine estuary in an uproar. His bitterness surged up stronger still, and then abruptly checked itself. An idea had come to him, and with the idea all the well-known old symptoms, the dryness in his throat, the tingling in his legs, the accelerated heartbeat. He swept his glance back and forth between the two brigs, excitement welling up inside him; calculations of wind and tide and daylight already formulating themselves, unsummoned, in his mind.

"Pull harder you men," he said to the boat's crew, and they obeyed him, but the gig could not possibly travel fast enough to satisfy him in his new mood.

Brown was looking at him sidelong, wondering what plan was evoking itself in his captain's brain; Brown himself — as well aware of the circumstances as Hornblower was — could see no possible way out of the situation. All he knew was that his captain looked back over his shoulder time and time again at the mutinous brig.

"Oars!" growled Brown to the boat's crew, as the officer of the watch gave the signal to the boat to come alongside; the bowman hooked onto the chains, and Hornblower went up the brig's side with a clumsy impetuosity that he could not restrain. Freeman was waiting for him on the quarterdeck, and Hornblower's hand was still at his hat when he gave his first order.

"Will you pass the word for the sailmaker, Mr. Freeman? And I shall want his mates, and every hand who can use a needle and palm."

"Aye aye, sir."

Orders were orders, even when they dealt with such extraneous matters as making sails while negotiating with a mutinous crew. Hornblower stared over at the *Flame*, still lying hove-to out of gunshot. The mutineers held a strong, an unassailable position, one which no frontal attack could break, and whose flanks were impregnable. It would be a very roundabout route that could turn such a position; maybe he had thought of one. There were some odd circumstances in his favour, fortunate coincidences. It was his business to seize upon those, exploit them to the utmost. He would have to take reckless chances, but he would do everything in his power to reduce the chances against him. The lucky man is he who knows how much to leave to chance.

A stoop-shouldered seaman was awaiting his attention, Freeman at his side.

"Swenson, sailmaker's mate, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Freeman. You see that patched fore-tops'l? Swenson, look at it well through this glass."

The Swedish sailmaker took the telescope in his gnarled hands and levelled it to his eye.

"Mr. Freeman, I want *Porta Coeli* to have a foretops'l just like that, so that no eye can see any difference between the two. Can that be done?"

Freeman looked at Swenson.

"Aye aye, sir, I can do that," said Swenson, glancing from Freeman to Hornblower and back again. "There's a bolt o' white duck canvas, an' with the old foretops'l — I can do it, sir."

"I want it finished and ready to bend by four bells in the afternoon watch. Start work on it now."

A little group had formed behind Swenson, those members of the crew whom inquiry had ascertained to have sailmaking experience. There were broad grins on some of their faces; Hornblower seemed to be conscious of a little wave of excitement and anticipation spreading through the crew like a ripple over a pond set up by the stone dropped into it in the form of Hornblower's unusual request. No one could see clearly as yet what was in Hornblower's mind, but they knew that he intended some devilment. The knowledge was a better tonic to discipline and the happiness of the ship than any ordinary ship's routine.

"Now see here, Mr. Freeman," said Hornblower, moving towards the rail. "What I propose is this — *Flame* and *Porta Coeli* are as like as two peas and they'll be liker yet as soon as we have that foretops'l set. The mutineers have been in communication with the shore; they told me so, and, what's more, Mr. Freeman, the place they've had dealings with is Le Havre — Harbour-Grace, Mr. Freeman. Boney and the governor have promised them money and immunity to bring the *Flame* in. We'll go in instead. There's that West Indiaman we saw come in this morning."

"We'll bring her out, sir!"

"Maybe we will. God knows what we'll find inside, but we'll go in ready for anything. Pick twenty men and an officer, men you can rely on. Give each one his orders about what he is to do if we have a chance to take a prize — heads'ls, tops'ls, wheel, cutting the cable. You know about all that as well as I do. It'll be just at dusk that we stand in, if the wind doesn't change, and I don't think it will. It'll be strange if in the dark we don't contrive something to annoy the Frogs."

"By God, sir, an' they'll think it's the mutineers! They'll think the mutiny was just a sham! They'll —"

"I hope they will, Mr. Freeman."

CHAPTER VI

It was late afternoon when the *Porta Coeli*, apparently unable to reach any decision, stood away from the *Flame* and crossed the broad estuary with the wind blowing briskly on her port beam. The thick weather still persisted; she was far enough both from *Flame* and from Le Havre for the details to be quite obscure when she took in her foretopsail and substituted for it the patched one which an enthusiastic gang of toilers had made ready on deck abaft the foremast. Hurried work with paintbrush and paint erased one name and substituted the other; Hornblower and Freeman wore their plain pea-jackets over their uniforms, concealing their rank. Freeman kept his glass trained on the harbour as they stood in.

"That's the Indiaman, sir. At anchor. And there's a lighter beside her. O' course, they wouldn't unload her at the quay. Not here, sir. They'd put her cargo into lighters an' barges, and send 'em up the river, to Rouen and Paris. O' course they would. I ought to ha' thought o' that before." Hornblower had already thought of it. His glass was sweeping the defences of the town; the forts of Ste. Adresse and Tourneville on the steep cliff above the town; the twin lighthouses on Cape de la Hève — which for a dozen years had not shown a light — the batteries on the low ground beside the old jetty. These last would be the great danger to the enterprise; he hoped that the big forts above would not know of what was going on down below in time to open fire.

"There's a lot of shipping farther in, sir," went on Freeman. "Might even be ships of the line. They haven't their yards crossed. I've never been in as close as this before."

Hornblower turned to look at the western sky. Night was fast falling, and the thick weather on the horizon showed no signs of clearing. He wanted light enough to find his way, and darkness enough to cover him on his way out.

"Here's the pilot lugger standing out, sir," said Freeman. "They'll think we're *Flame* all right."

"Very good, Mr. Freeman. Set the men to cheering at the ship's side. Secure the pilot when he comes on board. I'll con her in."

"Aye aye, sir."

It was just the sort of order to suit the temperament of British seamen. They entered whole-heartedly into the spirit of the thing, yelling like lunatics along the bulwarks, waving their hats, dancing exuberantly, just as one would expect of a horde of mutineers. The *Porta Coeli* backed her main-topsail, the lugger surged alongside, and the pilot swung himself into the mainchains.

"Lee braces!" roared Hornblower, the maintopsail caught the wind again, the wheel went over, and the *Porta Coeli* stood into the harbour, while Freeman put his shoulder between the pilot's shoulderblades and shot him neatly down the hatchway where two men were waiting to seize and pinion him.

"Pilot secured, sir," he reported.

He, too, was obviously carried away by the excitement of the moment, infected even by the din the hands were making; his pose of amused irony had completely disappeared.

"Starboard a little," said Hornblower to the helmsman. "Meet her! Steady as you go!"

It would be the last word in ignominy if all their high hopes were to come to an end on the sandbanks guarding the entrance. Hornblower wondered if he would ever feel cool again.

"A cutter standing out to us, sir," reported Freeman. That might be a committee of welcome, or orders telling them where to berth — both at once, probably.

"Set the hands to cheering again," ordered Hornblower. "Have the boarding-party secured as they come on board."

"Aye aye, sir."

They were nearing the big Indiaman; she lay, her sails loose, swinging to a single anchor. There was a lighter beside her, but obviously little enough had been done so far towards unloading her. In the fading light Hornblower could just make out a dozen of her seamen standing at the ship's side gazing curiously at them. Hornblower backed the maintopsail again, and the cutter came alongside, and half a dozen officials climbed onto the *Porta Coeli*'s deck. Their uniforms proclaimed their connection with the navy, the army, and the customs service, and they advanced slowly towards Hornblower, looking curiously about them as they did so. Hornblower was giving the orders that got the *Porta Coeli* under way again, and as she drew away from the

cutter in the gathering darkness he wore her round and headed her for the Indiaman. Cutlasses suddenly gleamed about the new arrivals.

"Make a sound and you're dead men," said Freeman.

Somebody made a sound, beginning to protest volubly. A seaman brought a pistol butt down on his head and the protests ended abruptly as the protester clattered on the deck. The others were hustled down the hatchway, too dazed and startled to speak.

"Very well, Mr. Freeman," said Hornblower, drawling the words so as to convey the impression that he felt perfectly at home here in the middle of a hostile harbour. "You may hoist out the boats. Maintops'l aback!" The shore authorities would be watching the brig's movements by what little light was left. If the *Porta Coeli* did anything unexpected, they would wonder idly what unknown condition on board had caused the harbourmaster's representative — now gagged and bound under hatches — to change his plans. The *Porta Coeli*'s motion died away; the sheaves squealed as the boats dropped into the water, and the picked crews tumbled down into them. Hornblower leaned over the side.

"Remember men, don't fire a shot!"

The oars splashed as the boats pulled over to the Indiaman. It was practically dark by now; Hornblower could hardly follow the boats to the Indiaman's side fifty yards away, and he could see nothing of the men as they swarmed up her side. Faintly he heard some startled exclamations, and then one loud cry; that might puzzle the people on shore, but would not put them on their guard. Here were the boats returning, each pulled by the two men detailed for the work. The tackles were hooked on and the boats swayed up; as the sheaves squealed again Hornblower heard a crunching sound from the Indiaman, and a dull thump or two — the hand detailed to cut the cable was doing his work, and had actually remembered to carry the axe with him when he went up the ship's side. Hornblower felt the satisfaction of a job well done; his careful instruction of the boarding-party in the afternoon, his methodical allocation of duties to each individual man, and his reiteration of his orders until everyone thoroughly understood the part he had to play were bearing fruit.

Against the misty sky he saw the Indiaman's topsails changing shape; the men allotted to the task were sheeting them home. Thank God for a few prime seamen who, arriving in darkness in a strange ship, could find their way to the right places and lay their hands on the right lines without confusion. Hornblower saw the Indiaman's yards come round; in the darkness he could just see a black blur detach itself from her side, the lighter, cut adrift and floating away.

"You can square away, Mr. Freeman, if you please," he said. "The Indiaman will follow us out."

The *Porta Coeli* gathered way and headed for the southeastern exit of the harbour, the Indiaman close at her stern. For several long seconds there was no sign of any interest being taken in these movements. Then came a hail, apparently from the cutter which had brought the officials aboard. It was so long since Hornblower had heard or spoken French that he could not understand the words used.

"*Comment?*" he yelled back through the speaking-trumpet.

An irascible voice asked him again what in the name of the devil he thought he was doing.

"Anchorage — mumble — current — mumble — tide," yelled Hornblower in reply.

This time the unknown in the cutter invoked the name of God instead of that of the devil.

"Who in God's name is that?"

"Mumble mumble mumble," bellowed Hornblower back again, and quietly to the helmsman, "Bring her slowly round to port."

Carrying on a conversation with the French authorities while taking a vessel down an involved channel — however well he had memorised the latter on the chart — taxed his resources.

"Heave-to!" yelled the voice.

"Pardon, Captain," yelled Hornblower back. "Mumble — anchor-cable — mumble — impossible."

Another loud hail from the cutter, full of menace.

"Steady as you go," cried Hornblower to the helmsman. "Mr. Freeman, a hand at the lead, if you please."

He knew there was no chance of gaining any more precious seconds; by the time the leadsman was calling the depths and revealing the brig's design of evasion the shore authorities would be fully alert. A pinpoint of light stabbed the thin mist and the sound of a musket-shot came over the water; the cutter was taking the quickest method of attracting the attention of the shore batteries.

"Stand by to go about!" rasped Hornblower; this was the most ticklish moment of the outward passage. The brig's canvas volleyed as she came round, and simultaneously there was a bigger tongue of red flame in the darkness and the sound of the cutter's six-pounder bow chaser, cleared away and loaded at last. Hornblower heard no sound of the ball. He was busy looking back at the Indiaman, dimly showing in the minute light of the brig's wake. She was coming about neatly. That master's mate — Calverly — whom Freeman had recommended for the command of the boarding-party was a capable officer, and must be highly praised when the time should come to send in a report.

And then from the jetty came a succession of flashes and a rolling roar; the big thirty-two pounders there had opened at last. The sound of the last shot was instantly followed by the noise of a ball passing close by; Hornblower had time somehow to note how much he hated that noise. They were having to round the jetty, and would be within range for several minutes. There was no sign of damage either to the brig or the Indiaman as yet — and there was nothing in favour of returning the fire, for the brig's little six-pounders would make no impression on the solid battery, while the flashes would reveal the vessel's position. He took note of the cry of the leadsman; it would be some minutes before he could tack again and stand directly away from the jetty. It was a long time, on the other hand, before the battery fired again. Bonaparte must have stripped his shore defences of seasoned gunners in order to man the artillery of his army in Germany; untrained recruits, called upon suddenly to man their guns, and working in darkness, would naturally be unhandy. Here it came, the flash and the roar, but this time there was no sound of any shot passing — maybe the gunners had lost all sense of direction and elevation, which was easy enough in the darkness. And the flashes from the guns were convenient in enabling Hornblower to check his position.

A yell came from the lookout in the bows, and Hornblower, looking forward, could just make out the dark square of the top of the pilot-lugger's mainsail, close in on their starboard bow. They were making an effort to impede the brig's escape.

"Steady!" said Hornblower to the helmsman.

Let the weakest go to the wall; there was a shattering crash as brig and lugger met, starboard bow to starboard bow. The brig shuddered and lurched and drove on, the lugger rasping down her side. Something caught and tore loose again, and there came, as the vessels parted, a thin despairing yell from the lugger. The little vessel's bows must have been smashed in like an eggshell by that shock, and the water must be pouring in. The cries died away; Hornblower distinctly heard one wailing voice abruptly cut short, as if water was pouring into the mouth of the despairing swimmer. The Indiaman was still holding her course in the brig's wake.

"By the mark eight!" called the leadsman.

He could lay her on the other tack now, and as he gave the order the battery at the jetty again roared harmlessly. They would be out of range by the time the gunners could reload.

"A very good piece of work, Mr. Freeman," said Hornblower, loudly. "All hands did their duty admirably." Somebody in the darkness began to cheer, and the cry was taken up throughout the brig. The men were yelling like madmen.

"Horny! Good old Horny!" yelled somebody, and the cheering redoubled.

Even from astern they could hear the exiguous prize crew of the Indiaman joining in; Hornblower felt a sudden smarting of the eyes, and then experienced a new revulsion of feeling. He felt a little twinge of shame at being fond of these simpletons. Besides —

"Mr. Freeman," he said, harshly, "kindly keep the hands quiet."

The risk he had run had been enormous. Not merely the physical danger, but the danger to his reputation. Had he failed, had the *Porta Coeli* been disabled and captured, men would not have stopped to think about his real motive, which was to make the French authorities believe that the *Flame*'s mutiny was merely a ruse to enable the brig to enter the harbour. No; men would have said that Hornblower had tried to take advantage of the mutiny to feather his own nest, had thrown away the *Porta Coeli* and had left the mutineers unmolested merely to grab at an opportunity to acquire prize-money. That was what they would have said — and all the appearances would have borne out the assumption — and Hornblower's reputation would have been eternally tarnished. He had risked his honour as well as his life and liberty. He had gambled everything in hare-brained fashion, thrown colossal stakes on the board for a meagre prize, like the fool he was.

Then the wave of black reaction ebbed away. He had taken a calculated risk, and his calculation had proved exact. It would be a long time before the mutineers could clear up their misunderstanding with the French authorities — Hornblower could imagine the messengers hurrying at this moment to warn the coastal defences at Honfleur and Caen — even if eventually they should succeed in doing so. He had turned the mutineers' position, cut off their retreat. He had bearded Bonaparte under the batteries of his own capital river. And there was the prize he had taken; at least a thousand pounds, his share would be, when the prize-money came to be reckoned up, and a thousand pounds was a welcome sum of money, a gratifying sum. Barbara and he would find it useful.

Emotion and excitement had left him tired. He was about to tell Freeman that he was going below, and then he checked himself. It would be an unnecessary speech; if Freeman could not find him on deck he would know perfectly well that he was in his cabin. He dragged himself wearily down to his cot.

CHAPTER VII

"Mr. Freeman's respects, sir," said Brown, "an' he said to tell you that day's just breaking, fairly clear, sir. Wind's backed to sou'-by-west, sir, during the night, blowin' moderate. We're hove-to, us an' the prize, an' it's the last of the flood-tide now, sir."

"Very good," said Hornblower, rolling out of his cot. He was still heavy with sleep, and the tiny cabin seemed stuffy, as well as chilly, although the stern window was open.

"I'll have my bath," said Hornblower, reaching a sudden decision. "Go and get the wash-deck pump rigged." He felt unclean; although this was November in the Channel he could not live through another day without a bath. His ear caught some surprised and jocular comments from the hands rigging the pump as he came up through the hatchway, but he paid them no attention. He threw off his dressing-gown, and a puzzled and nervous seaman, in the half-light, turned the jet of the canvas hose upon him while another worked the pump. The bitterly cold sea-water stung as it hit his naked skin, and he leaped and danced and turned about grotesquely, gasping. The seamen did not realise it when he wanted the jet stopped, and when he tried to escape from it they followed him up across the deck.

"Avast, there!" he yelled in desperation, half frozen and half drowned, and the merciless stream stopped. Brown threw the big towel round him, and he scrubbed his tingling skin, while he jumped and shivered with the stimulus of the cold.

"I'd be frozen for a week if I tried that, sir," said Freeman, who had been an interested spectator.

"Yes," said Hornblower, discouraging conversation.

His skin glowed delightfully as he put on his clothes in his cabin with the window shut, and his shivering ceased. He drank thirstily of the steaming coffee which Brown brought him, revelling in the pleasant and unexpected feeling of well-being that filled him. He ran lightheartedly on deck again, The morning was already brighter; the captured Indiaman could now be made out, hove-to half a gunshot to leeward.

"Orders, Sir Horatio?" said Freeman, touching his hat.

Hornblower swept his glance round, playing for time. He had been culpably negligent of business; he had given no thought to his duty since he woke — since he went below to sleep, for that matter. He should order the prize back to England at once, but he could not do that without taking the opportunity of sending a written report back with her, and at this moment he simply hated the thought of labouring over a report.

"The prisoners, sir," prompted Freeman.

Oh God, he had forgotten the prisoners. They would have to be interrogated and note made of what they had to say. Hornblower felt bone-lazy as well as full of wellbeing — an odd combination.

"They might have plenty to say, sir," went on Freeman, remorselessly. "The pilot talks some English, and we had him in the wardroom last night. He says Boney's been licked again. At a place called Leipzig, or some name like that. He says the Russians'll be over the Rhine in a week. Boney's back in Paris already. Maybe it's the end of the war."

Hornblower and Freeman exchanged glances; it was a full year since the world had begun to look for the end of the war, and many hopes had blossomed and wilted during that year. But the Russians on the Rhine! Even though the English army's entrance upon the soil of France in the south had not shaken down the Empire, this new invasion might bring that about. Yet there had been plenty of forecasts — Hornblower had made some — to the effect that the first defeat of Bonaparte in the open field would bring to an end at the same time both his reputation for invincibility and his reign. These forecasts about the invasion of the Empire might be as inaccurate.

"Sail-ho!" yelled the lookout, and in the same breath, "She's the *Flame*, sir."

There she was, as before; the parting mist revealed her for only a moment before closing round her again, and then a fresh breath of wind shredded the mist and left her in plain sight. Hornblower reached the decision he had so far been unable to make.

"Clear the ship for action, Mr. Freeman, if you please. We're going to fetch her out."

Of course, it was the only thing to do. During the night, within an hour of the cutting-out of the French Indiaman, the word would be sent flying round warning all French ports in the neighbourhood that the British brig with the white cross on her foretopsail was playing a double game, and only masquerading as a mutinous vessel. The news must have reached this side of the estuary by midnight — the courier could cross on the ferry at Quilleboeuf or elsewhere. Everyone would be on the watch for the brig to attempt another coup, and this bank of the river would be the obvious place. Any delay would give the mutineers a chance to reopen communication with the shore and to clear up the situation; if the authorities on shore were once to discover that there were two brigs, sister-ships, in the Bay of the Seine the mutineers might be saved that trouble. Not an hour ought to be lost.

It was all very clear and logical, yet Hornblower found himself gulping nervously as he stood on the quarter-deck. It could only mean a hammer-and-tongs battle — he would be in the thick of it in an hour. This deck which he trod would be swept by the grapeshot of the *Flame*'s carronades; within the hour he might be dead; within the hour he might be shrieking under the surgeon's knife. Last night he had faced disaster, but this morning he was facing death. That warm glow which his bath had induced in him had vanished completely, so that he found himself on the point of shivering in the chill of the morning. He scowled at himself in frantic self-contempt, and forced himself to pace brightly and jerkily up and down the tiny quarter-deck. His memories were unmanning him, he told himself. The memory of Richard trotting beside him in the sunset, holding his finger in an unbreakable clutch; the memory of Barbara; the memory even of Smallbridge or of Bond Street — he did not want to be separated from these things, to 'leave the warm precincts of the cheerful day'. He wanted to live, and soon he might die.

Flame had set more sail — boom-mainsail and jibs; close-hauled she could fetch Honfleur without ever coming within range of the *Porta Coeli*'s guns. Hornblower's fears withdrew into the background as his restless mind, despite itself, interested itself in the tactical aspects of the problem before it.

"See that the hands have some breakfast, if you please, Mr. Freeman," he said. "And it would be best if the guns were not run out yet."

"Aye aye, sir."

It might be a long, hard battle, and the men should have their breakfast first. And running out the guns would tell the people in *Flame* that the *Porta Coeli* expected a fight, and that would warn them that maybe their escape into French protection might not be easy. The more perfect the surprise, the greater the chance of an easy victory. Hornblower glowered at the *Flame* through his glass. He felt a dull, sullen rage against the mutineers who had caused all this trouble, whose mad action was imperilling his life. The sympathy he had felt towards them when he was seated in the safety of the Admiralty was replaced now by a fierce resentment. The villains deserved hanging — the thought changed his mood so that he could smile as he met Freeman's eyes when the latter reported the brig cleared for action.

"Very good, Mr. Freeman."

His eyes were dancing with excitement; he looked over at *Flame* again just as a fresh hail came from the masthead.

"Deck, there! There's a whole lot of small craft putting out from the beach, sir. Headin' for *Flame* it looks like, sir."

The mutineers' brig was going through the same performance as yesterday, heading towards the French coast just out of gunshot of the *Porta Coeli*, ready to take refuge sooner than fight; the mutineers must think the small craft a welcoming deputation, coming to escort them in. And there was thick weather liable to close in on them again at any moment. *Flame* was spilling the wind from her mainsail, her every action denoting increasing hesitation. Probably on her quarter-deck there was a heated argument going on, one party insisting on keeping out of range of the *Porta Coeli* while another hesitated before such an irrevocable action as going over to the French. Maybe there was another party clamouring to turn and fight — that was quite likely; and maybe even there was a party of the most timid or the least culpable who wished to surrender and trust to the mercy of a court martial. Certainly counsel would be divided. She was hauling on her sheet again now, on a straight course for Honfleur and the approaching gunboats; two miles of clear water separated her from the *Porta Coeli*.

"Those gunboats are closing in on her, sir," said Freeman, glass to eye. "And that chasse-marée lugger's full of men. Christ! There's a gun."

Someone in the *Flame* had fired a warning shot, perhaps to tell the French vessels to keep their distance until the debate on her deck had reached a conclusion. Then she wore round, as if suddenly realising the hostile intent of the French, and as she wore the small craft closed in on her, like hounds upon a deer. Half a dozen shots were fired, too ragged to be called a broadside. The gunboats were heading straight at her, their sweeps out, six a side, giving them additional speed and handiness. Smoke spouted from their bows, and over the water came the deep-toned heavy boom of the twenty-four-pounders they mounted — a sound quite different from the higher-pitched, sharper bang of the *Flame*'s carronades. The lugger ran alongside her, and through his glass Hornblower could see the boarders pouring onto the *Flame*'s deck.

"I'll have the guns run out, Mr. Freeman, if you please," he said.

The situation was developing with bewildering rapidity — he had foreseen nothing like this. There was desperate fighting ahead, but at least it would be against Frenchmen and not against Englishmen. He could see puffs of smoke on the *Flame*'s deck — some, at least, of the crew were offering resistance.

He walked forward a few yards, and addressed himself to the gunners.

"Listen to me, you men. Those gunboats must be sunk when we get in among 'em. One broadside for each will do that business for 'em if you make your shots tell. Aim true, at the base of their masts. Don't fire until you're sure you'll hit."

"Aye aye, sir," came a few voices in reply.

Hornblower found Brown beside him.

"Your pistols, sir. I loaded 'em afresh, an' primed 'em with new caps."

"Thank you," said Hornblower. He stuck the weapons into his belt, one on each side, where either hand could grasp them as necessary. It was like a boy playing at pirates, but his life might depend on those pistols in five minutes' time. He half drew his sword to see that it was free in its sheath, and he was already hastening back to take his stand by the wheel as he thrust it in again.

"Luff a little," he said. "Steady!"

Flame had flown up into the wind and lay all aback — apparently there was no one at the helm at the moment. The lugger was still alongside her, and the four gunboats, having taken in their sails, were resting on their oars, interposing between the *Porta Coeli* and the pair of ships. Hornblower could see the guns' crews bending over the twenty-four-pounders in their bows.

"Hands to the sheets, Mr. Freeman, please. I'm going between them — there. Stand to your guns, men! Now, hard down!"

The wheel went over, and the *Porta Coeli* came about on the other tack, handily as anyone could desire.

Hornblower heard the thunder of a shot close under her bows, and then the deck erupted in a flying shower of splinters from a jagged hole close to the mainmast bitts — a twenty-four-pound shot, fired upwards at close elevation, had pierced the brig's frail timbers, and, continuing its flight, had burst through the deck.

"Ready about! Hard over!" yelled Hornblower, and the *Porta Coeli* tacked again into the narrow gap between two gunboats. Her carronades went off in rapid succession on both sides. Looking to starboard, Hornblower had one gunboat under his eye. He saw her there, half a dozen men standing by the tiller aft, two men at each sweep amidships tugging wildly to swing her round, a dozen men at the gun forward. A man with a red

handkerchief round his head stood by the mast, resting his hand against it — Hornblower could even see his open mouth as his jaw dropped and he saw death upon him. Then the shots came smashing in. The man with the red handkerchief disappeared — maybe he was dashed overboard, but most likely he was smashed into pulp. The frail frame of the gunboat — nothing more than a big rowing-boat strengthened forward for a gun — disintegrated ; her side caved in under the shots as though under the blows of some vast hammer. The sea poured in even as Hornblower looked; the shots, fired with extreme depression, must have gone on through the gunboat's bottom after piercing her side. The dead weight of the gun in her bows took charge as her stability vanished, and her bows surged under while her stern was still above water. Then the gun slid out, relieving her of its weight, and the wreck righted itself for an instant before capsizing. A few men swam among the wreckage. Hornblower looked over to port; the other gunboat had been as hard hit, lying at that moment just at the surface with the remains of her crew swimming by her. Whoever had been in command of those gunboats had been a reckless fool to expose the frail vessels to the fire of a real vessel of war — even one as tiny as the *Porta Coeli* — as long as the latter was under proper command. Gunboats were only of use to batter into submission ships helplessly aground or dismasted.

The chasse-marée and the *Flame*, still alongside each other, were close ahead.

"Mr. Freeman, load with canister, if you please. We'll run alongside the Frenchman. One broadside, and we'll board her in the smoke."

"Aye aye, sir."

Freeman turned to bellow orders to his crew.

"Mr. Freeman, I shall want every available hand in the boarding-party. You'll stay here —"

"Sir!"

"You'll stay here. Pick six good seamen to stay with you to work the brig out again if we don't come back. Is that clear, Mr. Freeman?"

"Yes, Sir Horatio."

There was still time for Freeman to make the arrangements as the *Porta Coeli* surged up towards the Frenchman. There was still time for Hornblower to realise with surprise that what he had said about not coming back was sincere, and no mere bombast to stimulate the men. He was most oddly determined to conquer or die, he, the man who was afraid of shadows. The men were yelling madly as the *Porta Coeli* drew up to the Frenchman, whose name — the *Bonne Celestine* of Honfleur — was now visible on her stern. Blue uniforms and white breeches could be seen aboard her; soldiers — it was true, then, that Bonaparte's need for trained artillerymen had forced him to conscript his seamen, replacing them with raw conscript soldiers. A pity the action was not taking place out at sea, for then they would most of them be sea-sick.

"Lay us alongside," said Hornblower to the helmsman. There was confusion on the decks of the *Bonne Celestine*; Hornblower could see men running to the guns on her disengaged port side.

"Quiet, you men!" bellowed Hornblower. "Quiet!"

Silence fell on the brig; Hornblower had hardly to raise his voice to make himself heard on the tiny deck.

"See that every shot tells, you gunners," said Hornblower. "Boarders, are you ready to come with me?"

Another yell answered him. Thirty men were crouching by the bulwarks with pikes and cutlasses; the firing of the broadside and the dropping of the mainsail would set free thirty more, a small enough force unless the broadside should do great execution and the untrained landsmen in the *Bonne Celestine* should flinch.

Hornblower stole a glance at the helmsman, a grey-bearded seaman, who was coolly gauging the distance between the two vessels while at the same time watching the mainsail as it shivered as the *Porta Coeli* came to the wind. A good seaman, that — Hornblower made a mental note to remember him for commendation. The helmsman whirled the wheel over.

"Down mains'l," roared Freeman.

The *Bonne Celestine*'s guns bellowed deafeningly, and Hornblower felt powder grains strike his face as the smoke eddied round him. He drew his sword as the *Porta Coeli*'s carronades crashed out, and the two vessels came together with a squealing of timber. He sprang upon the bulwark in the smoke, sword in hand; at the same moment a figure beside him cleared the bulwark in a single motion and dropped upon the *Bonne Celestine*'s deck — Brown, waving a cutlass. Hornblower leaped after him, but Brown stayed in front of him, striking to left and right at the shadowy figures looming in the smoke. Here there was a pile of dead and

wounded men, caught in the blast of canister from one of the *Porta Coeli's* carronades. Hornblower stumbled over a limb, and recovered himself in time to see a bayonet on the end of a musket lunging at him. A violent twisting of his body evaded the thrust. There was a pistol in his left hand, and he fired with the muzzle almost against the Frenchman's breast. Now the wind had blown the cannon-smoke clear. Forward some of the boarders were fighting with a group of the enemy cornered in the bow — the clash of the blades came clearly to Hornblower's ears — but aft there was not a Frenchman to be seen. Gibbons, master's mate, was at the halliards running down the tricolour from the masthead. At the starboard side lay the *Flame*, and over her bulwarks were visible French infantry shakoes; Hornblower saw a man's head and shoulders appear, saw a musket being pointed. It shifted its aim from Gibbons to Hornblower, and in that instant Hornblower fired the other barrel of his pistol, and the Frenchman fell down below the bulwarks, just as a fresh wave of boarders came pouring on board from the *Porta Coeli*.

"Come on!" yelled Hornblower — it was desperately important to make sure of the *Flame* before a defence could be organised.

The brigs stood higher out of the water than did the *chasse-marée*; this time they had to climb upward. He got his left elbow over the bulwark, and tried to swing himself up, but his sword hampered him.

"Help me, damn you!" he snarled over his shoulder, and a seaman put his shoulder under Hornblower's stern and heaved him up with such surprising goodwill that he shot over the bulwarks and fell on his face in the scuppers on the other side, his sword slithering over the deck. He started to crawl forward towards it, but a sixth sense warned him of danger, and he flung himself down and forward inside the sweep of a cutlass, and cannoned against the shins of the man who wielded it. Then a wave of men burst over him, and he was kicked and trodden on and then crushed beneath a writhing body with which he grappled with desperate strength. He could hear Brown's voice roaring over him, pistols banging, sword-blades clashing before sudden silence fell round him. The man with whom he was struggling went suddenly limp and inert, and then was dragged off him. He rose to his feet.

"Are you wounded, sir?" asked Brown.

"No," he answered. Three or four dead men lay on the deck; aft a group of French soldiers with a French seaman or two among them stood by the wheel, disarmed, while two British sailors, pistol in hand, stood guard over them. A French officer, blood dripping from his right sleeve, and with tears on his cheeks — he was no more than a boy — was sitting on the deck, and Hornblower was about to address him when his attention was suddenly distracted.

"Sir! Sir!"

It was an English seaman he did not recognise, in a striped shirt of white and red, his pigtail shaking from side to side as he gesticulated with the violence of his emotion.

"Sir! I was fightin' against the Frogs. Your men saw me. Me an' these other lads here."

He motioned behind him to an anxious little group of seamen who had heretofore hung back, but now came forward, some of them bursting into speech, all of them nodding their heads in agreement.

"Mutineers?" asked Hornblower. In the heat of battle he had forgotten about the mutiny.

"I'm no mutineer, sir. I did what I had to or they'd 'a killed me. Ain't that so, mates?"

"Stand back, there!" blared Brown; there was blood on the blade of his cutlass.

A vivid prophetic picture suddenly leaped into Hornblower's mind's eye — the court martial, the semicircle of judges in glittering full dress, the tormented prisoners, tongue-tied, watching, only half understanding, the proceedings which would determine their lives or deaths, and he himself giving his evidence, trying conscientiously to remember every word spoken on both sides; one word remembered might make the difference between the lash and the rope.

"Arrest those men!" he snapped. "Put them under confinement."

"Sir! Sir!"

"None o' that!" growled Brown.

Remorseless hands dragged the protesting men away.

"Where are the other mutineers?" demanded Hornblower.

"Down below, sir, I fancies," said Brown. "Some o' the Frenchies is down there, too."

Odd how a beaten crew so often scuttled below. Hornblower honestly believed that he would rather face the fighting madness of the victors on deck than surrender ignominiously in the dark confines of the 'tween-decks. A loud hail from the *Porta Coeli* came to his ears.

"Sir Horatio!" hailed Freeman's voice. "We'll be all aground if we don't get way on the ships soon. I request permission to cast off and make sail."

"Wait!" replied Hornblower.

He looked round him; the three ships locked together, prisoners under guard here, there, and everywhere. Below decks, both in the *Bonne Celestine* and in the *Flame*, there were enemies still unsecured, probably many more in total than he had men under his orders. A shattering crash below him, followed by screams and cries; the *Flame* shook under a violent blow. Hornblower remembered the sound of a cannon-shot striking on his inattentive ears a second before; he looked round. The two surviving gunboats were resting on their oars a couple of cables' lengths away, their bows pointing at the group of ships. Hornblower could guess they were in shoal water, almost immune from attack. A jet of smoke from one of the gunboats, and another frightful crash below, and more screams. Those twenty-four-pounder balls were probably smashing through the whole frail length of the brig, whose timbers could resist their impact hardly better than paper. Hornblower plunged into the urgency of the business before him like a man into a raging torrent which he had to swim.

"Get those hatches battened down, Brown!" he ordered. "Put a sentry over each. Mr. Gibbons!"

"Sir?"

"Secure your hatches. Get ready to make sail."

"Aye aye, sir."

"What topmen are there here? Man the halliards. Who can take the wheel? What, none of you? Mr. Gibbons! Have you a quartermaster to spare? Send one here immediately. Mr. Freeman! You can cast off and make sail. Rendezvous at the other prize."

Another shot from those accursed gunboats crashed into the *Flame's* stern below him. Thank God the wind was off shore and he could get clear of them. The *Porta Coeli* had set her boom-mainsail again and had got clear of the *Bonne Celestine*; Gibbons was supervising the setting of the latter's lug-mainsail while half a dozen hands boomed her off from the *Flame*.

"Hoist away!" ordered Hornblower as the vessels separated. "Hard a-starboard, Quartermaster."

A sound overside attracted his attention. Men — mutineers or Frenchmen — were scrambling out through the shot-holes and hurling themselves into the sea, swimming towards the gunboats. Hornblower saw the white hair of Nathaniel Sweet trailing on the surface of the water as he struck out, twenty feet away from him. Of all the mutineers he was the one who most certainly must not be allowed to escape. For the sake of England, for the sake of the service, he must die. The seaman acting as sentry at the after hatchway did not look as if he were a capable marksman.

"Give me your musket," said Hornblower, snatching it.

He looked at priming and flint as he hurried back to the taffrail. He trained the weapon on the white head, and pulled the trigger. The smoke blew back into his face, obscuring his view only for a moment. The long white hair was visible for a second at the surface when he looked again, and then it sank, slowly, out of sight. Sweet was dead. Maybe there was an old widow who would bewail him, but it was better that Sweet was dead. Hornblower turned back to the business of navigating the *Flame* back to the rendezvous.

CHAPTER VIII

This fellow Lebrun was an infernal nuisance, demanding a private interview in this fashion. Hornblower had quite enough to do as it was; the gaping shot-holes in *Flame's* side had to be patched sufficiently well to enable her to recross the Channel: the exiguous crew of the *Porta Coeli* — not all of them seamen by any means — had to be distributed through no fewer than four vessels (the two brigs, the India-man, and the chasse-marée), while at the same time an adequate guard must be maintained over more than a hundred prisoners of one nationality or another; the mutineers must be supervised so that nothing could happen to

prejudice their trial; worst of all, there was a long report to be made out. Some people would think this last an easy task, seeing that there was a long string of successes to report, two prizes taken, the *Flame* recaptured, most of the mutineers in irons below decks and their ringleader slain by Hornblower's own hand. But there was the physical labour of writing it out, and Hornblower was very weary. Moreover, the composition of it would be difficult, for Hornblower could foresee having to steer a ticklish course between the Scylla of open boastfulness and the Charybdis of mock-modesty — how often had his lip wrinkled in distaste when reading the literary efforts of other officers! And the killing of Nathaniel Sweet by the terrible Commodore Hornblower, although it would look well in a naval history, and although, from the point of view of the discipline of the service, it was the best way in which the affair could have ended, might not appear so well in Barbara's eyes. He himself did not relish the memory of that white head sinking beneath the waves, and he felt that Barbara, with her attention forcibly called to the fact that he had shed blood, had taken a human life, with his own hands (those hands which she said she loved, which she had sometimes kissed), might feel a repulsion, a distaste.

Hornblower shook himself free from a clinging tangle of thoughts and memories, of Barbara and Nathaniel Sweet, to find himself still staring abstractedly at the young seaman who had brought to him Freeman's message regarding Lebrun's request.

"My compliments to Mr. Freeman, and he can send this fellow in to me," he said.

"Aye aye, sir," said the seaman, his knuckles to his forehead, turning away with intense relief. The Commodore had been looking through and through him for three minutes at least — three hours, it seemed like, to the seaman.

An armed guard brought Lebrun into the cabin, and Hornblower looked him keenly over. He was one of the half-dozen prisoners taken when the *Porta Coeli* came into Le Havre, one of the deputation which had mounted her deck to welcome her under the impression that she was the *Flame* coming in to surrender.

"Monsieur speaks French?" said Lebrun.

"A little."

"More than a little, if all the tales about Captain Hornblower are true," replied Lebrun.

"What is your business?" snapped Hornblower, cutting short this Continental floweriness. Lebrun was a youngish man, of olive complexion, with glistening white teeth, who conveyed a general impression of oiliness.

"I am *adjoint* to Baron Momas, Mayor of Le Havre."

"Yes?" Hornblower tried to show no sign of interest, but he knew that under the Imperial régime the mayor of a large town like Le Havre was a most important person, and that his *adjoint* — his assistant, or deputy — was a very important permanent official.

"The firm of Momas Frères is one you must have heard of. It has traded with the Americas for generations — the history of its rise is identical with the history of the development of Le Havre itself."

"Yes?"

"Similarly, the war and the blockade have had a most disastrous effect upon the fortunes both of the firm of Momas and upon the city of Le Havre."

"Yes?"

"The *Caryatide*, the vessel that you so ingeniously captured two days ago, monsieur, might have restored the fortunes of us all — a single vessel running the blockade, as you will readily understand, is worth ten vessels arriving in peacetime."

"Yes?"

"M. le Baron and the city of Le Havre will be desperate, I have no doubt, as the result of her capture before her cargo could be taken out."

"Yes?"

The two men eyed each other, like duellists during a pause, Hornblower determined to betray none of the curiosity and interest that he felt, and Lebrun hesitating before finally committing himself.

"I take it, monsieur, that anything further I have to say will be treated as entirely confidential."

"I promise nothing. In fact, I can only say that it will be my duty to report anything you say to the Government of His Majesty of Great Britain."

"They will be discreet for their own sake, I expect," ruminated Lebrun.

"His Majesty's ministers can make their own decisions," said Hornblower.

"You are aware, monsieur," said Lebrun, obviously taking the plunge, "that Bonaparte has been defeated in a great battle at Leipzig?"

"Yes."

"The Russians are on the Rhine."

"That is so."

"The Russians are on the Rhine!" repeated Lebrun, marvelling. The whole world, pro-Bonaparte or anti-Bonaparte, was marvelling that the massive Empire should have receded half across Europe in those few short months.

"And Wellington is marching on Toulouse," added Hornblower — there was no harm in reminding Lebrun of the British threat in the south.

"That is so. The Empire cannot much longer endure."

"I am glad to hear your opinion in the matter."

"And when the Empire falls there will be peace, and when peace comes trade will recommence."

"Without a doubt," said Hornblower, still a little mystified.

"Profits will be enormous during the first few months. All Europe has for years been deprived of foreign produce. At this moment genuine coffee commands a price of over a hundred francs a pound."

Now Lebrun was showing his hand, more involuntarily than voluntarily. There was a look of avarice in his face which told Hornblower much.

"All this is obvious, monsieur," said Hornblower, non-committally.

"A firm which was prepared for the moment of peace, with its warehouses gorged with colonial produce ready to distribute, would greatly benefit. It would be far ahead of its competitors. There would be millions to be made. Millions." Lebrun was obviously dreaming of the possibility of finding some of those millions in his own pocket.

"I have a great deal of business to attend to, monsieur," said Hornblower. "Have the goodness to come to the point."

"His Majesty of Great Britain might well allow his friends to make those preparations in advance," said Lebrun, the words coming slowly; well they might, for they could take him to the guillotine if Bonaparte ever heard of them. Lebrun was offering to betray the Empire in exchange for commercial advantages.

"His Majesty would first need undeniable proof that his friends *were* his friends," said Hornblower.

"A *quid pro quo*," said Lebrun, thereby for the first time during the conversation putting Hornblower at a loss — the Frenchman's pronunciation of Latin being quite unlike anything he was accustomed to, so that he had to grope about in his mind wondering what unaccustomed word Lebrun was using before at length he understood.

"You may tell me the nature of your offer, monsieur," said Hornblower with solemn dignity, "but I can make no promises of any sort in return. His Majesty's Government will probably refuse to bind themselves in any way whatsoever."

It was curious how he found himself aping the ministerial manner and diction — it might have been his solemn brother-in-law, Wellesley, speaking. Maybe high politics had that effect on everyone; it was useful in this particular case, because it helped him to conceal his eagerness.

"A *quid pro quo*," said Lebrun, again, thoughtfully. "Supposing the city of Le Havre declared itself against the Empire, declared itself for Louis XVIII?"

The possibility had occurred to Hornblower, but he had put it aside as being potentially too good to be true.

"Supposing it did?" he said cautiously.

"It might be the example for which the Empire is waiting. It might be infectious. Bonaparte could not survive such a blow."

"He has survived many blows."

"But none of this sort. And if Le Havre declared for the King the city would be in alliance with Great Britain. The blockade could not continue to apply. Or if it did a licence to import could be granted to the house of Momas Frères, could it not?"

"Possibly. Remember, I make no promises."

"And when Louis XVIII was restored to the throne of his fathers he would look with kindness upon those who first declared for him," said Lebrun. "The *adjoint* to Baron Momas might expect to find a great career open to him."

"No doubt of that," agreed Hornblower. "But — you have spoken of your own sentiments. Can you be sure of those of M. le Baron? And whatever may be M. le Baron's sentiments, how can he be sure that the city would follow him should he declare himself?"

"I can answer for the Baron, I assure you, sir. I know — I have certain knowledge of his thoughts."

Probably Lebrun had been spying on his master on behalf of the Imperial Government, and had no objection to applying his knowledge in another and more profitable cause.

"But the city? The other authorities?"

"The day you took me prisoner, sir," said Lebrun, "there arrived from Paris some sample proclamations and advance notice of some Imperial decrees. The proclamations were to be printed — my last official act was to give the order — and next Monday the proclamations were to be posted and the decrees made public."

"Yes?"

"They are the most drastic in the drastic history of the Empire. Conscription — the last of the class of 1815 is to be called, and the classes all the way back to that of 1802 are to be revised. Boys of seventeen, cripples, invalids, fathers of families, even those who have purchased exemption; they are all to be called."

"France must have grown used to conscription."

"France has grown weary of it, rather, sir. I have official knowledge of the number of deserters and the severity of the measures directed against them. But it's not merely the conscription, sir. The other decrees are more drastic still. The taxes! The direct imposts, the indirect imposts, the *droits réunis*, and the others! Those of us who survive the war will be left beggars."

"And you think publication of these decrees will rouse sufficient discontent to cause rebellion?"

"Perhaps not. But it would constitute an admirable starting-point for a determined leader."

Lebrun was shrewd enough — this last remark was acute and might be true.

"But the other authorities in the town? The military governor? The Prefect of the Department?"

"Some of them would be safe. I know their sentiments as well as I know Baron Momas'. The others — a dozen well-timed arrests, carried out simultaneously, an appeal to the troops in the barracks, the arrival of British forces (*your* forces, sir), a heartening proclamation to the people, the declaration of a state of siege, the closing of the gates, and it would be all over. Le Havre is well fortified, as you know, sir. Only an army and a battering train could retake it, and Bonaparte has neither to spare. The news would spread like wildfire through the Empire, however Bonaparte tried to stop it."

This man Lebrun had ideas and vision, whatever might be thought of his morals. That was a neat thumbnail sketch he had drawn of a typical *coup d'état*. If the attempt were successful the results would be profound. Even if it were to fail, loyalty throughout the Empire would be shaken. Treason was infectious, as Lebrun had said. Rats in a sinking ship were notoriously quick in following an example in leaving it. There would be little enough to risk losing in supporting Lebrun's notions, and the gains might be immense.

"Monsieur," said Hornblower, "so far I have been patient. But in all this time you have made me no concrete proposal. Words — nebulous ideas — hopes — wishes, that is all, and I am a busy man, as I told you. Please be specific. And speedy, if that is not too much trouble to you."

"I shall be specific, then. Set me on shore — as an excuse I could be sent to arrange a cartel for the exchange of prisoners. Let me be able to assure M. le Baron of your instant support. In the three days before next Monday I can complete the arrangements. Meanwhile, you remain close in the vicinity with all the force you can muster. The moment we secure the citadel we shall send up the white flag, and the moment you see that you enter the harbour and overawe any possible dissentients. In return for this — a licence to Momas Frères to import colonial produce, and your word of honour as a gentleman that you will inform King Louis that it was I, Hercule Lebrun, who first suggested the scheme to you."

"Ha-h'm," said Hornblower. He hardly ever made use of that sound now, after his wife had teased him about it, but it escaped from him at this moment of crisis. He had to think. He had to have time to think. The long conversation in the French which he was not accustomed to using had been exhausting. He lifted his voice in a bellow to the sentry outside the door.

"Pass the word for the armed guard to take this prisoner away."

"Sir!" protested Lebrun.

"I will give you my decision in an hour," said Hornblower. "Meanwhile for appearance's sake you must be treated harshly."

"Sir! Remember to be secret! Remember not to utter a word! For God's sake — !"

Lebrun had a very proper sense of the necessity for secrecy in planning a rebellion against such a potentate as Bonaparte. Hornblower took that into consideration as he went up on deck, there to pace up and down, thrusting the minor administrative problems out of his mind as he debated this, the greatest problem of all.

CHAPTER IX

The tricolour was still flying over the citadel — the fortress of Ste. Adresse — of Le Havre; Hornblower could see it through his glass as he stood on the deck of the *Flame*, which was creeping along under easy sail, just out of range of the shore batteries. He had decided, inevitably, to assist Lebrun in his scheme. He was telling himself again, at that very moment, and for the thousandth time, that there was much to gain whatever the result, and little enough to lose. Only Lebrun's life, and perhaps Hornblower's reputation. Heaven only knew what Whitehall and Downing Street would say when they heard of what he had been doing. No one had decided yet what to do about the government of France when Bonaparte should fall; certainly there was no unanimity of opinion regarding the restoration of the Bourbons. The Government could refuse to honour the promises he had made regarding import licences; they could come out with a bold announcement that they had no intention of recognising Louis XVIII's pretensions; they could rap him over the knuckles very sharply indeed for most of his actions since recapture of the *Flame*.

He had used his powers to pardon forty mutineers, all the seamen and boys, in fact, that were in the crew of the latter vessel. He could plead sheer necessity as a defence for that decision; to keep the mutineers as well as the prisoners under guard, and to provide prize crews for the two prizes, would have called for the services of every man at his disposal. He would hardly have had enough to handle the vessels, and certainly he could have attempted nothing further. As it was, he had relieved himself of all these difficulties by a few simple decisions. Every Frenchman had been sent on shore in the *Bonne Celestine* under flag of truce, with Lebrun ostensibly to arrange for their exchange; the Indiaman had been manned by a minimum crew and sent with despatches to Pellew and the Mid-Channel Squadron, and he had been able to retain the two brigs, each at least sufficiently manned, under his own command. That had been a convenient way of getting rid of Chadwick, too — he had been entrusted with the despatches and the command of the Indiaman. Chadwick had been pale, as a result of two weeks' confinement in the Black Hole, and two weeks' imminent danger of hanging. There had been no evident pleasure in his red-rimmed eyes when he realised that his rescuer had been young Hornblower, once his junior in the gunroom of the *Indefatigable* and now his immeasurable superior. Chadwick had snarled a little on receiving his orders — only a little. He had weighed the despatches in his hand, presumably wondering what was said in them about himself, but discretion or long habit had their way, and he said, "Aye aye, sir," and turned away.

By now those despatches should have passed through Pellew's hands, and, their contents noted, might even be on their way to Whitehall. The wind had been fair for the Indiaman to have fetched the Mid-Channel Squadron off the Start — fair, too, for the reinforcements Hornblower had asked for to make their way to him. Pellew would send them, he knew. It was fifteen years since they had last met; nearly twenty years since Pellew had promoted him to a lieutenancy in the *Indefatigable*. Now Pellew was an admiral and a commander-in-chief, and he was commodore, but Pellew would be the loyal friend and the helpful colleague he had always been.

Hornblower glanced out to seaward, where, dim on the horizon, the *Porta Coeli* patrolled in the mist. She would halt the reinforcements before they could be sighted from the shore, for there was no reason why the authorities in Le Havre should be given the least chance to think that anything unusual portended, although it was not a vital matter. England had always flaunted her naval might in sight of the enemy, making the hostile

coast her sea frontier — the *Flame*, here, wearing the White Ensign under the noses of the citizens of Le Havre, was no unusual sight to them. That was why he did not hesitate to stay here, with the tricolour on the citadel within range of his telescope.

"Keep a sharp lookout for any signal from the *Porta Coeli*," he said sharply to the midshipman of the watch.
"Aye aye, sir."

Porta Coeli, the Gate of Heaven; the Silly Porter was what the men called her. Hornblower had a vague memory of reading about the action which resulted in the strange name appearing in the Navy List. The first *Porta Coeli* had been a Spanish privateer — half pirate, probably — captured off Havannah. She had put up so fierce a resistance that the action had been commemorated by naming an English ship after her. The *Tonnant*, the *Temeraire*, most of the foreign names in the Navy List came there as a result of similar actions — if the war were to go on long enough there would be more ships in the Navy with foreign names than with English ones, and among the rival navies the converse might eventually become true. The French Navy boasted a *Swiftsure*; maybe the Americans would have a *Macedonian* on their Navy List in future years. He had not heard yet of a French *Sutherland*; Hornblower felt a sudden twinge of strange regret. He snapped his telescope shut and turned abruptly on his heel, walking fast as though to shake off the memories that assailed him. He did not like to think about surrendering the *Sutherland*, even though the court martial had so honourably acquitted him; and, strangely enough, the passage of time made his feelings of shame about the incident more acute instead of less. And his regrets about the *Sutherland* brought with them, inevitably, memories of Maria, now nearly three years in her grave. Memories of poverty and despair, of pinchbeck shoebuckles; of the pity and sympathy he had felt for Maria — a poor substitute for love, and yet the memory of it hurt intensely. The past was coming to life again in his mind, a resurrection as horrible as any other resurrection would be. He remembered Maria, snoring softly in her sleep beside him, and he remembered the sour smell of her hair; Maria, tactless and stupid, of whom he had been fond as one is fond of a child, although not nearly as fond as he was now of Richard. He was almost shaking with the memory when it abruptly faded out and was replaced by the memory of Marie de Graçay — why the devil was he thinking about *her*? The unreserved love that she gave him, her warmth and tenderness, the quickness of perception with which she understood his moods; it was insane that he should find himself hungering at this day for Marie de Graçay, and yet he was, even though it was hardly a week since he had left the arms of a loyal and understanding wife. He tried to think about Barbara, and yet the mental images he conjured up were instantly thrust again into the background by pictures of Marie. It would be better even to think about surrendering the *Sutherland*. Hornblower walked the deck of the *Flame* with ghosts at his side in the chill, bleak winter day. Men saw his face and shrank from crossing his path with greater care even than usual. Yet most of them thought Hornblower was only planning some further devilry against the French.

It was late afternoon before the expected interruption came.

"Signal from *Porta Coeli*, sir! Eighteen — fifty-one — ten. That's friendly ships in sight, bearing nor'west."

"Very good. Ask their numbers."

This must be the reinforcements sent by Pellew. The signal hands bent on the flags and hauled away at the halliards; it was several minutes before the midshipman noted the reply and translated it by reference to the list.

"*Nonsuch*, 74, Captain Bush, sir."

"Bush, by God!"

The exclamation leaped uncontrolled from Hornblower's lips; the devils that surrounded him were chased away as though by holy water at the thought of his old staunch matter-of-fact friend being only just over the horizon. Of course Pellew would send Bush if he were available, knowing the friendship that had so long existed between him and Hornblower.

"*Camilla*, 36, Captain Howard, sir."

He knew nothing about Howard whatever. He looked at the list — a captain of less than two years' seniority. Presumably Pellew had selected him as junior to Bush.

"Very good. Reply — 'Commodore to —'"

"*Porta*'s still signalling, begging your pardon, sir. '*Nonsuch* to Commodore. Have — on board — three hundred — marines — above — complement'."

Good for Pellew. He had stripped his squadron to give Hornblower a landing force that could make itself felt. Three hundred marines, and the *Nonsuch's* detachment as well, and a body of seamen. He could march five hundred men into Le Havre should the opportunity arise.

"Very good. Make 'Commodore to *Nonsuch* and *Camilla*. Delighted to have you under my command'."

Hornblower looked again over at Le Havre. He looked up at the sky, he gauged the strength of the wind, remembered the state of the tide, calculated the approach of night. Over there Lebrun must be bringing his plans to fruition, tonight if at all. He must be ready to strike his blow.

"Make 'Commodore to all vessels. Join me here after dark. Night signal two lanterns horizontally at fore yard-arms'."

"— fore yardarms. Aye aye, sir," echoed the midshipman, scribbling on his slate.

It was good to see Bush again, to shake his hand in welcome as he hoisted himself in the darkness onto the *Flame's* deck. It was good to sit in the stuffy little cabin with Bush and Howard and Freeman as he told them about his plans for the morrow. It was wonderful to be planning action after that day of horrible introspection. Bush looked at him closely with his deep-set eyes.

"You've been busy, sir, since you came to sea again."

"Of course," said Hornblower.

The last few days and nights had been a turmoil; even after the recapture of the *Flame* the business of reorganisation, the sessions with Lebrun, the writing of the despatches had all been exhausting.

"Too busy, if you'll pardon me, sir," went on Bush. "It was too soon for you to resume duty."

"Nonsense," protested Hornblower. "I had almost a year's leave."

"Sick leave, sir. After typhus. And since then —"

"Since then," interjected Howard, a handsome, dark, young-looking man, "a cutting-out action. A battle. Three prizes taken. Two vessels sunk. An invasion planned. A midnight council of war."

Hornblower felt suddenly irritated.

"Are you gentlemen trying to tell me," he demanded, glowering round at them, "that I'm unfit for service?" They quailed before his anger.

"No, sir," said Bush.

"Then be so good as to keep your opinions to yourselves."

It was hard luck on Bush, who, after all, was only making a kindly inquiry about his friend's health. Hornblower knew it, and he knew how desperately unfair it was to make Bush pay for the miseries Hornblower had suffered that day. Yet he could not resist the temptation for the moment. He swept his glance round them again, forcing them to drop their gaze to the deck, and he had no sooner done it, no sooner obtained for himself this pitiful bit of self-gratification, than he regretted it and sought to make amends.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I spoke in haste. We must all have the most complete confidence in each other when we go into action tomorrow. Will you forgive me?"

They mumbled back at him, Bush profoundly embarrassed at receiving an apology from a man who, in his opinion, was free to say what he liked to anyone.

"You all understand what I want done tomorrow — if tomorrow is the day?" Hornblower went on.

They nodded, turning their eyes to the chart spread out in front of them.

"No questions?"

"No, sir."

"I know this is only the sketchiest plan. There will be contingencies, emergencies. No one can possibly foresee what will happen. But of one thing I am certain, and that is that the ships of this squadron will be commanded in a way that will bring credit to the service. Captain Bush and Mr. Freeman have acted with bravery and decision under my own eyes too often, and I know Captain Howard too well by reputation for me to have any doubt about that. When we attack Havre, gentlemen, we shall be turning a page, we shall be writing the end of a chapter in the history of tyranny."

They were pleased with what he said, and they could have no doubt regarding his sincerity, because he spoke from his heart. They smiled as he met their eyes. Maria, when she was alive, had sometimes made use of a strange expression about polite phrases uttered in order to get the recipient into a good humour. She referred to them as 'a little bit of sugar for the bird'. That was what this final speech of his had been, a little bit of sugar

for the bird — and yet he had meant every word of it. No, not quite — he was still almost ignorant of Howard's achievements. To that extent the speech was formal. But it had served its purpose.

"Then we have finished with business, gentlemen. What can I offer you by way of entertainment? Captain Bush can remember games of whist played on the nights before going into action. But he is by no means an enthusiastic whist player."

That was understating the case — Bush was the most reluctant whist player in the world, and he grinned sheepishly in acknowledgment of Hornblower's gentle gibe; but it was pathetic to see him pleased at Hornblower's remembering this about him.

"You should have a night's rest, sir," he said, speaking, as the senior, for the other two, who looked to him for guidance.

"I should get back to my ship, sir," echoed Howard.

"So should I, sir," said Freeman.

"I don't want to see you go," protested Hornblower.

Freeman caught sight of the playing-cards on the shelf against the bulkhead.

"I'll tell your fortunes before we leave," he volunteered. "Perhaps I can remember what my gipsy grandmother taught me, sir."

So there really was gipsy blood in Freeman's veins; Hornblower had often wondered about it, noticing his swarthy skin and dark eyes. Hornblower was a little surprised at the carelessness with which Freeman admitted it.

"Tell Sir Horatio's," said Bush.

Freeman was shuffling the pack with expert fingers; he laid it on the table, and took Hornblower's hand and placed it on the pack.

"Cut three times, sir."

Hornblower went through the mumbo-jumbo tolerantly, cutting and cutting again as Freeman shuffled. Finally Freeman caught up the pack and began to deal it face upward on the table.

"On this side is the past," he announced, scanning the complicated pattern, "on that side is the future. Here in the past there is much to read. I see money, gold. I see danger. Danger, danger, danger. I see prison — prison twice, sir. I see a dark woman. And a fair woman. You have journeyed over sea."

He poured out his patter professionally enough, reeling it off without stopping to take breath. He made a neat résumé of Hornblower's career, and Hornblower listened with some amusement and a good deal of admiration for Freeman's glibness. What Freeman was saying could be said by anyone with an ordinary knowledge of Hornblower's past. Hornblower's eyebrows came together in momentary irritation at the brief allusion to the dead Maria, but he smiled again when Freeman passed rapidly on, telling of Hornblower's experiences in the Baltic, translating the phrases of ordinary speech into the gipsy clichés with a deftness that could not but amuse.

"And there's an illness, sir," he concluded, "a very serious illness, ending only a short time back."

"Amazing!" said Hornblower, in mock admiration. The glow of anticipated action always brought out his best qualities; he was cordial and human towards this junior officer in a way that would be impossible to him at any other time.

"Amazing's the word, sir," said Bush.

Hornblower was astonished to see that Bush was actually impressed; the fact that he was taken in by Freeman's adroit use of his knowledge of the past would go far towards explaining the success of the charlatans of this world.

"What about the future, Freeman?" asked Howard. It was a relief to see that Howard was only tolerantly interested.

"The future," said Freeman, drumming with his fingers on the table as he turned to the other half of the arrangement. "The future is always more mysterious. I see a crown. A golden crown."

He rearranged the pattern.

"A crown it is, sir, try it any way you will."

"Horatio the First, King of the Cannibal Isles," laughed Hornblower. The clearest proof of his present mellowness was this joke about his name — a sore subject usually with him.

"And here there is more danger. Danger and a fair woman. The two go together. Danger because of a fair woman — danger *with* a fair woman. There's all kinds of danger here, sir. I'd advise you to beware of fair women."

"No need to read cards to give that advice," said Hornblower.

"Sometimes the cards speak truth," replied Freeman, looking up at him with a peculiar intensity in his glittering eyes.

"A crown, a fair woman, danger," repeated Hornblower. "What else?"

"That's all that I can read, sir," said Freeman, sweeping the cards together.

Howard was looking at the big silver watch that he pulled from his pocket.

"If Freeman could have told us whether or no we will see a white flag over the citadel tomorrow," he said, "it might help us to decide to prolong this pleasant evening. As it is, sir, I have my orders to give."

Hornblower was genuinely sorry to see them go. He stood on the deck of the *Flame* and watched their gigs creep away in the black winter night, while the pipe of the bo'sun's mate was calling the hands for the middle watch. It was piercing cold, especially after the warm stuffiness of the cabin, and he felt suddenly even more lonely than usual, maybe as a result. Here in the *Flame* he had only two watch-keeping officers, borrowed from the *Porta Coeli*; tomorrow he would borrow another from the *Nonsuch* or the *Camilla*. Tomorrow? That was today. And today perhaps Lebrun's attempt to gain control of Le Havre might be successful. Today he might be dead.

CHAPTER X

It was as misty as might be expected of that season and place when day broke, or rather when the grey light crept almost unnoticed into one's consciousness. The *Porta Coeli* was dimly visible, an almost unnoticeable denser nucleus in the fog. Hailing her at the top of his lungs, Hornblower received the faint reply that *Nonsuch* was in sight astern of her, and a few seconds later the additional information that *Camilla* was in sight of *Nonsuch*. He had his squadron in hand, then, and there was nothing to do but wait, and to ponder for the hundredth time over the question as to how the hands, barefooted with the icy water surging round their feet, could possibly bear their morning duty of washing down the decks. But they were laughing and skylarking as they did it; the British seaman was of tough material. Presumably the lower deck guessed that there was something in the wind, that this concentration of force portended fresh action, and they found the prospect exhilarating. Partly, Hornblower knew, it was because they felt assured of success in the unknown enterprise before them. It must be amazingly pleasant to be able to put one's trust in a man and have no further doubts. Hornblower watched the men at work with envy as well as pity.

He himself was in a fever of anxiety, turning over in his mind the arrangements he had finally made with Lebrun before sending him ashore. They were simple enough; absurdly simple, it seemed to him now. The whole plan seemed a feeble thing with which to overturn an Empire that dominated Europe. Yet a conspiracy should be simple — the more elaborate the machinery the greater the chance of its breaking down. That was one reason why he had insisted on daylight for his part of the business. He had dreaded the possible mishaps if he had plunged ashore in darkness into an unknown town with his little army. Daylight doubled the chances of success while it doubled at least the possible loss in case of failure.

Hornblower looked at his watch — for the last ten minutes he had been fighting down the urge to look at it.

"Mr. Crawley," he said, to the master's mate who was his new first lieutenant in the *Flame*. "Beat to quarters and clear the brig for action."

The wind was a light air from the east, as he had expected. Fetching into Le Havre would be a ticklish business, and he was glad that he had resolved to lead in the small and hardy *Flame* so as to show the way to the ponderous old *Nonsuch*.

"Ship cleared for action, sir," reported Crawley.

"Very good."

Hornblower looked at his watch — it was fully a quarter-hour yet before he should move in. A hail to the *Porta Coeli* astern brought him the information that all the other vessels had cleared for action, and he smiled to himself. Freeman and Bush and Howard had no more been able to wait the time out than he had been.

"Remember, Mr. Crawley," he said, "if I am killed as we go in, the *Flame* is to be laid alongside the quay. Captain Bush is to be informed as soon as possible, but the *Flame* is to go on."

"Aye aye, sir," said Crawley. "I'll remember."

Damn his eyes, he need not be so infernally ordinary about it. From the tone of Crawley's voice one might almost assume that he expected Hornblower to be killed. Hornblower turned away from him and walked the deck briskly to shake off the penetrating cold. He looked along at the men at their stations.

"Skylark, you men," he ordered. "Let's see how you can jump."

There was no use going into action with men chilled to numbness. The men at the guns and waiting at the sheets began to caper at their posts.

"Jump, you men, jump!"

Hornblower leaped grotesquely up and down to set them an example; he wanted them thoroughly warmed up. He flapped his arms against his sides as he leaped, the epaulettes of the full-dress uniform he was wearing pounded on his shoulders.

"Higher than that! Higher!"

His legs were beginning to ache, and his breath came with difficulty, but he would not stop before the men did, although he soon came to regret the impulse which had made him start.

"Still!" he shouted at last, the monosyllable taking almost the last breath from his body. He stood panting, the men grinning.

"Horny for ever!" yelled an unidentifiable voice forward, and a ragged cheer came from the men.

"Silence!"

Brown was beside him with his pistols, a twinkle in his eye.

"Take that grin off your face!" snapped Hornblower.

There would be another Hornblower legend growing up in the Navy, similar to the one about the hornpipe danced on the deck of the *Lydia* during the pursuit of the *Natividad*. Hornblower pulled out his watch, and when he had replaced it took up his speaking-trumpet.

"Mr. Freeman! I am going about on the other tack. Hail the squadron to tack in succession. Mr. Crawley!"

"Sir!"

"Two hands at the lead, if you please."

One man might be killed, and Hornblower wanted no possible cessation in the calling of soundings.

"Headsail sheets! Mains'l sheets!"

The *Flame* went about on the starboard tack, making about three knots under fore and aft sail in the light breeze. Hornblower saw the shadowy *Porta Coeli* follow the *Flame's* example. Behind her, and invisible, was the old *Nonsuch* — Hornblower had still to set eyes on her since her arrival. He had not seen her, for that matter, since he quitted her to catch the typhus in Riga. Good old Bush. It gave Hornblower some comfort to think that he would be supported today by the *Nonsuch's* thundering broadsides and Bush's stolid loyalty. The leadsmen were already chanting the depths as the *Flame* felt her way up the fairway towards Le Havre. Hornblower wondered what was going on in the city, and then petulantly told himself that he would know soon enough. It seemed to him as if he could remember every single word of the long discussion he had had with Lebrun, when between them they had settled the details of Lebrun's harebrained scheme. They had taken into account the possibility of fog — any seaman would be a fool who did not do so in the Bay of the Seine in winter.

"Buoy on the starboard bow, sir," reported Crawley.

That would mark the middle ground — it was the only buoy the French had left on the approaches to Le Havre. Hornblower watched it pass close alongside and then astern; the flowing tide was heeling it a little and piling up against the seaward side of it. They were nearing the entrance.

"Listen to me, you men," said Hornblower, loudly. "Not a shot is to be fired without my orders. The man who fires a gun, for no matter what reason, unless I tell him to, I will not merely flog. I'll hang him. Before sunset today he'll be at the yardarm. D'you hear me?"

Hornblower had every intention of executing his threat — at least at that moment — and as he looked round him his expression showed it. A few muttered Aye aye, sir's showed him he had been understood.

"*Qui va là?*" screamed a voice through the fog from close overside; Hornblower could just see the French boat which habitually rowed guard over the entrance in thick weather. The guard-boat, as Hornblower and Lebrun had agreed, would not be easily diverted from its duty.

"Despatches for M. le Baron Momas," hailed Hornblower in return.

The confident voice, the fluent French, the use of Momas' name, might all gain time for the squadron to enter.

"What ship?"

It was inconceivable that the seamen in the guard-boat did not recognise the *Flame* — the question must be a merely rhetorical one asked while the puzzled officer in command collected his thoughts.

"British brig *Flame*," called Hornblower; he had the helm put over at that moment to make the turn past the point.

"Heave-to, or I will fire into you!"

"If you fire, you will have the responsibility," replied Hornblower. "We bear despatches for Baron Momas."

It was a fair wind now for the quay. The turn had brought the guard-boat close alongside; Hornblower could see the officer standing up in the bows beside the bow-gun, a seaman at his shoulder with a glowing linstock in his hand. Hornblower's own full-dress uniform must be visible and cause some delay, too, for men expecting to fight would not be expected to wear full dress. He saw the officer give a violent start, having caught sight of the *Porta Coeli* looming up in the mist astern of the *Flame*. He saw the order given, saw the spark thrust on the touchhole. The three-pounder roared, and the shot crashed into the *Flame*'s side. That would give the alarm to the batteries at the point and above the quay.

"We do not fire back," he hailed — maybe he could gain a little more time, and maybe that tune would be of use, although he doubted it.

Here inside the harbour the mist was not so thick. He could see the shadowy shape of the quay rapidly defining itself. In the next few seconds he would know if this were a trap or not, if the batteries should open in a tempest of flame. One part of his mind raced through the data, while another part was working out how to approach the quay. He could not believe that Lebrun was playing a double game, but if it were so only he and the *Flame* would be lost — the other vessels would have a chance to get clear.

"Luff!" he said to the helmsman. There were a few busy seconds as he applied himself to the business of bringing the *Flame* alongside the quay as speedily as possible and yet without damaging her too severely. She came alongside with a creak and a clatter, the fenders groaning as if in agony. Hornblower sprang onto the bulwark and from there to the quay, sword, cocked hat, epaulettes and all. He could not spare time to look round, but he had no doubt that the *Porta Coeli* had anchored, ready to give assistance where necessary, and that the *Nonsuch* in her turn was nearing the quay, her marines drawn up ready for instant landing. He strode up the quay, his heart pounding. There was the first battery, the guns glaring through the embrasures. He could see movement behind the guns, and more men running to the battery from the guardhouse in the rear. Now he had reached the edge of the moat, his left hand held up in a gesture to restrain the men at the guns.

"Where is your officer?" he shouted.

There was a momentary delay, and then a young man in blue and red artillery uniform sprang upon the parapet.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Tell your men not to fire," said Hornblower. "Have you not received your new orders?"

The full dress, the confident bearing, the extraordinary circumstances puzzled the young artillery officer.

"New orders?" he asked feebly.

Hornblower simulated exasperation.

"Get your men away from those guns," he said. "Otherwise there may be a deplorable accident."

"But, monsieur —" The artillery lieutenant pointed down to the quay, and Hornblower now could spare the time to glance back, following the gesture. What he saw made his pounding heart pound harder yet for sheer pleasure. There was the *Nonsuch* against the quay, there was the *Camilla* just coming alongside; but more important yet, there was a big solid block of red coats forming up on the quay. One section with an officer at its head was already heading towards them at a quick step, muskets sloped.

"Send a messenger instantly to the other battery," said Hornblower, "to make sure the officer in command there understands."

"But, monsieur —"

Hornblower stamped his foot with impatience. He could hear the rhythmic tread of the marines behind him, and he gesticulated to them with his hand behind his back. They marched along past him.

"Eyes left!" ordered the subaltern in command, with a smart salute to the French officer. The courtesy took what little wind was left out of the sails of the Frenchman, so that his new protest died on his lips. The marine detachment wheeled to its left round the flank of the battery on the very verge of its dry ditch. Hornblower did not dare take his eyes from the young Frenchman on the parapet, but he sensed what was going on in the rear of the battery. The sally-port there was open, and the marines marched in, still in column of fours, still with their muskets sloped. Now they were in among the guns, pushing the gunners away from their pieces, knocking the smouldering linstocks out of their hands. The young officer was wringing his hands with anxiety.

"All's well that ends well, monsieur," said Hornblower. "There might have been a most unpleasant incident." Now he could spare a moment to look round. Another marine detachment was off at the quickstep, marching for the other battery. Other parties, seamen and marines, were heading for the other strategic points he had listed in his orders. Brown was coming panting up the slope to be at his side.

The clatter of a horse's hoofs made him turn back again; a mounted French officer was galloping towards them, and reined up amid a shower of flying gravel.

"What is all this?" he demanded. "What is happening?"

"The news apparently has been delayed in reaching you, monsieur," said Hornblower. "The greatest news France has known for twenty years."

"What is it?"

"Bonaparte rules no more," said Hornblower. "Long live the King!"

Those were magic words; words like those of some old-time spell or incantation. No one in the length and breadth of the Empire had dared to say '*Vive le Roi!*' since 1792. The mounted officer's jaw dropped for a moment.

"It is false!" he cried, recovering himself. "The Emperor reigns."

He looked about him, gathering his reins into his hands, about to ride off.

"Stop him, Brown!" said Hornblower.

Brown took a stride forward, seized the officer's leg in his huge hands, and with a single heave threw him out of the saddle, Hornblower grabbing the bridle in time to prevent the horse from bolting. Brown ran round and extricated the fallen officer's feet from the stirrups.

"I have need of your horse, sir," said Hornblower.

He got his foot into the stirrup and swung himself awkwardly up into the saddle. The excited brute plunged and almost threw him, but he squirmed back into the saddle, tugged the horse's head round, and then let him go in a wild gallop towards the other battery. His cocked hat flew from his head, his sword and his epaulettes jerked and pounded as he struggled to keep his seat. He tore past the other marine detachment, and heard them cheer him, and then he managed to rein in the frantic horse on the edge of the ditch. Struck with a new idea, he trotted round to the rear of the battery to the main gate.

"Open," he shouted, "in the name of the King!"

That was the word of power. There was a clatter of bolts and the upper half of the huge oaken door opened and a couple of startled faces looked out at him. Behind them he saw a musket levelled at him — someone who was a fanatical Bonapartist, probably, or someone too stolid to be taken in by appearances.

"Take that imbecile's musket away from him!" ordered Hornblower. The pressing need of the moment gave an edge to his tone, so that he was obeyed on the instant. "Now, open the gate."

He could hear the marines marching up towards him.

"Open the gate!" he roared.

They opened it, and Hornblower walked his horse forward into the battery.

There were twelve vast twenty-four-pounders mounted inside, pointing out through the embrasures down into the harbour. At the back stood the furnace for heating shot with a pyramid of balls beside it. If the two batteries had opened fire nothing hostile could have endured long on the water, and not merely the water but

the quay and the waterfront could have been swept clean. And those batteries, with their parapets five feet thick and eight feet high, and their dry ditches, ten feet deep, cut square in the solid rock, could never have been stormed without regular siege methods. The bewildered gunners stared at him, and at the red-coated marines who came marching in behind him. A callow subaltern approached him.

"I do not understand this, sir," he said. "Who are you, and why did you say what you did?"

The subaltern could not bring himself to utter the word 'King'; it was a word that was taboo — he was like some old maid posing a delicate question to a doctor. Hornblower smiled at him, using all his self-control to conceal his exultation, for it would never do to triumph too openly.

"This is the beginning of a new age for France," he said.

The sound of music came to his ears. Hornblower dismounted and left his horse free, and ran up the steps cut in the back of the parapet, the subaltern following. Standing on the top of the parapet with the vast arms of the semaphore over their heads, the whole panorama of the port was open to them; the squadron lying against the quay, the detachments of the landing party, red-coated or white-shirted, on the march hither and thither, and, on the quay itself, the marine band striding up towards the town, the drums thundering and the bugles braying, the red coats and the white crossbelts and the glittering instruments making a brave spectacle. That had been Hornblower's crowning idea; nothing would be more likely to convince a wavering garrison that he came in peace than a band calmly playing selections as it marched in.

The harbour defences were secured now; he had carried out his part of the scheme. Whatever had happened to Lebrun, the squadron was not in serious danger; if the main garrison had refused to be seduced, and turned against him, he could spike the batteries' guns, blow up the magazines, and warp his ships out almost at leisure, taking with him whatever prisoners and booty he could lay his hands on. The awkward moment had been when the guard-boat had fired its gun — firing is infectious. But the fact of only one shot being fired, the delay, the mist, had made the inexperienced officer in command at the batteries wait for orders, giving him time to use his personal influence. It was evident already that part of Lebrun's scheme, at least, had been successful. Lebrun had not made up his mind, at the time of his leaving the *Flame*, whether it would be a banquet or a council of war to which he would summon the senior officers, but whichever it was he had clearly succeeded in depriving the harbour defences of all direction. Apparently, too, Lebrun's story that a blockade runner was expected to arrive during the night, and his request that the harbour defences should hold their fire until certain as to the identity of any ship entering the port, had had their effect as well — Lebrun had told Hornblower of his intention of making much of the fact that the *Flame*, on her way in to surrender, had actually been attacked so as to give the English the opportunity to recapture her.

"I will have no more muddles of that sort," Lebrun had said, with a grin. "Order, counter-order, disorder."

One way and another he had certainly contrived to create such disorder and such an atmosphere of uncertainty in the batteries as to give Hornblower every chance — the man was a born intriguer; but Hornblower still did not know whether the rest of his *coup d'état* had succeeded. This was no time for delay; there were too many examples in history of promising enterprises brought to naught after a good beginning solely because someone did not push on at the psychological moment.

"Where is my horse?" said Hornblower, leaving the subaltern's desire for information unsatisfied except by the vague statement that a new age was beginning for France.

He climbed down from the parapet again, to find that an intelligent marine was holding the horse's head. The redcoats were making a ludicrous attempt to fraternise with the French recruits. Hornblower climbed up into the saddle, and trotted out into the open. He wanted to make a bold push, but at the same time he felt nervous about involving his landing party in the narrow streets of the town without some assurance of a friendly reception there. Here came Howard, riding gracefully; apparently he, too, had been able to procure himself a horse.

"Any orders, sir?" Howard asked. Two midshipmen and Brown were running beside him, the midshipmen presumably to act as messengers.

"Not yet," answered Hornblower, fuming inwardly with anxiety while trying to appear calm.

"Your hat, sir," said the admirable Brown, who had picked the thing up while on his way from the other battery.

Here came a horseman at a gallop, a white band on his arm, a white handkerchief fluttering in his hand. He reined in when he saw Hornblower's gold lace.

"You are Monsieur — Monsieur —" he began.

"Hornblower." No Frenchman had ever been able to pronounce that name.

"From Baron Momas, sir. The citadel is secure. He is about to descend into the main square."

"The soldiers in the barracks?"

"They are tranquil."

"The main guard at the gate?"

"I do not know, sir."

"Howard, take your reserve. March for the gate as hard as you can. This man will go with you to explain to the guard. If they will not come over, let them desert. They can march out into the open country — it will not matter. No bloodshed if you can help it, but make sure of the gate."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower explained to the Frenchman what he had said.

"Brown, come with me. I shall be in the main square if needed, Howard."

It was not much of a procession Howard was able to form, two score marines and seamen, but the band blared out as best it could as Hornblower marched triumphantly up the street. The people on the route looked at them, curious or sullen or merely indifferent, but there was no sign of active resentment. In the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville there was far more bustle and life. Numerous men sat their horses there; a detachment of police, drawn up in line, gave an appearance of respectability to the proceedings. But what caught the eye was the multitude of white emblems. There were white cockades in the hats of the gendarmes, and the mounted officials wore white scarves or armbands. White flags — bed sheets, apparently — hung from most of the windows. For the first time in more than twenty years the Bourbon white was being flaunted on the soil of France. A fat man on foot, a white sash round his belly where (Hornblower guessed) yesterday he had worn the tricolour, hurried towards him as he rode in. Hornblower signalled frantically to the band to stop, and scrambled down from the saddle, handing the reins to Brown as he advanced towards the man he guessed to be Momas.

"Our friend!" said Momas, his arms outspread. "Our ally!"

Hornblower allowed himself to be embraced — even at that moment he wondered at what the leathernecks behind him would think about the sight of a commodore being kissed by a fat Frenchman — and then saluted the rest of the Mayor's staff as they came to greet him. Lebrun was at their head, grinning.

"A great moment, sir," said the Mayor.

"A great moment indeed, Monsieur le Baron."

The Mayor waved his hand towards the flagstaff that stood outside the Maine.

"The ceremony is about to take place," he said.

Lebrun was at his side with a paper, and Momas took it and mounted the steps at the foot of the flagstaff. He inflated his lungs and began to read at the top of his voice. It was curious how the French love of legal forms and appearances showed itself even here, at this moment of treason; the proclamation was studded with archaisms and seemed interminable in its prolixity. It mentioned the misdeeds of the usurper, Napoleon Bonaparte, it denounced all his pretensions to sovereignty, it disclaimed all allegiance to him. Instead it declared that all Frenchmen voluntarily recognised the unbroken reign of His Most Christian Majesty, Louis XVIII, King of France and Navarre. At those resounding words the men at the foot of the flagstaff hauled busily at the halliards, and the white standard of the Bourbons soared up the mast. It was time for a gesture on the part of the British. Hornblower turned to his men.

"Three cheers for the King!" he yelled.

He waved his cocked hat over his head.

"Hip — hip — hip —" he called.

"Hooray!" yelled the marines.

The cheer rang hollowly round the square; probably not one marine in ten had any idea as to which king he was cheering, but that did not matter.

"Hip — hip — hip —"

"Hooray!"

"Hip — hip — hip —"

"Hooray!"

Hornblower replaced his hat and stiffly saluted the white flag. Now it was time, and high time, to start organising the defence of the town against Bonaparte's wrath.

CHAPTER XI

"Your Excellency," said Lebrun, sidling into the room where Hornblower sat at his desk, "a fishermen's deputation has asked for an audience."

"Yes?" said Hornblower. With Lebrun he was careful not to commit himself prematurely.

"I have endeavoured to discover what it is they seek, Your Excellency."

Anyone could be quite sure that Lebrun would try to find things out. And so far Hornblower had carefully left Lebrun under the not unnatural illusion that he liked being addressed as 'Your Excellency' in every other sentence, and would be more malleable in consequence.

"Yes?"

"It is a question of one of their vessels being taken as a prize."

"Yes?"

"It carried one of your certificates to the effect that the vessel was sailing from the free port of Le Havre, and yet an English ship of war took possession of her."

"Indeed?"

What Lebrun did not know was that lying on the desk before him Hornblower had the report of the captain of the English brig which had made the capture. The captain was convinced that the vessel, before he took her, had just slipped out from Honfleur, across the estuary, having sold her catch there. Honfleur, being still under Bonaparte's rule, and under blockade in consequence, would pay three times as much for fish as could be obtained in liberated Le Havre. It was a question of trading with the enemy, and the Prize Court could be relied upon to adjudicate on the matter.

"We wish to retain the goodwill of the people, Your Excellency, especially of the maritime population. Could you not assure the deputation that the boat will be returned to its owners?"

Hornblower wondered how much the fishing-boat owners of the city had paid Lebrun to exert his influence on their behalf. Lebrun must be making the fortune he craved as much as he craved power.

"Bring the deputation in," said Hornblower; he had a few seconds in which to compose his speech to them — that was always as well, because his French was deficient enough to make circumlocutions necessary when a word or a grammatical construction evaded him.

The deputation, three grey-haired Norman fishermen with an intense air of respectability and in their Sunday best, came in as near smiles as was possible to their solemn natures; Lebrun must have assured them in the anteroom of the certainty of their request being granted. They were quite taken aback when Hornblower addressed them on the subjects of trading with the enemy and its consequences. Hornblower pointed out that Le Havre was at war with Bonaparte, war to the death. Heads would fall in hundreds if Bonaparte should emerge victorious from this war and recapture Le Havre. The scenes of horror that had been witnessed when Toulon fell twenty years before would be reproduced a thousandfold in Le Havre. A united effort was still necessary to pull the tyrant down. Let them attend to that, and make no further attempt to increase their personal fortunes. Hornblower wound up by announcing not merely his intention of allowing the fishing-boat to come under the adjudication of the British Prize Court, but also his fixed determination, in the case of any repetition of the offence, to send officers and crew before a court martial whose sentence undoubtedly would be death.

Lebrun ushered the deputation out again. For a moment Hornblower wondered how Lebrun would explain the failure, but he had no time to wonder for more than a moment. The demands upon the time and energy of the Governor of Le Havre were enormous; Hornblower sighed as he looked at the papers stacked on his desk.

There was so much to do; Saxton, the engineer officer just arrived from England, was clamouring to build a new battery, a demi-lune or a redan in his barbarous sapper vocabulary — to cover the defences of the Rouen Gate. All very well, but he would have to exact forced labour from the citizens to construct it. There was a mass of papers from Whitehall, mostly reports of spies regarding Bonaparte's strength and movements; he had skimmed through them, but one or two of them needed closer reading. There was the question of unloading the food ships which Whitehall had sent him — Le Havre should undoubtedly be well stocked with food in case of a close siege, but it was left to him to plan the warehousing of a thousand barrels of salt beef. There was the question of policing the streets. Old personal scores had been wiped out, Hornblower guessed, in the one or two murders of prominent Bonapartists — he even suspected Lebrun of having a hand in one of them — and there had already been some attempt at reprisal by secret assassination. He could run no risk, now that the city was under control, of allowing it to be divided against itself. The court martial was in progress of those mutineers of the *Flame* whom he had not pardoned. In every case the sentence would be death, inevitably, and there was food for thought in that He was Commodore of the British Squadron as well as Governor of Le Havre, and there was all the manifold business of the squadron to be attended to. He must decide about —

Hornblower was already walking up and down. This vast room in the Hôtel de Ville was far better adapted for walking in than was any quarter-deck. He had had two weeks now to adapt himself to the absence of fresh air and wide horizons; his head was bent on his breast and his hands were clasped behind him as he paced, forming the decisions that were demanded of him. This was the reward of success; confinement in an office, chained to a desk; parcelling out his time among a dozen heads of departments and innumerable persons seeking favours. He might as well be a harassed City merchant instead of a naval officer, with the exception that as a naval officer he had the additional labour and responsibility of sending long daily reports to Whitehall. It may have been a great honour to be entrusted with the governorship of Le Havre, to head the attack upon Bonaparte, but it was onerous.

Here came another interruption; an elderly officer in a dark-green uniform waving a paper in his hand. This was — what was his name again? — Hau, a captain in the 60th Rifles. Nobody knew quite what his nationality was by this time; maybe he did not know himself. The 60th, since it had lost its title of Royal Americans, had become rather a depository for aliens in the service of the Crown. He apparently, before the French Revolution, had been a Court official of one of the innumerable little states on the French side of the Rhine. His master had been an exile for twenty years, his master's subjects had been Frenchmen for twenty years, and he himself had been for twenty years employed in odd duties by the British Government.

"The Foreign Office bag is in, sir," said Hau, "and this despatch was marked 'urgent'."

Hornblower took his mind from the problem of nominating a new *juge de paix* (to take the place of the recent incumbent, who had apparently escaped to Bonapartist territory) to deal with the new problem.

"They're sending us a prince," said Hornblower, having read the letter.

"Which one, sir?" asked Hau, with keen and immediate interest.

"The Duc d'Angoulême."

"Eventual heir of the Bourbon line," said Hau, judiciously. "Eldest son of the Comte d'Artois, Louis' brother. By his mother he descends from the House of Savoy. And he married Marie Thérèse, the Prisoner of the Temple, daughter of the martyred Louis XVI. A good choice. He must be aged about forty now."

Hornblower wondered vaguely what use a royal prince would be to him. It might sometimes be a convenience to have a figurehead, but he could foresee — Hornblower was labouring under all the burden of disillusionment — that the Duke's presence would much more often involve him in additional and unprofitable labours.

"He will arrive tomorrow if the wind is fair," said Hau.

"And it is," said Hornblower, looking out of the window at the flagstaff, where fluttered, side by side, the Union flag of England and the white flag of the Bourbons.

"He must be received with all the solemnity the occasion demands," said Hau, dropping unconsciously into French through a fairly obvious association of ideas. "A Bourbon prince setting foot on French soil for the first time in twenty years. At the quay he must be greeted by all the authorities. A royal salute. A procession to the church. Te Deum to be sung there. A procession to the Hôtel de Ville, and there a grand reception."

"That is all your business," said Hornblower.

The bitter cold of winter still persisted unbroken. Down on the quay, where Hornblower waited while the frigate bearing the Duke was being warped in, a cutting northeasterly wind was blowing, which pierced through the heavy cloak he was wearing. Hornblower was sorry for the seamen and the troops drawn up in line, and for the other seamen who manned the yards of the men-of-war in the harbour. He himself had only just come down from the Hôtel de Ville, staying there until the last moment when a messenger brought him the information that the Duke was about to land, but the dignitaries and minor officials grouped behind him had been assembled some time. It seemed to Hornblower that where he stood he could hear teeth chattering in unison.

He watched with professional interest the warping in of the frigate; he heard the clanking of the windlass and the sharp orders of the officers. Slowly she drew up to the quay. The side-boys and the bosun's mates came running up the gangway, followed by the officers in full dress. The marine guard of honour formed up. A brow was thrown from the gangway to the quay, and here came the Duke, a tall, stiff man in a Hussar uniform, a blue ribbon across his chest. In the ship the pipes of the bosun's mates twittered in a long call, the marines presented arms, the officers saluted.

"Step forward to greet His Royal Highness, sir," prompted Hau at Hornblower's elbow.

There was a magic mid-point in the brow over which the Duke was walking; as he passed it he crossed from the British ship to the soil of France. Down came the French royal standard from the frigate's masthead. The pipes died away in one last ecstatic wail. The massed bands burst out in a triumphal march, the salutes began to roar, seamen and soldiers of the guard of honour presented arms after the fashion of two services and two nations. Hornblower found himself stepping forward, laying his cocked hat across his breast in the gesture he had painfully rehearsed under Hau's guidance that morning, and bowing to the representative of His Most Christian Majesty.

"Sir 'Oratio," said the Duke cordially — for all his lifetime in exile apparently he still had a Frenchman's difficulty in dealing with aspirates. He looked round him. "France, beautiful France."

Anything less beautiful than the waterfront of Le Havre with a nor'easter blowing Hornblower could not imagine, but perhaps the Duke meant it, and, anyway, the words would sound well to posterity. Probably the Duke had been coached beforehand to say them, by the grave and uniformed dignitaries who followed him down the brow. One of these the Duke indicated as Monsieur — Hornblower did not catch the name — the *chevalier d'honneur*, and this gentleman in turn presented the equerry and the military secretary.

Out of the tail of his eye Hornblower saw the massed dignitaries behind him straightening themselves up from their concerted bow, their hats still across their stomachs.

"Cover yourselves, gentlemen, I beg of you," said the Duke, and the grey hairs and the bald heads disappeared as the dignitaries gratefully shielded themselves from the wintry wind.

The Duke's teeth, too, apparently were chattering with cold. Hornblower darted a glance at Hau and at Lebrun, who were, with imperturbable politeness, elbowing each other to be nearest him and the Duke, and decided on the spot to cut down the further presentations to a bare minimum, ignoring the elaborate programme with which Hau and Lebrun had provided him. There would be no use in having a Bourbon prince sent him if he let him die of pneumonia. He had to present Momas, of course — the Baron's name would go down through history; and Bush, the senior naval officer — one of each country to mark the alliance between them, which was convenient, for Bush loved a lord, and royalty he adored. The Duke would be an important name on the list in Bush's memory headed by the Tsar of All the Russias. Hornblower turned and beckoned for the horses to be led up; the equerry hastened to hold the stirrup, and the Duke swung himself into the saddle, a born horseman like all his family. Hornblower mounted the quiet horse he had reserved for himself, and the others followed his example, a few of the civilians a little hampered by their unaccustomed swords. It was only a scant quarter of a mile to the church of Our Lady, and Lebrun had seen to it that every yard of it proclaimed a welcome to the Bourbons — there were white banners in every window, and a triumphal arch in fleurs-de-lis over the approach to the west portal of the church. But the cheers of the people in the street sounded thin in the cutting wind, and the procession could not have been very inspiring, with everybody hunched forward in self-protection.

The church offered them grateful shelter — like the figurative shelter she had to offer to all sinners, thought Hornblower, in a moment before he was engulfed in affairs again. He took his seat behind the Duke; in the tail of his eye he could see Lebrun, who was intentionally stationed there for Hornblower's benefit. By watching him Hornblower could see what had to be done, when to stand and when to kneel, for this was the first time he had ever been in a Catholic church or attended a Catholic ceremony. He was a little sorry that the activity of his mind prevented him from observing everything as closely as he would have liked. The vestments, the age-old ceremonial, might have appealed to him, but he was distracted by thoughts about what sort of pressure Lebrun had put on the officiating priests to get them to risk Bonaparte's wrath in this fashion, and by his wonderings about how much this scion of the Bourbons would wish to take a real part in the campaign, and about what was the exact significance of the reports which had begun to dribble in to the effect that at last Imperial troops were moving on Le Havre.

The incense and the warmth and his fatigue and the inconsequence of his thoughts made him drowsy; he was on the point of nodding off when he was roused by Lebrun's rising to his feet. He hastened to do the same, and the procession filed out of the church again.

From Notre Dame they rode up the Rue de Paris, scourged by the wind, and all round the grand square before dismounting again outside the Hôtel de Ville. The cheers of the people seemed thin and spiritless, and the wave of the hand or the lifting of the hat with which the Duke acknowledged them seemed wooden and mechanical. His Royal Highness possessed much of that stoical power to endure hardship in public without flinching which royalty must always display, but seemingly it had been acquired at the cost of making him silent and reserved. Hornblower wondered whether anything could be made of him, for under the Duke's nominal leadership Frenchmen would soon be shedding the blood of Frenchmen, or would be the moment Hornblower could be sure that he could trust the Bourbon partisans in action against the Bonapartists.

Hornblower watched him down the length of the great hall in the Hôtel de Ville — freezing cold, too, despite the fires which blazed at either end — as he greeted in turn the local dignitaries and their wives who were led up to him. The mechanical smile, the apt but formal phrase of greeting, the carefully graded courtesies, from the inclination of the head to the slight bow; all these indicated the care taken in his schooling. And clustered behind him and at his side were his advisers, the *émigré* nobles he had brought with him, Momas and Lebrun representing France since the revolution, Hau watching over British interests. No wonder the man acted like a wooden puppet, with all these people pulling the strings.

Hornblower saw the red noses and, above their gloves, the red elbows of the women shivering in the extreme *décolleté* of their Court gowns. Tradesmen's wives, petty officials' wives, badly dressed in clothes hurriedly run up that very day at the news that they were invited to the reception; some of the fat ones panted in corsets pulled tight, and some of the more slender ones tried to display the languorous uncorseted grace which had been fashionable ten years ago. They seethed with excitement at the prospect of meeting royalty. Their husbands caught some of the infection, and bustled about from group to group, but Hornblower knew of the anxiety that gnawed at them, the fear lest the monstrous power of Bonaparte should not be destroyed, lest a few days should find them stripped of their petty fortunes or their prospects of pensions, penniless exiles or victims of the guillotine. One reason why the Duke had come was to force these people to declare themselves openly for the Bourbon cause, and doubtless private hints from Lebrun had much to do with their appearance here. The doubts and the heartaches were concealed — history later would only tell of the brilliant reception which signalled the arrival of a Bourbon prince on French soil. The Young Pretender's reception at Holyrood must have been full of similar undercurrents, Hornblower realised suddenly, whatever popular legend made of it nowadays. But, on the other hand, the Pretender's reception had not been graced by the scarlet of the marines and the blue and gold of the Navy.

Someone was twitching at his sleeve; there seemed to be warning in the touch, and Hornblower turned slowly to find Brown, soberly dressed in his best clothes, at his elbow.

"Colonel Dobbs sent me in to you, sir," said Brown.

He spoke quietly, without looking directly at his captain, and without moving his lips more than was absolutely necessary. He neither wanted to call the attention of the company to his presence nor to give anyone an opportunity of hearing what he said.

"Well?" asked Hornblower.

"Despatch come in, sir, and Colonel Dobbs says he'd like you to see it, sir."

"I'll come in a moment," said Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir."

Brown sidled away; despite his bulk and height, he could be very unobtrusive when he wished. Hornblower waited long enough to make it appear unlikely that his own departure was connected with Brown's message, and then made his way out past the sentries at the door. He strode up the stairs two at a time to his office, where the red-coated marine colonel stood waiting for him.

"They're on their way at last, sir," said Dobbs, handing over the message for Hornblower to read.

It was a long, narrow strip of paper, yet narrow as it was, it had been longitudinally folded as well as crossways; such a peculiar letter that Hornblower looked a question at Dobbs before reading it.

"It was folded up in a button on the messenger's coat, sir," explained Dobbs. "From an agent in Paris."

Plenty of people in high position, Hornblower knew, were betraying their Imperial master, selling military and political secrets either for present gain or for future advancement. This letter must have been sent by someone of that sort.

"The messenger left Paris yesterday," said Dobbs. "He rode post to Honfleur, and crossed the river after dark today."

The message was written by someone who knew his business.

"This morning," it said, "siege artillery left the artillery park at Sablons by river, going downstream. It included the 107th Regiment of Artillery. The guns were 24-pounders, and I believe there were 24 of them. Three companies of sappers and a company of miners were attached. It is said that General Quiot will command. I do not know what other forces he will have."

There was no signature, and the handwriting was disguised. "Is this genuine?" asked Hornblower. "Yes, sir. Harrison says so. And it agrees with those other reports we've been receiving from Rouen."

So Bonaparte, locked in a death struggle in eastern France with the Russians and the Prussians and the Austrians, fighting for his life in the south against Wellington, had yet contrived to scrape together a force to counter the new menace in the north. There could be no doubt against whom the siege artillery was destined to be used. Down the Seine from Paris his only enemies were the rebels in Le Havre; the presence of sappers and miners was a clear proof that a siege was intended, and that the guns were not merely intended to strengthen some land fortification. And Quiot had some two divisions mustering in Rouen.

The Seine offered Bonaparte every convenience for striking a blow at Le Havre. By water the heavy guns could be moved far more quickly than by road, especially by winter roads; even the troops, packed into barges, would travel faster than on their own feet. Night and day those barges would be towed downstream — by now they must already be nearing Rouen. It could be no more than a matter of a few days before Quiot closed in on the city. Hornblower went back in his mind to the last siege he had witnessed, that of Riga. He remembered the relentless way the approaches crept forward, the steady advance with gabion and fascine; within a few days it would be his responsibility to counter that deadly menace.

He felt a sudden gust of resentment against London for having left him so poorly supported; during the two weeks that Le Havre had been in British hands much might have been done. He had written as strongly as he dared on the inadvisability of an inactive policy — those were the very words he had used, he remembered — but England, with her whole army engaged under Wellington in the south, her life-blood drained by twenty years of warfare, had little enough to spare for him. The rebellion he had instigated had been forced to remain a rebellion on the defensive, and as such only a minor military factor in the tremendous crisis. Politically and morally the effect of his action had been enormous, so they assured him, flatteringly, but the means were utterly wanting to reap any military harvest. Bonaparte, whose Empire was supposed to be tottering, who was fighting for his life on the snow-covered fields of Champagne, could still find two divisions and a siege-train to recapture Le Havre. Was it possible that man could ever be beaten?

Hornblower had forgotten the presence of the marine colonel; he looked past him into vacancy. It was time for the rebellion to cease the defensive, and to take the offensive, however limited its means, however powerful the enemy. Something must be done, something must be dared. He could not bear the thought of cowering behind the fortifications of Le Havre, like a rabbit in its burrow, waiting for Quiot and his sappers to come and ferret him out.

"Let me see that map again," he said to Dobbs. "How are the tides now? You don't know? Then find out, man, immediately. And I want a report on the roads between here and Rouen. Brown! Go and get Captain Bush out of the reception."

He was still making plans and giving provisional orders, when Hau came into the room.

"The reception is ending, sir," said Hau. "His Royal Highness is about to retire."

Hornblower cast one more look at the map of the lower Seine spread before him; his brain was seething, with calculations regarding tides and road distances.

"Oh, very well," he said. "I'll come for five minutes."

He was smiling as he walked in — many eyes turned towards him and noticed it. It was a little ironical that the good people at the reception should feel reassured just because Hornblower had received news of the developing threat to their city.

CHAPTER XII

The murky winter day was giving place to murky night. There was little of the grey winter afternoon left as Hornblower stood on the quay watching the boats make ready. It was already dark enough and misty enough for the preparations to be invisible to anyone outside the town, whatever point of vantage he might have chosen for himself. So it was safe for the seamen and the marines to begin to man the boats; it was only an hour before the flood tide should begin, and no moment of the tide ought to be wasted.

This was another of the penalties of success; that he should have to stand here and watch others set off on an expedition that he would have loved to head. But the Governor of Le Havre, the Commodore, could not possibly risk his life and liberty with a petty sortie; the force he was sending out, crammed into half a dozen ships' longboats, was so small that he was hardly justified in putting a post captain in command.

Bush came stumping up to him, the thump of his wooden leg on the cobble, alternating with the flatter sound of his one shoe.

"No further orders, sir?" asked Bush.

"No, none. I only have to wish you the best of good fortune now," said Hornblower.

He put out his hand, and Bush took it — amazing how Bush's hand remained hard and horny as if he still had to haul on braces and halliards. Bush's frank blue eyes looked into his.

"Thank you, sir," said Bush, and then, after a moment's hesitation. "Don't you go worrying about us, sir."

"I won't worry with you in command, Bush."

There was some truth in that. In all these years of close association Bush had learned his methods, and could be relied upon to execute a plan intelligently. Bush knew as well as he did now the value of surprise, the importance of striking swiftly and suddenly and unexpectedly, the necessity for close co-operation between all parts of the force.

The *Nonsuch's* longboat was against the quay, and a detachment of marines was marching down into it. They sat stiff and awkward on the thwarts, their muskets pointing skywards between their knees, while the seamen held the boat off.

"All ready, sir?" piped up a voice from the sternsheets.

"Goodbye, Bush," said Hornblower.

"Goodbye, sir."

Bush's powerful arms swung him down into the longboat with no difficulty despite his wooden leg.

"Shove off."

The boat pushed out from the quay; two other boats left the quay as well. There was still just enough light to see the rest of the flotilla pull away from the sides of the ships moored in the harbour. The sound of the orders came to Hornblower's ears across the water.

"Give way."

Bush's boat swung round and headed the procession out into the river, and the night swallowed it. Yet Hornblower stood looking after them into the blackness for some time before he turned away. There could be

no doubt at all, having regard to the state of the roads, and the reports of the spies, that Quiot would bring his siege-train as far as Caudebec by water — barges would carry his vast twenty-four-pounders fifty miles in a day, while over those muddy surfaces they would hardly move fifty miles in a week. At Caudebec there was an *estacade* with facilities for dealing with large cargoes. Quiot's advanced guards at Lillebonne and Bolbec would cover the unloading — so he would think. There was a good chance that boats, coming up the river in the darkness swiftly with the tide, might arrive unobserved at the *estacade*. The landing party could burn and destroy to their hearts' content in that case. Most likely Bonaparte's troops, which had conquered the land world, would not think of the possibility of an amphibious expedition striking by water round their flank; and even if they did think of it there was more than a chance that the expedition, moving rapidly on the tide, would break through the defence in the darkness as far as the barges. But though it was easy enough to form these comforting conclusions, it was not so easy to see them go off in the darkness like this. Hornblower turned away from the quay and began to walk up the dark Rue de Paris to the Hôtel de Ville. Half a dozen dimly perceived figures detached themselves from street corners and walked along a few yards in front and behind him; these were the bodyguards that Hau and Lebrun had detailed for him. They had both of them raised hands and eyes in horror at the thought that he should go about the town unescorted — on foot to make it worse — and when he had refused utterly to have a military guard permanently about him they had made this other arrangement. Hornblower aroused himself by walking as fast as his long thin legs would carry him. The exercise was pleasurable, and it made him smile to himself to hear the pattering of feet as his escort strove to keep pace with him; it was curious that nearly all of them were short-legged men.

In his bedroom there was a privacy to be obtained which he could not hope for elsewhere. He dismissed Brown as soon as the latter had lighted the candles in the stick on the night table at the bedhead, and with a grateful sigh he stretched himself out on the bed, careless of his uniform. He rose again to get his boat-cloak and spread it over himself, for the room was dank and cold despite the fire in the grate. Then at last he could take the newspaper from the top of the pile at the bedhead, and set himself to read seriously the marked passages at which previously he had merely glanced — Barbara had sent him those newspapers; her letter, read and reread, was in his pocket, but all through the day he had not found leisure for the papers.

If the Press was, as it claimed to be, the voice of the people, then the British public most strongly approved of him and his recent actions. It was strangely difficult for Hornblower to recapture the mood of only a few weeks back; the manifold distractions of his duties as Governor of Le Havre made the events preceding the capture of the city very blurred and indistinct in his memory. But here was *The Times* running over with praise for his handling of the situation in the Bay of the Seine. The measures he had taken to make it impossible for the mutineers to take the *Flame* in to the French authorities were described as 'a masterpiece of the ingenuity and skill which we have come to expect of this brilliant officer'. The pontifical manner of the article left Hornblower with the Impression that it would have been more appropriate if the 'we' had been spelt with a capital W.

Here was the *Morning Chronicle* expatiating on his capture of the *Flame* across the decks of the *Bonne Celestine*. There was only one example in history of a similar feat — Nelson's capture of the *San Josef* at Cape St. Vincent. Hornblower's eyebrows rose as he read. The comparison was quite absurd. There had been nothing else for him to do; he had had only to fight the *Bonne Celestine*'s crew, for hardly a man in the *Flame*'s company had raised a hand to prevent the vessel's recapture. And it was nonsense to compare him with Nelson. Nelson had been brilliant, a man of lightning thought, the inspiration of all who came in contact with him. He himself was only a fortunate plodder by comparison. Extraordinary good fortune was the root of all his success; good fortune, and long thought, and the devotion of his subordinates. It was perfectly horrible that he should be compared with Nelson; horrible and indecent. As Hornblower read on he felt a disquieting sensation in his stomach, exactly as he felt during his first hours at sea after a spell on land, when the ship he was in slid down a wave. Now that this comparison with Nelson had been made the public and the service would judge his future actions by the same standard, and would turn and rend him in their disappointment should he fail. He had climbed high, and as a natural result there was a precipice at his feet. Hornblower remembered how he had felt as a king's letter-boy, when he had first climbed to the main-truck of the *Indefatigable*. The climbing had not been so difficult, not even the futtock-shrouds, but when at the masthead he had looked down he felt dizzy and nauseated, appalled at the distance below him — just as he felt now.

He flung the *Morning Chronicle* aside and took up the *Anti Gallican*. The writer here gloated over the fate of the mutineers. He exulted over the death of Nathaniel Sweet, laying special stress on the fact that he had died at Hornblower's own hands. He went on to hope that Sweet's accessories in the horrible crime of mutiny would shortly meet the fate they deserved, and he hoped that the happy issue of Hornblower's recapture of the *Flame* would not be allowed to serve as an excuse for mercy or sentimental considerations. Hornblower, with twenty sentences of death awaiting his signature, felt his nausea renewed. This writer in the *Anti Gallican* did not know what death was. Before Hornblower's eyes floated once more the memory of Sweet's white hair in the water as the smoke from the musket-shot drifted away. That old man — Chadwick had sworn to disrate him and then flog him. Hornblower decided for the twentieth time that he would have mutinied, too, if confronted with the certainty of a flogging. This writer knew nothing of the sickening crack of the cat-o'-nine-tails as it fell on a naked back. He could never have heard the yell of agony of a grown man under torment. A later number of *The Times* discussed the capture of Le Havre. There were the words he had been dreading to read, but in Latin, as one might expect of *The Times*. *Initium finis* — the beginning of the end. *The Times* expected Bonaparte's dominion, which had endured all these years, to melt away in the next few days. The crossing of the Rhine, the fall of Le Havre, the declaration of Bordeaux in favour of the Bourbons, made the writer certain that Bonaparte would be dethroned immediately. Yet Bonaparte with a solid army was still striking back at his enemies today. The last reports told of his victories over the Prussians and the Austrians; Wellington in the south was making only the slowest progress against Soult. No one could foresee an immediate end to the war save this inky scribbler safe in some dusty office in Printing House Square. But there was a morbid fascination about reading these newspapers. Hornblower put down this copy and reached for another, knowing as he did so that it would only disgust him or frighten him. It was as hard to resist as opium was to an addict. Hornblower read on and on through the marked passages, which dealt mainly with his own achievements, in much the same way that an old maid, by chance alone in her house on a wintry night, might go on reading one of Monk Lewis's terrifying novels, too frightened to stop, and yet knowing that every word she read would only make the stopping more frightening still. He had hardly finished the pile of newspapers when he noticed the bed jar slightly under him and the candle-flames flicker for a moment. He paid almost no attention to the phenomenon — it might have been a heavy gun being fired, although he had not heard the explosion — but a few seconds later he heard the bedroom door stealthily opened. He looked up to see Brown peering round the corner at him to see if he were asleep. "What do you want?" he snapped. His ill-temper was so obvious that even Brown hesitated to speak. "Out with it," snarled Hornblower. "Why am I being disturbed contrary to my orders?" Howard and Dobbs made their appearance behind Brown; it was to their credit that they were willing not merely to take the responsibility but to receive the first impact of the wrath of the Commodore. "There's been an explosion, sir," said Howard. "We saw the flash of it in the sky, east by north of here — I took the bearing. That could be at Caudebec." "We felt the jar, sir," said Dobbs. "But there was no sound — too far away. A big explosion to shake us here and yet be unheard." That meant, almost for certain, that Bush had been successful. He must have captured the French powder-barges and blown them up. A thousand rounds for each of twenty-four twenty-four pounders — the minimum for a siege; eight pounds of powder for each round. That would be eight times twenty-four thousand. That would be nearly two hundred thousand pounds. That would be almost a hundred tons. A hundred tons of gunpowder would make a fair explosion. Having computed his calculation, Hornblower refocused his eyes on Dobbs and Howard; until then he had looked at them without seeing them. Brown had tactfully slipped out from this council of his betters. "Well?" said Hornblower. "We thought you would like to know about it, sir," said Dobbs, lamely. "Quite right," said Hornblower, and held up his newspaper between them again. Then he pulled it down again just long enough to say "Thank you." From behind his newspaper Hornblower heard his two staff officers creep out of the room and shut the door gently behind them. He was pleased with his performance; that final 'thank you' had been a masterly touch, conveying the impression that, even though he was loftily above such trifles as the mere destruction of a

siege-train, he could yet remember his manners before his inferiors. Yet it was only a moment before he was sneering at himself for relishing such a petty triumph. He felt a sudden self-contempt, which even when it passed left him depressed and unhappy. The unhappiness had a special quality; Hornblower, laying aside his newspaper to look up at the play of shadows on the bedtester, suddenly realised he was lonely. He wanted company. He wanted friendship. Much more than that, he wanted comforting, he wanted affection, he wanted just what he could not have as Governor of this bleak, beleaguered city. He bore all the vast weight of responsibility, and he had no one to share his fears and hopes. Hornblower pulled himself up on the verge of an abyss of self-pity, his self-contempt greatly increased by the discovery. He had always been too self-analytical and too conscious of his own faults to be sorry for himself. His present loneliness was of his own making. He need not have been so gratuitously reserved with Dobbs and Howard; a sensible man would have shared their pleasure, would have sent for a bottle of champagne to celebrate the success, would have passed a pleasant hour or two with them — and would certainly have increased their pleasure and their loyalty by hinting that the success was largely due to their contributions to the plan, even though it was not true. For the ephemeral and extremely doubtful pleasure of showing himself to be what he was not, a man untouched by human emotions, he was now having to pay the present price of loneliness. Well, decided Hornblower, swallowing a decidedly bitter truth, it served him right.

He pulled out his watch; half an hour since the explosion, and the ebb tide had been running here at the river's mouth for a full hour longer than that. It must have turned some time ago at Caudebec; it was to be hoped that Bush and his flotilla were running down with it, exulting in their victory. Fully twenty-five miles by road, thirty at least by river, from their nearest enemies at Le Havre, the soldiers of the French siege-train must have thought themselves perfectly secure with an army of nearly twenty thousand men to protect them from an enemy who so far had shown no sign of taking the offensive. Yet in less than six hours, even in darkness, well-manned boats with the racing Seine tide behind them could span the interval that infantry would take two days — the daylight hours of two days — to cross. Boats could strike and escape again in the course of a single night up the broad and bridgeless river; and the fact that the river was broad and bridgeless would encourage Quiot's army to look upon the Seine as a protection to their flank and so to forget its potentialities as a highway for their enemies. Quiot had until recently commanded a division in the Imperial Guard, and never, in its ten victorious years, had the Imperial Guard taken part in an amphibious campaign.

Hornblower realised that he had been through all this train of thought before, many times over. He snuffed the guttered candles, looked at his watch again, and stretched his legs restlessly under his cloak. His hand fluttered tentatively towards the tumbled newspapers and was withdrawn immediately. Rather the unpalatable company of his own thoughts than that of *The Times* and the *Morning Chronicle*. Rather than either — humble pie, especially as it would be made a little more appetising by the knowledge that he would be doing his duty. He flung the cloak off his legs and rose to his feet. He went to some trouble to pull his coat into position, and he combed his hair with some care before sauntering out of his bedroom. The sentry at the door came to attention with a jerk — Hornblower guessed that he had been sleeping on his feet — while Hornblower crossed the hall to the room beyond. He opened the door into warm stuffiness. A single shaded candle hardly illuminated the room enough for him to see. Dobbs was asleep in a chair at a table, his head resting on his folded forearms; beyond the table lay Howard on a cot. The shadow there was so dense that Hornblower could not see his face, but he could hear his low, measured snores.

So nobody wanted his company after all. Hornblower withdrew and shut the door quietly. Brown presumably was asleep in some cubbyhole of his own; Hornblower toyed with the idea of sending for him and having him make him a cup of coffee, but decided against it out of pure humanity. He climbed back onto his own bed and dragged the cloak over him. A whistling draught decided him to draw the curtains round the bed, and he did so after extinguishing the candles. It occurred to him that he would have been much more comfortable had he undressed and got into the bed, but he could not face the effort — it suddenly became plain to him that he was very weary. His eyelids closed before the solid darkness within the curtains, and he slept, fully dressed.

CHAPTER XIII

The fact that he had not taken off his clothes told Brown and Dobbs and Howard at dawn that Hornblower had not been as composed and self-confident as he had tried to appear, but not one of them was foolish enough to comment on the fact. Brown merely opened the curtain and made his report.

"Day just breaking, sir. Cold morning with a bit o' fog. The last o' the ebb, sir, and no news as yet of Captain Bush an' the flotilla."

"Right," said Hornblower, getting stiffly to his feet. He yawned and felt his bristling cheeks. He wished he knew how Bush had succeeded. He wished he did not feel so unwashed and unclean. He wanted his breakfast, but he wanted news of Bush even more. He was still deadly tired despite his hours of unbroken sleep. Then he fought down his weariness in a direct personal struggle like that of Christian with Apollyon.

"Get me a bath, Brown. Make it ready while I shave."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower stripped off his clothes and proceeded to shave himself at the wash-hand-stand in the corner of the room. He kept his eyes from his naked body reflected in the mirror, from his skinny, hairy legs and slightly protuberant belly, as resolutely as he kept his mind from his fatigue and from his anxiety about Bush. Brown and a marine private came in carrying the bath and put it on the floor near him; Hornblower, shaving carefully round the corners of his lips, heard the hot water being poured into it from buckets. It took a little while to compound the mixture in the right proportion so as to get the temperature suitable; Hornblower stepped into it and sank down with a sigh of satisfaction — an immense amount of water poured over the sides, displaced by his body, but he did not care. He thought about soaping himself, but flinched from the effort and the physical contortions necessary, and instead he lay back and allowed himself to soak and relax. He closed his eyes.

"Sir!"

Howard's voice caused him to reopen them.

"Two boats are in sight coming down the estuary, sir. Only two."

Bush had taken seven boats with him to Caudebec. Hornblower could only wait for Howard to finish his report.

"One of 'em's *Camilla's* launch, sir, I can recognise her through the glass. I don't think the other is from *Nonsuch*, but I can't be sure."

"Very good, Captain. I'll join you in a moment."

Ruin and destruction; five boats lost out of seven — and Bush lost too, seemingly. The destruction of the French siege-train — if it were destroyed — would be well worth the loss of the whole flotilla, to someone who could coldly balance profit and loss. But Bush gone! Hornblower could not bear the thought of it. He sprang from his bath and looked round for a towel. He saw none, and with exasperation tore a sheet from the bed on which to dry himself. Only when he was dry and seeking his clean shirt did he find the towels by the dressing-table where they should have been. He dressed hurriedly, and at every moment his fears and his sorrow on account of Bush increased — the first shock had not been nearly as severe as this growing realisation of his bereavement. He came out into the ante-room.

"One boat's coming into the quay, sir. I'll have the officer reporting here in fifteen minutes," said Howard. Brown was across the room at the far door. Now, if ever, Hornblower had the opportunity — his unaccountable brain recognised it at this moment — to show himself a man of iron. All he had to do was to say 'My breakfast, Brown' and sit down and eat it. But he could not pose, faced as he was by the possibility of Bush's death. It was all very well to do those things when it was merely a battle that lay before him, but this was the loss of his dearest friend. Brown must have read the expression on his face, for he withdrew without making any suggestion about breakfast. Hornblower stood undecided.

"I have the court-martial verdicts here for confirmation, sir," said Howard, calling his attention to a mass of papers.

Hornblower sat down and picked one up, looked at it unseeing, and put it down again.

"I'll deal with that later on," he said.

"Cider's begun coming into the city from the country in great quantity, sir, now that the farmers have found it's a good market," said Dobbs. "Drunkenness among the men's increasing. Can we — ?"

"I'll leave it to your judgment," said Hornblower. "Now. What is it you want to do?"

"I would submit, sir, that —"

The discussion lasted a few minutes. It led naturally to the vexed question of an established rate of exchange for British and French currency. But it could not dull the gnawing anxiety about Bush.

"Where the hell's that officer?" said Howard, petulantly pushing back his chair and going out of the room. He was back almost immediately.

"Mr. Livingstone, sir," he said. "Third of *Camilla*."

A middle-aged lieutenant, steady and reliable enough to outward appearance; Hornblower looked him over carefully as he came into the room.

"Make your report, please."

"We went up the river without incident, sir. *Flame*'s boat went aground but was refloated directly. We could see the lights of Caudebec before we were challenged from the bank — we were just rounding the bend, then. Cap'n Bush's longboat was leading, sir."

"Where was your boat?"

"Last in the line, sir. We went on without replying, as our orders said. I could see two barges anchored in midstream, an' clusters of others against the bank. I put the tiller over and ran beside the one farthest downstream, as my orders said, sir. There was a lot of musketry fire higher up, but only a few Frenchies where we were, an' we chased 'em away. On the bank where we were there were two twenty-four-pounders on travelling carriages. I had 'em spiked, and then we levered them off the bank into the river. One fell onto the barge underneath an' went through it, sir. It sank alongside my launch, deck just level with the water; just before the turn of the tide, that was. Don't know what she carried, sir, but I think she was light, judging by the height she rode out of the water when I boarded her. Her hatches were open."

"Yes?"

"Then I led my party along the bank as ordered, sir. There was a lot of shot there, just landed from the next barge. The barge was only half unloaded. So I left a party to scuttle the barge and roll the shot into the river, an' went on myself with about fifteen men, sir. *Flame*'s boat's crew was there, an' the party they were fighting against ran away when we came on their flank. There were guns on shore and guns still in the barges, sir. We spiked 'em all, threw the ones that had been landed into the river, and scuttled the barges. There was no powder, sir. My orders were to blow the trunnions off the guns if I could, but I couldn't."

"I understand."

Guns spiked and pitched into the slime at the bottom of a rapid tidal river would be out of action for some time, even though it would have been better to blow off their trunnions and disable them permanently. And the shot at the bottom of the river would be difficult to recover. Hornblower could picture so well in his mind the fierce and bloody little struggle in the dark on the river bank.

"Just then we heard drums beating, sir, and a whole lot of soldiers came bearing down on us. A battalion of infantry, I should think it was — I think we had only been engaged up to then with the gunners an' sappers. My orders were to withdraw if opposed in force, so we ran back to the boats. We'd just shoved off and the soldiers were firing at us from the banks when the explosion came."

Livingstone paused. His unshaven face was grey with fatigue, and when he mentioned the explosion his expression changed to one of helplessness.

"It was the powder-barges higher up the river, sir. I don't know who set them off. Maybe it was a shot from the shore. Maybe Cap'n Bush, sir —"

"You had not been in touch with Captain Bush since the attack began?"

"No, sir. He was at the other end of the line to me, and the barges were in two groups against the bank. I attacked one, an' Cap'n Bush attacked the other."

"I understand. Go on about the explosion."

"It was a big one, sir. It threw us all down. A big wave came an' swamped us, filled us to the gunnels, sir. I think we touched the bottom of the river, sir, after that wave went by. A bit of flying wreckage hit *Flame*'s boat. Gibbons, master's mate, was killed an' the boat smashed. We picked up the survivors while we bailed out. Nobody was firing at us from the bank any more, so I waited. It was just the top of the tide, sir. Presently two boats came down to us, *Camilla*'s second launch and the fishing-boat that the marines manned. We waited,

but we could not see anything of *Nonsuch's* boats. Mr. Hake of the marines told me that Cap'n Bush an' the other three boats were all alongside the powder-barges when the explosion happened. Perhaps a shot went into the cargo, sir. Then they began to open fire on us from the bank again, and as senior officer I gave the order to retire."

"Most likely you did right, Mr. Livingstone. And then?"

"At the next bend they opened fire on us with field-pieces, sir. Their practice was bad in the dark, sir, but they hit and sank our second launch with almost their last shot, and we lost several more men — the current was running fast by then."

That was clearly the end of Livingstone's story, but Hornblower could not dismiss him without one more word.

"But Captain Bush, Mr. Livingstone? Can't you tell me any more about him?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry, sir. We didn't pick up a single survivor from the *Nonsuch's* boats. Not one."

"Oh, very well then, Mr. Livingstone. You had better go and get some rest. I think you did very well."

"Let me have your report in writing and list of casualties before the end of the day, Mr. Livingstone," interposed Dobbs — as Assistant-Adjutant-General he lived in an atmosphere of reports and Lists of casualties. "Aye aye, sir."

Livingstone withdrew, and the door had hardly closed upon him before Hornblower regretted having let him go with such chary words of commendation. The operation had been brilliantly successful. Deprived of his siege-train and munitions, Quot would not be able to besiege Le Havre, and it would probably be a long time before Bonaparte's War Ministry in Paris could scrape together another train. But the loss of Bush coloured all Hornblower's thoughts. He found himself wishing that he had never conceived the plan — he would rather have stood a siege here in Le Havre and have Bush alive at his side. It was hard to think of a world without Bush in it, of a future where he would never, never see Bush again. People would think the loss of a captain and a hundred and fifty men a small price to pay for robbing Quot of all his offensive power, but people did not understand.

Dobbs and Howard were sitting glum and silent when he glanced at them; they respected his sorrow. But the sight of their deferential gloom roused Hornblower's contrariness. If they expected him to be upset and unable to work, he would show them how mistaken they were.

"I'll see those court-martial reports now, Captain Howard, if you please."

The busy day's work began; it was possible to think clearly, to make decisions, to work as if nothing had happened, despite the feeling of being drained dry by unhappiness. Not merely that; it was even possible to think of new plans.

"Go and find Hau," he said to Howard. "Tell him I'd like to see the Duke for a moment."

"Aye aye, sir." Howard rose to his feet. He allowed himself a grin and a twinkle as he pompously reworded Hornblower's language.

"Sir Horatio solicits the favour of a short audience with His Royal Highness if His Royal Highness will be so kind as to condescend to receive him."

"That's right," said Hornblower, smiling in spite of himself. It was even possible to smile.

The Duke received him standing, warming the royal back before a cheerful fire.

"I do not know," began Hornblower, "if Your Royal Highness is acquainted with the circumstances which first brought me to the waters on this part of the coast."

"Tell me about them," said the Duke. Maybe it was not etiquette for royalty to admit ignorance on any subject. The Duke's attitude did not seem to convey a feeling of much interest in any case.

"There was a mutiny in one of His Majesty's — one of His Britannic Majesty's — ships of war."

"Indeed?"

"I was sent to deal with it, and I succeeded in capturing the vessel and most of the mutineers, Your Royal Highness."

"Excellent, excellent."

"Some twenty of them were tried, convicted, and have now been sentenced to death."

"Excellent."

"I would be glad not to carry those sentences out, Your Royal Highness."

"Indeed?" His Royal Highness was not apparently greatly interested — a yawn seemed to be hesitating only just inside the royal lips.

"As far as my service is concerned, it is impossible for me to pardon the men without the gravest prejudice to discipline, Your Royal Highness."

"Quite so. Quite so."

"But if Your Royal Highness were to intervene on behalf of the men, I might then be able to pardon them without prejudice to discipline, being in a position where I can deny Your Royal Highness nothing."

"And why should I intervene, Sir 'Oratio?'"

Hornblower sidestepped the question for the moment.

"Your Royal Highness could take the stand that it would be unfitting that the opening days of the return of the Dynasty to France should be marred by the shedding of the blood of Englishmen, however guilty. It would then be possible for me to pardon them, with a great show of reluctance. Men tempted to mutiny in the future would not have their temptation greatly increased by the hope of a similar event saving them from the consequences of their actions — the world will never again be so fortunate as to see a return of Your Royal Highness's family to its legitimate position."

This last was a clumsy compliment, clumsily worded and susceptible to misunderstanding, but luckily the Duke took it in the spirit in which it was ostensibly meant. Nevertheless, he hardly seemed enthusiastic; he went back to his original point with Bourbon stubbornness.

"But why *should* I do this, Sir 'Oratio?'"

"In the name of common humanity, Your Royal Highness. There are twenty lives to be saved, the lives of useful men."

"Useful men? Mutineers? Presumably Jacobins, revolutionaries, equalitarians — even Socialists!"

"They are men who lie in irons today and expect to be hanged tomorrow, Your Royal Highness."

"As I have no doubt whatever, they deserve, Sir 'Oratio. It would be a fine beginning to the Regency with which His Most Christian Majesty has entrusted me if my first public act should be to solicit the lives of a parcel of revolutionaries. His Most Christian Majesty has not spent the past twenty-one years combating the spirit of revolution for that. The eyes of the world are upon me."

"I have never yet known the world offended by an act of clemency, Your Royal Highness."

"You have strange ideas of clemency, sir. It appears to me as if this remarkable suggestion of yours has some purpose other than is apparent. Perhaps you are a Liberal yourself, one of these dangerous men who consider themselves thinkers. It would be a good stroke of policy for you to induce my family to brand itself by its first act as willing to condone revolution."

The monstrous imputation took Hornblower completely aback.

"Sir!" he spluttered. "Your Royal Highness —"

Even if he had been speaking in English words would have failed him. In French he was utterly helpless. It was not merely the insult, but it was the revelation of the Bourbon narrow-mindedness and suspicious cunning that helped to strike him dumb.

"I do not see fit to accede to your request, sir," said the Duke, his hand on the bellrope.

Outside the audience chamber Hornblower strode past courtiers and sentries, his cheeks burning. He was blind with fury — it was very rarely that he was as angry as this; nearly always his tendency to look at both sides of a question kept him equable and easy-going; weak, he phrased it to himself in moments of self-contempt. He stamped into his office, flung himself into his chair and sprang up from it again a second later, walked round the room and sat down again. Dobbs and Howard looked with astonishment at the thundercloud on his brow, and after their first glance bent their gaze studiously upon the papers before them. Hornblower tore open his neckcloth. He ripped open the buttons of his waistcoat, and the dangerous pressure within began to subside. His mind was in a maelstrom of activity, but over the waves of thought, like a beam of sunshine through a squall at sea, came a gleam of amusement at his own fury. With no softening of his resolution his mischievous sense of humour began to assert itself; it only took a few minutes for him to decide on his next action.

"I want those French fellows brought in here who came with the Duke," he announced. "The equerry, and the *chevalier d'honneur*, and the almoner. Colonel Dobbs, I'll trouble you to make ready to write from my dictation."

The *emigre* advisers of the Duke filed into the room a little puzzled and apprehensive; Hornblower received them still sitting, in fact almost lounging back in his chair.

"Good morning, gentlemen" he said, cheerfully. "I have asked you to come to hear the letter I am about to dictate to the Prime Minister. I think you understand English well enough to get the gist of the letter. Are you ready, Colonel?"

'To the Right Honourable Lord Liverpool.

My Lord, I find I am compelled to send back to England His Royal Highness the Duke d'Angouleme'."

"Sir!" said the astonished equerry, breaking in, but Hornblower waved him impatiently to silence.

"Go on, Colonel, please.

'I regret to have to inform Your Lordship that His Royal Highness has not displayed the helpful spirit the British nation is entitled to look for in an ally'."

The equerry and the *chevalier d'honneur* and the almoner were on their feet by now. Howard was goggling at him across the room; Dobbs' face was invisible as he bent over his pen, but the back of his neck was a warm purple which clashed with the scarlet of his tunic.

"Please go on, Colonel.

'During the few days in which I have had the honour of working with His Royal Highness, it has been made plain to me that His Royal Highness has neither the tact nor the administrative ability desirable in one in so high a station'."

"Sir!" said the equerry. "You cannot send that letter."

He spoke first in French and then in English; the *chevalier d'honneur* and the almoner made bilingual noises of agreement.

"No?" said Hornblower.

"And you cannot send His Royal Highness back to England. You cannot! You cannot!"

"No?" said Hornblower again, leaning back in his chair.

The protests died away on the lips of the three Frenchmen. They knew as well as Hornblower, as soon as they were forced to realise the unpalatable truth, who it was that held the power in Le Havre. It was the man who had under his command the only disciplined and reliable military force, the man who had only to give the word to abandon the city to the wrath of Bonaparte, the man at whose word the ships came in and went out again.

"Don't tell me," said Hornblower with elaborate concern, "that His Royal Highness would physically oppose an order from me consigning him on board a ship? Have you gentlemen ever witnessed a deserter being brought in? The frogmarch is a most undignified method of progression. Painful, too, I am informed."

"But that letter," said the equerry, "would discredit His Royal Highness in the eyes of the world. It would be a most serious blow to the cause of the Family. It might endanger the succession."

"I was aware of that when I invited you gentlemen to hear me dictate it."

"You would never send it," said the equerry with a momentary doubt regarding Hornblower's strength of will.

"I can only assure you gentlemen that I both can and will."

Eyes met eyes across the room, and the equerry's doubt vanished. Hornblower's mind was entirely made up.

"Perhaps, sir," said the equerry, clearing his throat and looking sidelong at his colleagues for their approval, "there has been some misunderstanding. If His Royal Highness has refused some request of Your Excellency's, as I gather has been the case, it must have been because His Royal Highness did not know how much

importance Your Excellency attached to the matter. If Your Excellency would allow us to make further representations to His Royal Highness —"

Hornblower was looking at Howard, who very intelligently recognised his cue.

"Yes, sir," said Howard. "I'm sure His Royal Highness will understand."

Dobbs looked up from his paper and made corroborative sounds. But it took several minutes before Hornblower could be persuaded to postpone putting his decision into instant effect. It was only with the greatest reluctance that he yielded to the pleadings of his own staff and the Duke's. After the equerry had led his colleagues from the room to seek the Duke, Hornblower sat back with a real relaxation replacing the one he had simulated. He was tingling and glowing both with the after effects of excitement and with his diplomatic victory.

"His Royal Highness will see reason," said Dobbs.

"No doubt about it," agreed Howard, judiciously.

Hornblower thought of the twenty seamen chained in the hold of the *Nonsuch*, expecting to be hanged tomorrow.

"An idea has struck me, sir," said Howard. "I can send a flag of truce out to the French forces. A *parlementaire* — a mounted officer with a white flag and a trumpeter. He can carry a letter from you to General Quiot, asking for news about Captain Bush. If Quiot knows anything at all I'm sure he'll have the courtesy to inform you, sir." Bush! In the excitement of the last hour Hornblower had forgotten about Bush. His pleasurable excitement escaped from him like grain from a ripped sack. Depression closed in upon him again. The others saw the change that came over him; as an example of the affection for him which he had inspired in this short time of contact it is worthy of mention that they would rather have seen the black thundercloud of rage on his brow than this wounded unhappiness.

CHAPTER XIV

It was the day that the *parlementaire* returned; Hornblower would always remember it for that reason. Quiot's courteous letter left no ground for hope whatever; the gruesome details which it included told the whole story. A few rags and tatters of men had been found and had been buried, but nothing that could be identified as any individual. Bush was dead; that burly body of his had been torn into shreds by the explosion.

Hornblower was angry with himself for allowing the fact that Bush's grave would never be marked, that his remains were utterly destroyed, to increase his sadness. If Bush had been given a choice, he presumably would have chosen to die at sea, struck down by a shot in the moment of victory at the climax of a ship-to-ship action; he would have wished to have been buried in his hammock, round-shot at his feet and head, with seamen weeping as the grating tilted and the hammock slid from under the flag into the sea and the ship rocked on the waves, hove-to with backed topsails. It was a horrid irony that he should have met his end in a minor skirmish on a river bank, blown into bloody unidentifiable rags.

And yet what did it matter how he died? One moment he had been alive and the next dead, and in that he had been fortunate. It was a far greater irony that he should have been killed now, after surviving twenty years of desperate warfare. Peace was only just over the horizon, with the allied armies closing in on Paris, with France fast bleeding to death, with the allied Governments already assembling to decide on the peace terms. Had Bush survived this one last skirmish, he would have been able to enjoy the blessings of peace for many years, secure in his captain's rank, in his pension, in the devotion of his sisters. Bush would have enjoyed all that, if only because he knew that all sensible men enjoyed peace and security. The thought of that only increased Hornblower's feeling of bitter personal loss. He had never thought he could mourn for anyone as he mourned for Bush.

The *parlementaire* had only just returned with Quiot's letter; Dobbs was still eagerly questioning him about what he had been able to observe of the condition of the French forces, when Howard came rapidly in.

"*Gazelle*, sloop of war, just entering the harbour, sir. She is wearing the Bourbon flag at the main and makes this signal, sir. 'Have on board Duchess of Angouleme'."

"She has?" said Hornblower. His spirit climbed wearily out of its miserable lethargy. "Tell the Duke. Let Hau know and tell him to arrange about salutes. I must meet her on the quay along with the Duke. Brown! Brown! My dress coat and my sword."

It was a watery day with a promise of early spring. The *Gazelle* came warping against the quay, and the salutes rolled round the harbour just as they had done when His Royal Highness arrived. The Duke and his entourage stood in almost military formation on the quay; upon the deck of the *Gazelle* was gathered a group of women in cloaks awaiting the casting of the brow across to the quay. Bourbon court etiquette seemed to dictate a rigid absence of any appearance of excitement; Hornblower, standing with his staff a little to the rear and to the side of the Duke's party, noted how the women on deck and the men on the quay made no signal of welcome to each other. Except for one woman, who was standing by the mizzenmast waving a handkerchief. It was something of a comfort to see that there was at least one person who refused to be bound by stoical etiquette; Hornblower supposed that it must be some serving-woman or lady's maid who had caught sight of her lover in the ranks on the quay.

Over the brow came the Duchess and her suite; the Duke took the regulation steps forward to greet her. She went down in the regulation curtsy, and he lifted her up with the regulation condescension, and they put cheek to cheek in the regulation embrace. Now Hornblower had to come forward to be presented, and now he was bowing to kiss the gloved hand laid upon his levelled forearm. "Sir 'Oratio! Sir 'Oratio!" said the Duchess. Hornblower looked up to meet the blue Bourbon eyes. The Duchess was a beautiful woman of some thirty years of age. She had something urgent to say, obviously. As if tongue-tied, she was unable to say it, the rules of etiquette making no allowance for this situation. Finally she made a frantic gesture, and looked round her to call Hornblower's attention to someone behind her. A woman stood there, standing alone, separated a little from the group of ladies-in-waiting and *dames d'honneur*. It was Barbara — Hornblower had to look twice before he could believe his eyes. She stepped towards him, smiling. Hornblower took two strides towards her — in the midst of them he thought briefly of the necessity of not turning his back upon royalty, but threw discretion to the winds — and she was in his arms. There was a tumult of thoughts in his mind as she put her lips, icy cold from the sea air, against his. It was sensible enough that she had come, he supposed, although he had always strongly disapproved of captains and admirals who had their wives with them on active service. As the Duchess had come it would be quite desirable to have Barbara here as well. All this in a flash, before more human feelings became apparent. A warning cough from Hau behind him told him that he was holding up the proceedings, and he hastily took his hands from Barbara's shoulders and stepped back a little sheepishly. The carriages were waiting.

"You go with the royal pair, sir," whispered Hau, hoarsely.

The carriages requisitioned in Le Havre were not striking examples of coach-building, but they served. The Duke and Duchess were seated, and Hornblower handed Barbara in and took his seat beside her, his back and hers to the horses. With a clatter of hoofs and a generous squeaking they set off up the Rue de Paris.

"Was that not a pleasant surprise, Sir 'Oratio?" asked the Duchess.

"Your Royal Highness was far too kind," said Hornblower.

The Duchess leaned forward and put her hand on Barbara's knee.

"You have a most beautiful and most accomplished wife," she said.

The Duke beside her uncrossed his knees and coughed uncomfortably, for the Duchess was acting with a condescension a trifle excessive in a king's daughter, a future queen of France.

"I trust you had a comfortable voyage," said the Duke, addressing himself to his wife; a mischievous curiosity prompted Hornblower to wonder if there was ever a moment when he did not use a tone of such rigid formality towards her.

"We will pass over the memory of it," said the Duchess with a laugh.

She was a high-spirited and lovely creature, and running over with excitement at this new adventure.

Hornblower watched her curiously. Her infancy had been passed as a princess in The most splendid Court of Europe; her childhood as a prisoner of the revolutionaries. Her father and mother, the king and queen, had died under the guillotine; her brother had died in prison. She herself had been exchanged for a parcel of captive generals, and married to her cousin, had wandered through Europe as the wife of the heir to a penniless but haughty Pretender. Her experiences had left her human — or was it that the formalities of

shabby-genteel royalty had not succeeded in dehumanising her? She was the only living child of Marie Antoinette, whose charm and vivacity and indiscretion had been proverbial. That might explain it. Here they were, climbing out of the carriage at the Hôtel de Ville; a naval cocked hat was a clumsy thing to keep under the arm while handing ladies out. There was to be a reception later, but time must be allowed for the Duchess's trunks to be swayed up out of the *Gazelle's* hold, and for the Duchess to change her dress. Hornblower found himself leading Barbara to the wing which constituted his headquarters. In the lobby orderlies and sentries came to attention; in the main office Dobbs and Howard gaped at the spectacle of the Governor ushering in a lady. They scrambled to their feet and Hornblower made the presentations. They bowed and scraped to her; they knew of her, of course — everyone had heard about Lady Barbara Hornblower, the Duke of Wellington's sister.

Glancing automatically at his desk, Hornblower caught sight of Quiot's letter lying there where he had left it, with its beautiful handwriting and elaborate signature and *paraphe*. It reminded him once more that Bush was dead. *That* sorrow was real, acute, actual; Barbara's coming had been so unexpected that it was not real to him yet. That fantastic mind of his refused to dwell on the central point that Barbara was once more with him, but flew off at ridiculous tangents. It liked its details well-ordered, and insisted on them; it would not let him sink into simple uxorious happiness, but rather chose to work on the practical details — never thought of until that time — of the arrangement of the life of an officer on active service, who, while locked in a death grapple with an Emperor, yet had a wife to think about. Many-sided Hornblower may have been, but the mainspring of his life was his professional duty. For more than twenty years, for all his adult life, he had been accustomed to sacrifice himself for that, to such an extent and for so long that the sacrifice now was automatic and usually ungrudging. He was so set on his struggle with Bonaparte and had been plunged so deep into it during the last months that he was inclined to resent distractions.

"This way, dear," he said, at length, a little hoarsely — he was about to clear his throat when he checked himself. The need for throat-clearing was a sure symptom of nervousness and shyness. Barbara had lightly teased him out of it years ago, and he would not clear his throat now, not in front of Barbara, not in front of himself.

They crossed the little ante-room and Hornblower threw open the door into the bedroom, standing aside for Barbara to pass through, and then he entered after her and shut the door. Barbara was standing in the centre of the floor, her back to the foot of the big bed. There was a smile on one side of her mouth; one eyebrow was raised above the other. She raised one hand to unfasten the clasp of her cloak, but let it drop again, its work uncompleted. She did not know whether to laugh or to cry over this incalculable husband of hers; but she was a Wellesley, and pride forbade her to weep. She stiffened herself just one second before Hornblower came forward to her one second too late.

"Dear," he said, and took her cold hands.

She smiled at him in return, but there could have been more tenderness in her smile, light and playful though it was.

"You are pleased to see me?" she asked; she kept her tone light, and kept her anxiety out of it.

"Of course. Of course, dear." Hornblower tried to make himself human, fighting down the instinctive impulse to withdraw into himself that was roused when his telepathic sensitivity warned him of danger. "I can hardly believe yet that you *are* here, dear."

That was the truth, heartfelt, and to say it was a relief, easing some of his tension. He took her into his arms and they kissed; tears were stinging her eyes when their lips parted again.

"Castlereagh decided the Duchess should come here, just before he left for Allied Headquarters," she explained. "So I asked if I could come too."

"I'm glad you did," said Hornblower.

"Castlereagh calls her the only man in the whole Bourbon family."

"I shouldn't be surprised if that were true."

They were warming to each other now; two proud people, learning anew the sacrifice each had to make to admit to the other their mutual need of each other. They kissed again, and Hornblower felt her body relaxing under his hands. Then came a knocking at the door, and they drew apart. It was Brown, supervising the work of a half-dozen seamen dragging in Barbara's trunks. Hebe, Barbara's little Negro maid, hovered on the

threshold before coming in with the baggage. Barbara walked over to the mirror and began to take off her hat and cloak before it.

"Little Richard," she said, in a conversational tone, "is very well and happy. He talks unceasingly, and he still digs. His particular corner of the shrubbery looks as if an army of badgers had been at work. In that trunk I have some drawings of his that I kept for you — although one can hardly say they display any noticeable artistic ability."

"I'd be astonished if they did," said Hornblower, sitting down.

"Easy with that there portmanteau," said Brown to one of the seamen. "That's no barrel o' beef you're handling. Handsomely, now. Where shall we put her ladyship's trunk, sir?"

"Leave it against the wall there, Brown, if you please," said Barbara. "Here are the keys, Hebe."

It seemed quite fantastic and unnatural to be sitting here watching Barbara at the mirror, watching Hebe unpack the baggage, here in a city of which he was military governor. Hornblower's masculine narrow-mindedness was disquieted by the situation. Twenty years of life at sea had made his lines of thought a little rigid. There should be a time and a place for everything.

A little squeal came from Hebe, instantly suppressed; Hornblower, looking round, caught a rapid interchange of glances between Brown and the seaman — the latter, seemingly, had no such views about time and place and had taken a sly pinch at Hebe. Brown could be trusted to deal with the seaman; it was not a matter in which it was consonant with the dignity of a commodore and a governor to interfere. And Brown had hardly taken his working party away when a succession of knocks at the door heralded a procession of callers. An equerry came in, bearing the royal command that at dinner tonight the company should be in full dress with powder. Hornblower stamped with rage at that; he had not floured his head more than three times in his life, and he felt ridiculous when he did. Immediately afterwards came Hau, his mind beset with the same problems, in a different guise, as were disturbing Hornblower. Under what authority should he issue rations to Lady Barbara and Lady Barbara's maid? Where should the latter be quartered? Hornblower drove him forth with orders to read the regulations for himself and discover his own legal formulas; Barbara, coolly straightening her ostrich feathers, told him that Hebe would sleep in the dressing-room opening from this bedroom. Next came Dobbs; he had read through the despatches brought by *Gazelle*, and there were some which Hornblower should see. Moreover, there were certain papers which needed the Governor's attention. A packet was sailing tonight. And the night orders certainly needed the Governor's signature. And —

"All right, I'll come," said Hornblower. "Forgive me, my dear."

"Boney's been beaten again," said Dobbs, gleefully, the moment they were out of the bedroom. "The Prussians have taken Soissons and cut up two of Boney's army corps. But that's not all."

By now they were in the office and Dobbs produced another despatch for Hornblower's perusal.

"London's going to put some force at our disposal at last, sir," explained Dobbs. "The militia have begun to volunteer for foreign service — now that the war's nearly over — and we can have as many battalions as we want. This should be answered by tonight's packet, sir."

Hornblower tried to shake from his mind thoughts about hair powder, about Hebe's amorous proclivities, to deal with this new problem regarding the launching of a campaign up the Seine valley against Paris. What did he know about the military capacity of the militia? He would have to have a general to command them, who would certainly be senior in rank to himself. What was the law regarding seniority as between a governor appointed by letters-patent and officers commanding troops? He ought to know, but it was not easy to remember the wording. He read the despatch through once without comprehending a word of it and had to apply himself to it again seriously from the beginning. He put aside the temptation that momentarily assailed him, to throw the despatch down and tell Dobbs to act according to his own judgment; mastering himself, he began soberly to dictate his reply. As he warmed to his work he had to restrain himself so as to give Dobbs' flying pen a chance to keep up with him.

When it was all done, and he had dashed off his signature on a dozen documents, he went back to the bedroom. Barbara was before the mirror, looking herself over in a white brocade gown, feathers in her hair and jewels at her throat and ears; Hebe was standing by her with the train ready to attach. Hornblower stopped short at sight of Barbara, lovely and dignified, but it was not only her distinguished appearance that checked him. It was also the sudden realisation that he could not have Brown in to help him dress, not here.

He could not exchange his trousers for breeches and stockings with Barbara and Hebe and Brown all present. He made his apologies, for Brown, aware by his usual sixth sense that Hornblower had finished his office work, was already tapping at the door. They gathered up whatever they thought they might need and went into the dressing-room — even here women's perfumes were instantly noticeable — and Hornblower began hurriedly to dress. The breeches and stockings, the gold-embroidered sword-belt. Brown had already, as might have been expected, found a woman in the town who could starch neckcloths admirably, stiff enough to retain their curves when folded, and yet soft enough not to snap in the bending. Brown hung a dressing-gown over Hornblower's shoulders, and Hornblower sat with his head lowered while Brown plied the flour-dredger and comb. When he straightened up and looked in the mirror he felt a sneaking pleasure at the result. He had allowed what was left of his curls to grow long lately, simply because he had been too busy to have his hair cropped, and Brown had combed the snow-white mop to the best advantage so that no trace of bare scalp was visible. The powdered hair set off his weather-beaten face and brown eyes admirably. The cheeks were a little hollow and the eyes a little melancholy, but it was by no means the face of an old man, so that the white hair made a most effective contrast, giving him the youthful appearance and calling that attention to his personality which presumably the fashion had in mind when it began. The blue and gold of the uniform, the white of neckcloth and powder, the ribbon of the Bath and the glittering star set him off as a very personable figure. He could wish he had more calf inside the stockings; that was the only fault he could find with his appearance. He made sure that his belt and sword were properly adjusted, put his hat under his arm, picked up his gloves, and went back into the bedroom, remembering in the nick of time to pound on the door before he turned the handle.

Barbara was ready; stately, almost like a statue, in her white brocade. The likeness to a statue was something more than what a casual simile implied; Hornblower remembered a statue of Diana that he had seen somewhere — was it Diana? — with the end of her robe caught up over her left arm exactly the way Barbara was carrying her train. Her powdered hair made her face seem a little cold in its expression, for the style did not suit her colouring and features. A glance at it reminded Hornblower of Diana again. She smiled when she saw him.

"The handsomest man in the British Navy," she said.

He gave her a clumsy bow in return.

"I only wish I were worthy of my lady," he said.

She took his arm and stood beside him in front of the mirror. Because of her height her feathers overtopped him; she flicked open her fan with an effective gesture.

"How do you think we look?" she asked.

"As I said," repeated Hornblower, "I only wish I were worthy of you."

Brown and Hebe were gaping at them behind them, as he could see in the mirror, and Barbara's reflection smiled at him.

"We must go," she said, with a pressure upon his arm. "It would never do to keep Monseigneur waiting."

They had to walk from one end of the Hôtel de Ville to the other, through corridors and ante-rooms filled with a multitude dressed in every type of uniform — it was a curious chance that had made this not very distinguished building a seat of government, the palace of a regent, the headquarters of an invading army, and the flagship of a squadron, too, for that matter, all at the same time. People saluted and drew aside respectfully against the walls as they went by — Hornblower had a clear notion of what it felt like to be royalty as he acknowledged the compliments on either side. There was noticeable an obsequiousness and a subservience very unlike the disciplined respect he was accustomed to receive in a ship. Barbara sailed along beside him; the glances that Hornblower stole at her sidelong showed her to him as struggling conscientiously against the artificiality of her smile.

A silly wave of feeling came over him; he wished he were some simple-minded fellow who could rejoice naturally and artlessly in the unexpected arrival of his wife, who could take lusty pleasure of her without self-consciousness. He knew himself to be absurdly sensitive to minute influences, even influences that did not exist except in his own ridiculous imagination but which were none the less powerful. His mind was like a bad ship's compass, not sufficiently deadbeat, wavering uncertainly and swinging to every little variation of course, swinging more widely in response to the correction, until at the hands of a poor helmsman the ship would find

herself chasing her tail or taken all aback. He felt as if he were chasing his tail at the present moment; it made no difference to the complexity of his relations with his wife to know that it was all his fault, that her emotions towards him would be simple and straightforward did they not reflect his own tangled feelings — on the contrary, thinking about that made confusion worse confounded.

He tried to fling off his melancholy, to cling to some simple fact or other to steady himself, and with frightful clarity one of the central facts in his consciousness made its appearance in his mind, horribly real — like the memory of a man he had once seen hanged, writhing with handkerchief-covered face at the end of a rope. He had not yet told Barbara about it.

"Dear," he said, "you didn't know. Bush is dead."

He felt Barbara's hand twitch on his arm, but her face still looked like that of a smiling statue.

"He was killed, four days back," babbled on Hornblower with the madness of those whom the gods wish to destroy.

It was an insane thing to say to a woman about to walk into a royal reception, on the very point of setting her foot across the threshold, but Hornblower was sublimely unconscious of his offence. Yet he had at that last moment the perspicacity to realise — what he had not realised before — that this was one of the great moments of Barbara's life; that when she had been dressing, when she had smiled at him in the mirror, her heart had been singing with anticipation. It had not occurred to his stupidity that she could enjoy this sort of function, that it could give her pleasure to sail into a glittering room on the arm of Sir Horatio Hornblower, the man of the hour. He had been taking it for granted that she would extend to these ceremonies the same sort of strained tolerance that he felt.

"Their Excellencies the Governor and Milady Barbara 'Ornblor," blared the major-domo at the door.

Every eye turned towards them as they entered. The last thing that Hornblower was conscious of, before he plunged into the imbecilities of a social function, was that he had somehow spoiled his wife's evening, and there was some angry resentment in his heart; against her, not against himself.

CHAPTER XV

The militia had arrived, pouring, still green with sea-sickness, from the close-packed transports. They were something better than a rabble in their scarlet uniforms; they could form line and column, and could march off smartly enough behind the regimental bands, even though they could not help gaping at the strangeness of this foreign town. But they drank themselves into madness or stupor at every opportunity, they insulted the women either innocently or criminally, they were guilty of theft and of wanton damage and of all the other crimes of imperfectly disciplined troops. The officers — one battalion was commanded by an earl, another by a baronet — were not sufficiently experienced to keep their men in hand. Hornblower, facing the indignant protests of the Mayor and the civil authorities, was glad when the horse-transports came in bringing the two regiments of yeomanry that had been promised him. They provided the cavalry he needed for an advanced guard, so that now he could send his little army out in its push towards Rouen, towards Paris itself.

He was at breakfast with Barbara when the news arrived; Barbara in a grey-blue informal garment with the silver coffee-pot before her, pouring his coffee, and being helped by him to bacon and eggs — a domesticity that was still unreal to him. He had been hard at work for three hours before he had come in to breakfast, and he was still too set in his ways to make the change easily from a military atmosphere to one of connubial intimacy.

"Thank you, dear," said Barbara, accepting the plate from him.

A thump at the door.

"Come in!" yelled Hornblower.

It was Dobbs, one of the few people privileged to knock at that door when Sir Horatio was at breakfast with his wife.

"Despatch from the army, sir. The Frogs have gone."

"Gone?"

"Up-stick and away, sir. Quiot marched for Paris last night. There's not a French soldier in Rouen."

The report that Hornblower took from Dobbs' hand merely repeated in more formal language what Dobbs had said. Bonaparte must be desperate for troops to defend his capital; by recalling Quiot he had left all Normandy exposed to the invader.

"We must follow him up," said Hornblower to himself, and then to Dobbs, "Tell Howard — no I'll come myself. Excuse me, my dear."

"Is there not even time," said Barbara to him, sternly, "to drink your coffee and eat your breakfast?"

The struggle on Hornblower's face was so apparent that she laughed outright at him.

"Drake," she went on, "had time to finish the game and beat the Spaniards too. I was taught that in the schoolroom."

"You're quite right, my dear," said Hornblower. "Dobbs, I'll be with you in ten minutes."

Hornblower applied himself to bacon and eggs. Maybe it would be good for discipline, in the best sense of the term, if it became known that the legendary Hornblower, the man of so many exploits, was human enough to listen sometimes to his wife's protests.

"This is victory," he said, looking at Barbara across the table. "This is the end."

He knew it in his soul now; he had arrived at this conclusion by no mere intellectual process. The tyrant of Europe, the man who had bathed the world in blood, was about to fall. Barbara met his eyes, and their emotion admitted of no words. The world which had been at war since their childhood was about to know peace, and peace had something of the unknown about it.

"Peace," said Barbara.

Hornblower felt a little unsteady. It was impossible for him to analyse his feelings, for he had no data from which to begin his deductions. He had joined the Navy as a boy, and he had known war ever since; he could know nothing of the Hornblower, the purely hypothetical Hornblower, who would have existed had there been no war. Twenty-one years of frightful strain, of peril and hardship, had made a very different man of him from what he would have become otherwise. Hornblower was no born fighting man; he was a talented and sensitive individual whom chance had forced into fighting, and his talents had brought him success as a fighter just as they would have brought him success in other walks of life, but he had had to pay a higher price. His morbid sensitiveness, his touchy pride, the quirks and weaknesses of his character might well be the result of the strains and sorrows he had had to endure. There was a coldness between him and his wife at the moment (a coldness masked by camaraderie; the passion to which both of them had given free rein had done nothing to dispel it) which might in large part be attributed to the defects of his character — a small part of it was Barbara's fault, but most of it was his. Hornblower wiped his mouth and stood up. "I really should go, dear," he said. "Please forgive me."

"Of course you must go if you have your duty to do," she answered, and held up her lips to him.

He kissed her and hurried from the room. Even with the kiss on his lips he knew that it was a mistake for a man to have his wife with him on active service; it was liable to soften him, to say nothing of the practical inconveniences, like the occasion two nights ago when an urgent message had to be brought in to him when he was in bed with Barbara. In the office he read the reconnaissance report again. It stated unequivocally that no contact could be made with any Imperial troops whatever, and that prominent citizens of Rouen, escaping from the town, assured the outposts that not a Bonapartist soldier remained there. Rouen was his for the taking, and obviously the tendency to desert Bonaparte and join the Bourbons was becoming more and more marked. Every day the number of people who came into Le Havre by road or by boat to make their submission to the Duke grew larger and larger.

"*Vive le Roi!*" was what they called out as they neared the sentries. "Long live the King!"

That was the password which marked the Bourbonist — no Bonapartist, no Jacobin, no republican would soil his lips with those words. And the number of deserters and refractory conscripts who came pouring in was growing enormous. The ranks of Bonaparte's army were leaking like a sieve, and Bonaparte would find it difficult to replace the missing ones, when his conscripts were taking to the woods or fleeing to English protection to avoid service. It might be thought possible that a Bourbonist army could be built up from this material, but the attempt was a failure from the start. Those runaways objected not merely to fighting for Bonaparte, but to fighting at all. The Royalist army which Angoulême had been sent here to organise still

numbered less than a thousand men, and of these thousand more than half were officers, old *émigrés* sent here after serving in the armies of the enemies of France.

But Rouen awaited a conqueror, nevertheless. His militia brigade could tramp the miry roads to the city, and he and Angoulême could get into carriages and drive after them. He would have to make the entrance as spectacular as possible; the capital of Normandy was no mean city, and beyond it lay Paris, quivering and sensitive. A fresh idea struck him. In eastern France the allied monarchs were riding every few days into some new captured town. It was in his power to escort Angoulême into Rouen in more spectacular fashion, demonstrating at the same time the long arm of England's sea-power, and rubbing in the lesson that it was England's naval strength which had turned the balance of the war. The wind was westerly; he was a little vague about the state of the tide, but he could wait until it should serve.

"Captain Howard," he said, looking up, "warn *Flame* and *Porta Coeli* to be ready to get under way. I shall take the Duke and Duchess up to Rouen by water. And their whole suite — yes, I'll take Lady Barbara too. Warn the captains to make preparations for their reception and accommodation. Send me Hau to settle the details. Colonel Dobbs, would you be interested in a little yachting trip?"

It seemed indeed like a yachting trip next morning, when they gathered on the quarter-deck of the *Porta Coeli*, a group of men in brilliant uniforms and women in gay dresses. *Porta Coeli* had already warped away from the quay, from which they rowed out to her, and Freeman, at a nod from Hornblower, had only to bellow the orders for sail to be set and the anchor hove in for them to start up the broad estuary. The sun was shining with the full promise of spring, the wavelets gleamed and danced. Down below decks, Hornblower could guess from the sounds, there was trouble and toil, while they were still trying to rig accommodation for the royal party, but here by the taffrail all was laughter and expectancy. And it was heavenly to tread a deck again, to feel the wind on his cheeks, to look aft and see *Flame* under all fore-and-aft sail in her station astern, to have the white ensign overhead and his broad pendant hoisted, even though the Bourbon white and gold flew beside it.

He met Barbara's eye and smiled at her; the Duke and Duchess condescended to step to his side and engage him in conversation. The fairway led close by the northern shore of the estuary; they passed Harfleur, and the battery there exchanged salutes with them. They were bowling up the channel at a full eight knots, faster than if they had gone in carriages, but of course when the river began to narrow and to wind it might be a different story. The southern shore came northward to meet them, the flat green shore becoming more and more defined, until in a flash, as it seemed, they were out of the estuary and between the banks of the river, leaving Quilleboeuf behind and opening up the long reach that led to Caudebec, the left bank green pasture-land studded with fat farms, the right bank lofty and wooded. Over went the helm, the sheets were hauled in. But with the wind tending to funnel up the valley it was still well over their quarter, and with the racing tide behind them they fairly tore along the river. Luncheon was announced, and the party trooped below, the women squealing at the lowness of the decks and the difficulty of the companion. Bulkheads had been ripped out and replaced to make ample room for royalty — Hornblower guessed that half the crew would be sleeping on deck in consequence of the presence of the Duke and Duchess. The royal servants, assisted by the wardroom stewards — the former as embarrassed by their surroundings as the latter by the company on whom they had to wait — began to serve the food, but luncheon had hardly begun when Freeman came in to whisper to Hornblower as he sat between the Duchess and the *dame d'honneur*.

"Caudebec in sight, sir," whispered Freeman; Hornblower had left orders to be told when this happened. With an apology to the Duchess and a bow to the Duke, Hornblower slipped unobtrusively out of the room; the etiquette of royalty even covered events on shipboard, and sailors could come and go with little ceremony if the management of the vessel demanded it. Caudebec was in sight at the top of the reach, and they were approaching it fast, so that it was only a matter of minutes before there was no need for the glass that Hornblower trained on the little town. The damage caused by the explosion which had cost Bush's life was very obvious. Every house had been cut off short six or eight feet from the ground; the massive church had withstood the shock save that most of its roof had been stripped off and its windows blown in. The long wooden quay was in ruins, and a few stumps of blackened wrecks showed above water-level beside it. A single cannon — a twenty-four-pounder on a travelling carriage — stood on the river bank above the quay, all that

remained of Quiot's siege-train. A few people were to be seen; they stood staring at the two men-o'-war brigs sailing along the river past them.

"A nasty sight, sir," said Freeman beside him.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

This was where Bush died; Hornblower stood silent in tribute to his friend. When the war was over he would erect a little monument on the river bank there above the quay. He could wish that the ruined town would never be rebuilt; that would be the most striking monument to his friend's memory — that or a pyramid of skulls.

"Mains'l sheets! Jib sheets!" roared Freeman.

They had come to the head of the reach, and were beginning the long turn to starboard. Jibing a big brig in a narrow river was no child's play. The flattened sails roared like thunder as they caught the back-lash of the wind from the heights. The brig's way carried her forward, and she rounded to, slowly, round the bend. Letting out the mainsail sheet gave them the needed push and steerage way; the farther she came round the flatter the sails were hauled, until at last she was close-hauled on a course almost opposite to the one by which she had approached Caudebec, sailing close-hauled up the new reach which presented itself to their gaze.

Here was Hau beside him now.

"Monseigneur wishes to know," he said, "whether your business on deck is very urgent. His Royal Highness has a toast to propose, and wishes that you could join in it."

"I'll come," said Hornblower.

He took a last glance aft at Caudebec, vanishing round the bend, and hurried below. The big extemporised cabin was parti-coloured with sunlight coming in through the open ports. Angoulême caught sight of him as he entered, and rose to his feet, crouching under the low deck-beams.

"To His Royal Highness the Prince Regent!" he said, lifting his glass. The toast was drunk, and everyone looked to Hornblower for the proper response.

"His Most Christian Majesty!" said Hornblower, and when the ceremony was completed raised his glass again.

"His Most Christian Majesty's Regent in Normandy, Monseigneur His Royal Highness the Duke d'Angoulême!"

The toast was drunk amid a roar of acclamation. There was something dramatic and painful about being down here below decks drinking toasts while an Empire was falling in ruins outside. The *Porta Coeli* was sailing as close to the wind as she could lie, so Hornblower guessed from the feel of the vessel under his feet and the sound of her passage through the water. Freeman on deck would have difficulty in weathering the next bend — he had noticed before he came down that the reach they had entered trended a little into the wind.

Hornblower heard Freeman roar a fresh order on deck, and was consumed with restlessness. Down here it was like being with a nursery party of children, enjoying themselves while the adults attended to the management of the world. He made his apologetic bow again and slipped out to go on deck.

It was as he thought; The *Porta Coeli* was as close-hauled as she would lie, almost closer. Her sails were shivering and her motion sluggish, and the bend in the river that would give her relief was a full half-mile farther ahead. Freeman looked up at the flapping sails and shook his head.

"You'll have to club-haul her, Mr. Freeman," said Hornblower. To tack in that narrow channel, even with the tide behind them, would be too tricky an operation altogether.

"Aye aye, sir," said Freeman.

He stood for a second judging his distances; the hands at the sheets, in no doubt about the delicacy of the ensuing manoeuvres, waiting keyed up for the rapid succession of orders that would follow. Filling the sails for a moment gave them plenty of way again, although it brought them perilously close to the leeward shore. Then in came the sheets, over went the helm, and the *Porta Coeli* snatched a few yards into the wind, losing most of her way in the process. Then out went the sheets, up came the helm a trifle, and she gathered way again, close-hauled yet edging down perceptibly towards the lee shore.

"Well done," said Hornblower. He wanted to add a word of advice to the effect that it would be as well not to leave it so late next time, but he glanced at Freeman sizing up the distances and decided it was unnecessary. Freeman wanted none of the brig's way lost this time. The moment the sails flapped he threw them back, put his helm over, and this time gained the full width of the river into the wind. Looking aft, Hornblower saw that the *Flame* was following her consort's example. The lee shore seemed to come to meet them; it seemed a very

short time before the manoeuvre would have to be repeated, and Hornblower was relieved to see that the bend was appreciably nearer.

It was at that moment that the Duke's head appeared above the coaming as he climbed the little companion, and the royal party began to swarm on deck again. Freeman looked with despair at Hornblower, who took the necessary decision. He fixed the nearest courtier — the equerry, it happened to be — with a look that cut short the laughing speech he was addressing to the lady at his side.

"It is not convenient for His Royal Highness and his suite to be on deck at present," Hornblower said loudly. The gay chatter stopped as if cut off with a knife; Hornblower looked at the crestfallen faces and was reminded of children again, spoiled children deprived of some minor pleasure.

"The management of the ship calls for too much attention," went on Hornblower, to make his point quite clear. Freeman was already bellowing at the hands at the sheets.

"Very well, Sir 'Oratio," said the Duke. "Come, ladies. Come, gentlemen."

He beat as dignified a retreat as possible, but the last courtier down the companion was sadly hustled by the rush of the hands across the deck.

"Up helm!" said Freeman to the steersman, and then, in the breathing space while they gathered way close-hauled, "Shall I batten down, sir?"

The outrageous suggestion was made with a grin.

"No," snapped Hornblower, in no mood for joking.

On the next tack *Porta Coeli* succeeded in weathering the point. Round she came and round; Freeman jibed her neatly, and once more with the wind on her quarter the brig was running free up the next reach, wooded hills on one side, fat meadow-land on the other. Hornblower thought for a moment of sending a message down that the royal party could come on deck for the next quarter of an hour, but thought better of it. Let 'em stay below, Barbara and all. He took his glass and laboriously climbed the main-shrouds; from the main-crosstrees his view over the countryside was greatly extended. It was oddly pleasant to sit up here and look over this green and lovely land of France like some sightseeing traveller. The peasants were at work in the fields, hardly looking up as the two beautiful vessels sailed past them. There was no sign of war or desolation here; Normandy beyond Caudebec was untouched as yet by invading armies. Then, for one moment, as the brig neared the next bend and preparations were being made for jibing her round, Hornblower caught a glimpse of Rouen far away across the country, cathedral towers and steeples. It gave him a queer thrill, but immediately the wooded heights as the brig came round cut off his view, and he snapped his glass shut and descended again.

"Not much of the tide left, sir," said Freeman.

"No. We'll anchor in the next reach, if you please, Mr. Freeman. Anchor bow and stern, and make a signal to *Flame* to the same effect."

"Aye aye, sir."

Natural phenomena, like nightfall and tides, were far more satisfactory things to deal with than human beings and their whims, than princes — and wives. The two brigs anchored in the stream to ride out the ebb tide and the hours of darkness to follow. Hornblower took the natural precautions against attack and surprise, rigging the boarding-nettings and keeping a couple of boats rowing guard during the night, but he knew there was little to fear from that exhausted and apathetic countryside. If there had been any of the army left within striking distance, if Bonaparte had been operating west of Paris instead of east, it would be a different story. But save for Bonaparte and the armed forces which he compelled to fight for him there was no resistance left in France; she lay helpless, the inert prize of the first conqueror to arrive.

The party on board the *Porta Coeli* went on being gay. It was a nuisance that the Duke and Duchess and their suite continually discovered that servants or pieces of baggage needed in *Porta Coeli* were in *Flame*, and vice versa, so that there was a continual need for boats between the two vessels, but presumably that was only to be expected from these people. They made surprisingly little complaint about the crowding in the sleeping accommodations. Barbara went off philosophically to bed in Freeman's cabin along with four other women — Freeman's cabin would be uncomfortable quarters for two. The royal servants slung hammocks for themselves under the amused tuition of the hands with no demur at all; it seemed as if during twenty years of exile, of wandering through Europe, they had learned in adversity some lessons which they had not forgotten as yet.

No one seemed likely to sleep — but in the prevailing excitement and pleasurable anticipation they would probably not have slept even in downy beds in palaces.

Certainly Hornblower, after trying to compose himself for an hour or two in the hammock slung for him on deck (he had not slept in a hammock since the time when he refitted the *Lydia* at the island of Coiba), gave up the attempt, and lay looking up at the night sky, save when a couple of sharp showers drove him to cover himself over, head and all, with the tarpaulin provided for him. Staying awake did at least keep him assured that the westerly wind was still blowing, as might be expected at that time of year. If it had dropped or changed he was prepared to push on for Rouen in the ships' boats. There was no need; dawn and an increase in the westerly breeze came together, along with more rain, and two hours after the first daylight the flood set in and Hornblower could give the word to up anchor.

At the next bend Rouen's cathedral towers were plain to the sight; at the one after that only a comparatively narrow neck of land separated them from the city, although there was still a long and beautiful curve of the river to navigate. It was still early afternoon when they rounded the last bend and saw the whole city stretched before them, the island with its bridges, its wharves cluttered with river boats, the market hall across the quay, and the soaring Gothic towers which had looked down upon the burning of Joan of Arc. It was a tricky business anchoring there just below the town with the last of the flood still running; Hornblower had to take advantage of a minor bend in the stream to throw all aback and anchor by the stern, two cables' lengths farther from the city than he would have chosen in other circumstances. He scanned the city through his glass for signs of a deputation coming to greet them, and the Duke stood beside him, inclined to chafe at any delay.

"I'll have a boat, if you please, Mr. Freeman," Hornblower said at length. "Will you pass the word for my coxswain?"

Crowds were already gathering on the quays to stare at the English ships, at the White Ensign and at the Bourbon lilies; it was twenty years since either had been seen there. There was quite a mass of people assembled when Brown laid the boat alongside the quay just below the bridge. Hornblower walked up the steps, eyed by the crowd. They were apathetic and silent, not like any French crowd he had seen or heard before. He caught sight of a man in uniform, a sergeant of *douaniers*.

"I wish to visit the Mayor," he said.

"Yes, sir," said the *douanier* respectfully.

"Call a carriage for me," said Hornblower.

There was a little hesitation; the *douanier* looked about him doubtfully, but soon voices from the crowd began to make suggestions, and it was not long before a rattling hackney coach made its appearance. Hornblower climbed in, and they clattered off. The Mayor received him on the threshold of the Hôtel de Ville, having hastened there to meet him from his desk as soon as he heard of his arrival.

"Where is the reception for His Royal Highness?" demanded Hornblower. "Why have no salutes been fired? Why are the church bells not ringing?"

"Monsieur — Your Excellency —" The Mayor knew not quite what Hornblower's uniform and ribbon implied and wanted to be on the safe side. "We did not know — we were not certain —"

"You saw the royal standard," said Hornblower. "You knew that His Royal Highness was on his way here from Le Havre."

"There had been rumours, yes," said the Mayor reluctantly. "But —"

What the Mayor wanted to say was that he hoped the Duke would arrive not only with overpowering force but also would make an unassuming entrance so that nobody would have to commit themselves too definitely on the Bourbon side according him a welcome. And that was exactly what Hornblower had come to force him to do.

"His Royal Highness," said Hornblower, "is seriously annoyed. If you wish to regain his favour, and that of His Majesty the King who will follow him, you will make all the amends in your power. A deputation — you, all your councillors, all the notables, the Prefect and the Sub-prefect if they are still here, every person of position, in fact, must be on hand two hours from now to welcome Monseigneur when he lands."

"Monsieur —"

"Note will be taken of who is present. And of who is absent," said Hornblower. "The church bells can begin to ring immediately."

The Mayor tried to meet Hornblower's eyes. He was still in fear of Bonaparte, still terrified in case some reversal of fortune should leave him at Bonaparte's mercy, called to account for his actions in receiving the Bourbon. And, on the other hand, Hornblower knew well enough that if he could persuade the city to offer an open welcome, Rouen would think twice about changing sides again. He was determined upon winning allies for his cause.

"Two hours," said Hornblower, "will be ample for all preparations to be made, for the deputation to assemble, for the streets to be decorated, for quarters to be prepared for His Royal Highness and his suite."

"Monsieur, you do not understand all that this implies," protested the Mayor. "It means —"

"It means that you are having to decide whether to enjoy the King's favour or not," said Hornblower. "That is the choice before you."

Hornblower ignored the point that the Mayor was also having to decide whether or not to risk the guillotine at Bonaparte's hands.

"A wise man," said Hornblower, meaningfully, "will not hesitate a moment."

So hesitant was the Mayor that Hornblower began to fear that he would have to use threats. He could threaten dire vengeance tomorrow or the next day when the advancing army should arrive; more effectively, he could threaten to knock the town to pieces immediately with his ships' guns, but that was not a threat he wanted to put into execution at all; it would be far from establishing the impression he wished to convey of a people receiving its rulers with acclamation after years of suffering under a tyrant.

"Time presses," said Hornblower, looking at his watch.

"Very well," said the Mayor, taking the decision which might mean life or death to him. "I'll do it. What does Your Excellency suggest?"

It took only a matter of minutes to settle the details; Hornblower had learned from Hau much about arranging the public appearances of royalty. Then he took his leave, and drove back again to the quay through the silent crowds, to where the boat lay with Brown growing anxious about him. They had hardly pushed off into the stream when Brown cocked his ear. A church carillon had begun its chimes, and within a minute another had joined in. On the deck of the *Porta Coeli* the Duke listened to what Hornblower had to tell him. The city was making ready to welcome him.

And when they landed on the quay there was the assembly of notables, as promised; there were the carriages and the horses; there were the white banners in the streets. And there were the apathetic crowds, numbed with disaster. But it meant that Rouen was quiet during their stay there, the reception could at least have an appearance of gaiety, so that Barbara and Hornblower went to bed each night worn out.

Hornblower turned his head on the pillow as the thumping on the door penetrated at last into his consciousness.

"Come in!" he roared; Barbara beside him moved fretfully as he reached out, still half asleep, and pulled open the curtains.

It was Dobbs, slippered and in his shirtsleeves, his braces hanging by his thighs, his hair in a mop. He held a candle in one hand and a despatch in the other.

"It's over!" he said. "Boney's abdicated! Blücher's in Paris!"

So there it was. Victory; the end of twenty years of war. Hornblower sat up and blinked at the candle.

"The Duke must be told," he said. He was gathering his thoughts. "Is the King still in England? What does that despatch say?"

He got himself out of bed in his nightshirt, while Barbara sat up with her hair in disorder.

"All right, Dobbs," said Hornblower. "I'll be with you in five minutes. Send to wake the Duke and warn him that I am about to come to him."

He reached for his trousers as Dobbs left him, and, balancing on one leg, he met Barbara's sleepy gaze.

"It's peace," he said. "No more war."

Even when roused out in this fashion Hornblower dressed, as he did all that came his way, extraordinarily quickly. He was tucking his nightshirt into his trousers — the long skirts of the warm and bulky garment packed the latter uncomfortably full — before Barbara replied.

"We knew it would come," she said, a little fretfully. During recent events Barbara had had small time to sleep. "The Duke must be told immediately, all the same," said Hornblower, thrusting his feet into his shoes. "I expect he'll start for Paris at dawn."

"At dawn? What time is it now?"

"Six bells, I should fancy — three o'clock."

"Oh!" said Barbara, sinking back on her pillow.

Hornblower pulled on his coat and stopped to kiss her, but she kissed him back only perfunctorily.

The Duke kept him waiting fifteen minutes in the drawing-room of the residence of the departed Prefect where he had been installed. He heard the news with his council round him, and with royal stoicism showed no sign of emotion.

"What about the usurper?" was his first question after hearing what Hornblower had to say.

"His future is partially decided, Your Royal Highness. He has been promised a minor sovereignty," said Hornblower. It sounded absurd to him as he said it.

"And His Majesty, my uncle?"

"The despatch does not say, Your Royal Highness. Doubtless His Majesty will leave England now. Perhaps he is already on his way."

"We must be at the Tuileries to receive him."

CHAPTER XVI

Hornblower sat in his sitting-room in the Hôtel Meurice in Paris rereading the crackling parchment document that had arrived for him the previous day. The wording of it might be called as gratifying as the purport of it, to one who cared for such things.

As the grandeur and stability of the British Empire depend chiefly upon knowledge and experience in maritime affairs, We esteem those worthy of the highest honours who, acting under Our influence, exert themselves in maintaining Our dominion over the sea. It is for this reason that We have determined to advance to the degree of Peerage Our trusty and well beloved Sir Horatio Hornblower, Knight of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, who, being descended from an ancient family in Kent, and educated from his youth in the sea service, hath through several posts arrived to high station and command in Our navy, by the strength of his own abilities, and a merit distinguished by Us, in the many important services, which he has performed with remarkable fidelity, courage and success. In the late vigorous wars, which raged so many years in Europe; wars fruitful of naval combats and expeditions; there was scarce any action of consequence wherein he did not bear a principal part, nor were any dangers or difficulties too great, but he surmounted them by his exquisite conduct, and a good fortune that never failed him."

It is just, therefore, that We should distinguish with higher titles a subject who has so eminently served Us and his country, both as monuments of his own merit, and to influence others into a love and pursuit of virtue.

So now he was a Peer of the Realm, a Baron of the United Kingdom, Lord Hornblower of Smallbridge, County of Kent. There were only two or three other examples in history of a naval officer being raised to the peerage before attaining flag rank. Lord Hornblower of Smallbridge; of course he had decided to retain his own name in his title. There might be something grotesque about the name of Hornblower, and yet he was fond of it, and he had no desire to lose it in the almost anonymity of Lord Smallbridge or Lord Something-else. Pellew, he had heard, had elected to become Lord Exmouth. That might suit Pellew, but it would not suit him. His brother-in-law, when he received a step in the peerage, had actually reverted from a territorial to a personal title, becoming Marquis Wellesley instead of Earl of Mornington. Another brother-in-law, unable to use the Wellesley name in consequence of his brother's pre-emption of it, had become Wellington, apparently in an effort to retain as much of the family name as possible. He was a Duke now, far above a mere Baron, and yet they were all three Peers together. Lords, hereditary legislators. Little Richard was now the Honourable

Richard Hornblower, and some time would be Lord Hornblower in succession to his father. All the formalities regarding titles were a little amusing. Barbara, for instance; as the daughter of an earl — it was her father's rank that mattered, not the fact that one brother was now a marquis and one a duke — she had had higher precedence than as the wife of a Knight of the Bath. She had been Lady Barbara Hornblower up to yesterday. But now as a result of her husband's peerage she would be Lady Hornblower. Lord and Lady Hornblower. It sounded well. It was a great honour and distinction, the coping-stone of his professional career. Oh, to be truthful about it, it was the sheerest lot of tommy-nonsense. Robes and a coronet. Hornblower stiffened in his chair as a thought struck him. Freeman's ridiculous prophecy over the cards in the cabin of the *Flame* about a golden crown had this much confirmation now. It was an amazingly shrewd guess on the part of Freeman; it had never occurred to him himself for one moment that he might become a peer. But the rest of Freeman's prophecy had fallen to the ground. Danger and a fair woman, Freeman had foreseen. And now the danger was all over with the coming of peace, and there was no fair woman in his life, unless Barbara, with her blue eyes and light-brown hair, could be called fair.

He rose to his feet in his irritation, and perhaps was going to stamp round the room, but Barbara came in at that moment from her bedroom, ready for the Ambassador's party. She was all in unrelieved white, for the party had been planned as a culminating demonstration of loyalty to the Bourbons, and the women were to wear white regardless as to whether or not their complexions could stand it; maybe that was the most convincing proof of loyalty to the newly restored dynasty that could be offered. Hornblower picked up his hat and cloak in readiness to escort her; it was the fortieth time in forty nights, he fancied, that he had done just the same thing.

"We won't stay at Arthur's late," said Barbara.

Arthur was her brother the Duke of Wellington, lately and strangely transferred from commanding the army fighting France to His Britannic Majesty's Embassy to His Most Christian Majesty. Hornblower looked his surprise.

"We shall go on to the Polignacs'," explained Barbara. "To meet M. le Prince."

"Very well, dear," said Hornblower. He thought he kept the resignation out of his voice perfectly convincingly. M. le Prince; that was the Prince of Condé, of a younger Bourbon line. Hornblower had begun to learn his way through the complexities of French society — the complexities of the last century transported bodily back into this. He wondered if he were the only man who thought of them as outmoded anachronisms. M. le Prince; M. le Duc — that was the Duc de Bourbon, wasn't it? Monsieur — plain Monsieur, with no honorifics at all — was the Comte d'Artois, the King's brother and heir. Monseigneur, on the other hand, was the Duc d'Angoulême, Monsieur's son, who would one of these days be Dauphin if his father survived his uncle. The very name of Dauphin was anachronistic, smacking of the Dark Ages. And the future Dauphin, as Hornblower well knew, was a man of convinced stupidity whose characteristic most easily remembered was a high-pitched mirthless laugh something like the cackling of a hen.

They had descended the stairs by now and Brown was waiting to hand them into the waiting carriage.

"The British Embassy, Brown," said Hornblower.

"Yes, my lord."

Brown had not stumbled over the new title once in the twenty-four hours he had borne it; Hornblower felt in his exasperation that he would have given anything for Brown to slip into 'Aye aye, sir'. But Brown was too clear-headed and quick-thinking a person to make any such blunder; it was surprising that Brown should have elected to stay on in his service. He might well have made a career for himself.

"You're not listening to a word I'm saying," said Barbara.

"Please forgive me, dear," said Hornblower — there was no denying the accusation.

"It's very important indeed," said Barbara. "Arthur is going to Vienna to represent us at the Congress.

Castlereagh has to come home to manage the House."

"Arthur will give up the Embassy?" asked Hornblower, making polite conversation. The carriage roared over the cobbles; the occasional lights revealed through the windows the bustling multi-uniformed crowd of Paris in the whirl of peace.

"Of course. *This* is much more important. All the world will be in Vienna — every Court, in the world will be represented."

"I suppose so," said Hornblower. The destinies of the world were to be decided at the Congress.

"That's what I was going to tell you about. Arthur will need a hostess there — there'll be constant entertaining, of course — and he has asked me to come and act for him."

"My God!" Polite conversation had led straight to the brink of this abyss.

"Don't you think it's wonderful?" asked Barbara.

Hornblower was on the point of saying 'Yes, dear' when rebellion surged up within him. He had endured for his wife's sake uncounted martyrdoms already. And this would be one far more violent and prolonged. Barbara would be the lady of the house, hostess of the most important delegate to the most important Congress in the world. The seeds of diplomacy, Hornblower had already learned, were planted far more often in drawing-rooms than in Cabinets. Barbara's drawing-room would be a place of intrigue and double-dealing. She would be hostess, Wellington would be the man of the house, and he — what would he be? Something even more unnecessary than he was at present. Hornblower saw stretching before him a three months' vista of salons and balls and visits to the ballet, outside the inner circle, outside the outer circle too. No Cabinet secrets would be entrusted to him, and he did not want to have anything to do with the petty gossip and polite scandal of the great world. A fish out of water was what he would be — and not a bad metaphor, either, when applied to a naval officer in the salons of Vienna.

"You don't answer me?" said Barbara. "I'm utterly damned if I'll do it!" said Hornblower — strange that, with all his tact and intuition, he always took a sledge-hammer in his rare arguments with Barbara, to kill flies with.

"You won't do it, dear?"

In the course of that brief sentence Barbara's tone changed from disappointment at the beginning to bitter hostility at the end.

"No!" said Hornblower, in a roar. He had kept the lid on his feelings for so long and so tightly that the explosion was violent when it came.

"You'll deprive me of the greatest thing that has ever happened to me?" said Barbara, a hint of ice edging the words.

Hornblower fought down his feelings. It would be easier to give way — ever so easy. But no, he would not. Could not. Yet Barbara was quite right about its being a wonderful thing. To be hostess to a European Congress, to help mould the future of the world — and then, on the other hand, Hornblower had no wish whatever to be a member, and an unimportant member at that, of the Wellesley clan. He had been captain of a ship too long. He did not like politics, not even politics on a European scale. He did not want to kiss the hands of Hungarian countesses, and exchange inanities with Russian grand dukes. That had been fun in the old days when his professional reputation hinged on some such success, as it had done. But he needed more of a motive than the mere maintenance of his reputation as a beau.

Quarrels in a carriage always seemed to reach a climax just as the drive ended. The carriage had halted and porters in the Wellington livery were opening the door before Hornblower had had time either to explain or make amends. As they walked into the Embassy Hornblower's apprehensive side glances revealed that Barbara's colour was high and her eyes dangerously bright. So they remained during the whole of the reception; Hornblower looked across the room at her whenever he could, and every time she was clearly in high spirits, or laughing with the groups in conversation with her, tapping with her fan. Was she flirting? The red coats and the blue coats, the black coats and the green coats, that assembled round her bent their shoulders in obvious deference to her. Every glance Hornblower took seemed to increase his resentment. But he fought it down, determined to make amends.

"You had better go to Vienna, dear," he said, as they were once more in the carriage on their way to the Polignacs'. "Arthur needs you — it's your duty."

"And you?" Barbara's tone was still chilly.

"You don't need me. The skeleton at the feast, dear. I'll go to Smallbridge."

"That is very kind of you," said Barbara. Proud as she was, she resented a little having to be beholden to anyone. To ask permission was bad enough; to receive grudging permission was dreadful.

Yet here they were at the Polignacs'.

"Milord and milady Hornblower," roared the major-domo.

They paid their respects to the Prince, received their hosts' and hostess's greetings. What in the world — ? What — ? Hornblower's head was spinning. His heart was pounding, and there was a roaring in his ears like when he had battled for his life in the waters of the Loire. The whole glittering room was seemingly banked in fog, save for a single face. Marie was looking at him across the room, a troubled smile on her lips. Marie! Hornblower swept his hand over his face, forced himself to think clearly as he had sometimes had to do when exhausted in battle. Marie! Not so many months before his marriage to Barbara he had told Marie he loved her, and he had been on the verge of sincerity when he said it. And she had told him she loved him, and he had felt her tears on his face. Marie the tender, the devoted, the sincere. Marie, who had needed him, whose memory he had betrayed to marry Barbara.

He forced himself to cross the room to her, to kiss with simple formality the hand she offered. That troubled smile was still on her lips; she had looked like that when — when — when he had selfishly taken all she had to give, like some thoughtless child claiming a sacrifice from a loving mother. How could he meet her eyes again? And yet he did. They looked each other over with mock whimsicality. Hornblower had the impression of something vivid and vital. Marie was dressed in cloth of gold. Her eyes seemed to burn into him — that was no careless metaphor. Mentally he tried to cling to Barbara, like a shipwrecked sailor to a broken mast tossing in the surf. Barbara slim and elegant; and Marie warm and opulent. Barbara in white which did not do her justice, Marie in gold. Barbara's blue eyes, sparkling, and Marie's brown eyes, warm and tender. Barbara's hair fair and almost brown; Marie's, golden and almost auburn. It did not do to think about Barbara while looking at Marie. Here was the Count, quizzically kindly, awaiting his attention — the kindest man in all the world, whose three sons had died for France, and who had told Hornblower once that he felt towards him as towards a son. Hornblower clasped hands with him in an outpouring of affection. The introductions were not easy. It was not easy to introduce his wife and his mistress.

"Lady Hornblower — Mme la Vicomtesse de Graçay. Barbara, my dear — M. le Comte de Graçay."

Were they sizing each other up, these two women? Were they measuring swords, his wife and his mistress, the woman whom he had publicly chosen and the one he had privately loved?

"It was M. le Comte," said Hornblower, feverishly, "and his daughter-in-law who helped me escape from France. They hid me until the pursuit was over."

"I remember," said Barbara. She turned to them and spoke in her shocking schoolroom French. "I am eternally grateful to you for what you did for my husband."

It was difficult. There was a puzzled look on the faces of Marie and the Count; this was nothing like the wife Hornblower had described to them four years ago when he had been a fugitive hidden in their house. They could hardly be expected to know that Maria was dead and that Hornblower had promptly married Barbara, who was as unlike her predecessor as she well could be.

"We would do as much again, madame," said the Count. "Fortunately there will never be any need."

"And Lieutenant Bush?" asked Marie of Hornblower. "I hope he is well?"

"He is dead, madame. He was killed in the last month of the war. He was a captain before he died."

"Oh!"

It was silly to say he had been a captain. For anyone else it would not have been. A naval officer hungered and yearned so inexpressibly for that promotion that speaking of a casual acquaintance one could think his death requited by his captaincy. But not with Bush.

"I am sorry," said the Count. He hesitated before he spoke again — now that they had emerged from the nightmare of war it was apprehensively that one asked about old friends who might have been killed. "But Brown? That pillar of strength? He's well?"

"Perfectly well, M. le Comte. He is my confidential servant at this moment."

"We read a little about your escape," said Marie.

"In the usual garbled Bonaparte form," added the Count, "You took a ship — the — the —"

"The *Witch of Endor*, sir."

Was all this too painful or too pleasant? Memories were crowding in on him, memories of the Château de Graçay, of the escape down the Loire, of the glorious return to England; memories of Bush; and memories — honey-sweet memories — of Marie. He met her eyes, and the kindness in them was unfathomable. God! This was unendurable.

"But we have not done what we should have done at the very first," said the Count. "We have not offered our felicitations, our congratulations, on the recognition your services have received from your country. You are an English lord, and I well know how much that implies. My sincerest congratulations, milord. Nothing — nothing can ever give me greater pleasure."

"Nor me," said Marie.

"Thank you, thank you," said Hornblower. He bowed shyly. It was for him, too, one of the greatest pleasures in his life to see the pride and affection beaming in the old Count's face.

Hornblower became aware that Barbara standing by had lost the thread of the conversation. He offered her a hurried English translation, and she nodded and smiled to the Count — but the translation was a false move. It would have been better to have let Barbara blunder along with French; once he started interpreting for her the barrier of language was raised far higher, and he was put into the position of intermediary between his wife and his friends, tending to keep her at a distance.

"You are enjoying life in Paris, madame?" asked Marie.

"Very much, thank you," said Barbara.

It seemed to Hornblower as if the two women did not like each other. He plunged into a mention of the possibility of Barbara's going to Vienna; Marie listened apparently in rapture at Barbara's good fortune. Conversation became formal and stilted; Hornblower refused to allow himself to decide that this was a result of Barbara's entry into it, and yet the conclusion formed in his inner consciousness. He wanted to chatter free and unrestrained with Marie and the Count, and somehow it could not be done with Barbara standing by. Relief actually mingled with his regret when the surge of people round them and the approach of their host meant that their group would have to break up. They exchanged addresses; they promised to call on each other, if Barbara's probable departure for Vienna left her time enough. There was a soul-searing glimpse of sadness in Marie's eyes as he bowed to her.

In the carriage again, going back to their hotel, Hornblower felt a curious little glow of virtue over the fact that he had suggested that Barbara should go to Vienna without him before they had met the Graçays. Why he should derive any comfort from that knowledge was more than he could possibly imagine, but he hugged the knowledge to him. He sat in his dressing-gown talking to Barbara while Hebe went through the elaborate processes of undressing her and making her hair ready for the night.

"When you first told me about Arthur's suggestion, my dear," he said, "I hardly realised all that it implied. I am so delighted. You will be England's first lady. And very properly, too."

"You do not wish to accompany me?" said Barbara.

"I think you would be happier without me," said Hornblower with perfect honesty. Somehow he would spoil her pleasure, he knew, if he had to endure a succession of balls and ballets in Vienna.

"And you?" asked Barbara. "You will be happy at Smallbridge, you think?"

"As happy as I ever can be without you, dear," said Hornblower, and he meant it.

So far not a word about the Graçays had passed between them. Barbara was commendably free from the vulgar habit which had distressed him so much in his first wife of talking over the people they had just met. They were in bed together, her hands in his, before she mentioned them, and then it was suddenly, with no preliminary fencing, and very much not *à propos*.

"Your friends the Graçays are very charming," she said.

"Are they not all that I told you about them?" said Hornblower, immensely relieved that in telling Barbara of his adventures he had made no attempt to skirt round that particular episode, even though he had not told her all — by no means all. Then a little clumsily he went on. "The Count is one of the most delightful and sweetest-natured men who ever walked."

"She is beautiful," said Barbara, pursuing undeflected her own train of thought. "Those eyes, that complexion, that hair. So often women with reddish hair and brown eyes have poor complexions."

"Hers is perfect," said Hornblower — it seemed the best thing to do to agree.

"Why has she not married again?" wondered Barbara. "She must have been married very young, and she has been a widow for some years, you say?"

"Since Aspern," he explained. "In 1809. One son was killed at Austerlitz, one died in Spain, and her husband, Marcel, at Aspern."

"Nearly six years ago" said Barbara.

Hornblower tried to explain; how Marie was not of blue blood herself, how whatever fortune she had would certainly revert to the Graçays on her remarriage, how their retired life gave her small chance of meeting possible husbands.

"They will be moving much in good society now," commented Barbara, thoughtfully. And some time afterwards, *à propos* of nothing, she added, "Her mouth is too wide."

Later that night, with Barbara breathing quietly beside him, Hornblower thought over what Barbara had said. He did not like to think about Marie's remarriage, which was perfectly ridiculous of him. He would almost never see her again. He might call once, before he returned to England, but that would be all. Soon he would be back in Smallbridge, in his own house, with Richard, and with English servants to wait on him. Life in future might be dull and safe, but it would be happy. Barbara would not be in Vienna for always. With his wife and his son he would lead a sane, orderly, and useful life. That was a good resolution on which to close his eyes and compose himself to sleep.

CHAPTER XVII

Two months later saw Hornblower sitting in a chaise driving along through France towards Nevers and the Château of Graçay. The Congress of Vienna was still sitting, or dancing — someone had just made the remark that the Congress danced but made no progress — and Barbara was still entertaining. Little Richard spent his mornings in the schoolroom now, and there was nothing for an active man to do in Smallbridge except feel lonely. Temptation had crept up on him like an assassin. Six weeks of mooning round the house had been enough for him; six weeks of an English winter of rain and cloud, six weeks of being hovered over by butler and housekeeper and governess, six weeks of desultory riding through the lanes and of enduring the company of his bucolic neighbours. As a captain he had been a lonely man and yet a busy one, a very different thing from being a lonely man with nothing to do. Even going round to parties in Paris had been better than this. He had caught himself talking to Brown, harking back to old experiences, reminiscing, and that would never do. He had his dignity still to consider; no strong man could be weak enough to yearn for activity and interest. And Brown had talked eagerly about France, about the Château of Graçay, about their escape down the Loire — maybe it was Brown's fault that Hornblower's thoughts had turned more and more towards Graçay. As a fugitive he had found a welcome there, a home, friendship, and love. He thought about the Count — it may have been because his conscience troubled him, but undoubtedly at first it was the Count that he thought about rather than Marie — with his courtesy and kindness and general loveliness. With Bush dead it was likely that the Count was the man of whom Hornblower was fondest in all the world. The spiritual tie of which Hornblower had been conscious years ago was still in existence. Under the surface of his thoughts there may have been a tumultuous undercurrent of thoughts about Marie, but it was not apparent to him. All he knew was that one morning the pressure of his restlessness had become overwhelming. He fingered in his pocket the Count's pleasant letter, received some days ago, telling him of his and his daughter-in-law's return to Graçay and repeating his invitation to come and stay. Then he had shouted to Brown to pack clothes for both of them and to have horses put to the chaise.

Two nights ago they had slept at the Sign of the Siren in Montargis; last night at the post-house at Briare. Now here they were driving along a lonely road overlooking the Loire, which ran like a grey ocean at their right hand, wide and desolate, with forlorn willows keeping a desperate foothold waist deep in the flood. Lashing rain beat down upon the leather tilt of the chaise, thundering down upon the taut material with a noise that made conversation difficult. Hornblower had Brown beside him in the chaise; the unfortunate postilion, hat drawn down over his ears to meet the collar of his cape, riding the near-side horse in front of them. Brown sat with folded arms, the model gentleman's servant, ready to converse politely if Hornblower showed any inclination to do so, keeping a discreet silence until addressed. He had managed every detail of the journey remarkably well — not that it would be difficult to manage any journey in France for an English milord. Every

post-house keeper, however insolent in his office, was reduced to instant deference at the mention of Hornblower's rank.

Hornblower felt Brown stiffen beside him, and then peer forward through the driving rain.

"The Bec d'Allier," said Brown, without being spoken to first.

Hornblower could see where the grey Allier joined the grey Loire at an acute angle — all this country was under moderate floods. There was something a little odd about having a coxswain who spoke French with the facility and good accent of Brown, who must have made (of course Hornblower knew he had) the best use of his months of living below stairs at Graçay when they had been escaped prisoners of war together — they and Bush. Hornblower could feel a mounting excitement in Brown, comparable with his own, and that was hard to explain in Brown's case. There was no reason for Brown to feel the same sort of homesickness for Graçay that Hornblower felt.

"Do you remember coming down here?" asked Hornblower.

"Aye, my lord, that I do," said Brown.

It was down the Loire that they had made their historic escape from France, a long, curiously happy voyage to Nantes, to England, and to fame. Graçay could only be a few miles ahead now; Brown was leaning forward expectantly in the chaise. There it was, the grey pepper-pot turrets only just visible in the distance against the grey sky through the rain. A flag flying from the flagstaff made a tiny darker spot above the château. The Count was there. Marie was there. The postilion shook up his depressed horses into a smarter trot, and the château came nearer and nearer; the unbelievable moment was at hand. All the way from Smallbridge, from the time when Hornblower had decided to start, it had seemed as if it was quite impossible that they were going to Graçay. Hornblower had seemed to himself like a child crying for the moon, for their goal was so desirable as to seem necessarily unattainable. Yet here they were, reining up at the gates, and here the gates were opening and they were trotting forward into the so-well-remembered courtyard. Here was old Felix the butler hurrying out into the rain to welcome them, and over there by the kitchens stood a group of serving-women, fat Jeanne the cook among them. And here, beside the chaise, at the head of the far stone steps sheltered from the rain by the projecting roof overhead, were the Count and Marie. It was a homecoming.

Hornblower scrambled down awkwardly from the chaise. He stooped to kiss Marie's hand; he went into the Count's arms and laid cheek to cheek to the manner born. The Count was patting his shoulder.

"Welcome. Welcome."

There was no pleasure on earth comparable with this sensation of being looked for and of feeling that his arrival was causing pleasure. Here was the well-remembered drawing-room with the old gilt Louis-Seize chairs. The Count's wrinkled old face was mobile with delight, and Marie was smiling. This man had broken her heart once, and she was ready to let him break it all over again — she knew he would — because she loved him. All Hornblower was conscious of was her smile, welcoming and — and — was it maternal? There was a proud sadness in that smile, like that perhaps of a mother watching her son grown up now and soon to be lost to her. It was only a fleeting feeling that Hornblower had; his powers of observation were negated immediately by his own wave of personal feeling. He wanted to take Marie to him, to feel her rich flesh in the circle of his arms, to forget his troubles and doubts and disillusionments in the intoxication of her embrace; just as four years ago he had found oblivion there, selfishly.

"A more cheerful arrival than your last, milord," said the Count.

Hornblower's last arrival had been as a fugitive, carrying the wounded Bush, and hunted by Bonaparte's gendarmes.

"Yes, indeed," said Hornblower. Then he realised how formally the Count had addressed him. "Must I be 'milord' to you, sir? It seems —"

They all smiled together.

"I shall call you 'Oratio', then, if you will permit me," said the Count. "I feel the greatness of the honour of such intimacy."

Hornblower looked towards Marie.

"'Oratio'," she said. "'Oratio.'"

She had called him that before in little broken tones when they had been alone together. Just to hear her say it again sent a wave of passionate emotion through Hornblower's body. He was filled with love — the sort of

love of which he was capable. He was not conscious yet of any wickedness about his action in coming thus to torment Marie again. He had been overborne by his own wild longing — and perhaps in his excuse it could also be pleaded that his silly modesty made him incapable of realising how much a woman could love him. Here came Felix with wine; the Count raised his glass.

"To your happy return, 'Oratio,' he said.

The simple words called up a momentary pageant in Hornblower's memory, a sort of procession of returns, like the procession of kings in Macbeth's imagination. A sailor's life was a chain of departures and homecomings. Home-comings to Maria now dead and gone, homecomings to Barbara — and now this homecoming to Marie. It was not well to think of Barbara while he was with Marie; he had thought of Marie while he was with Barbara.

"I suppose Brown has made himself comfortable, Felix?" he asked. A good master always sees after the wellbeing of his servant — but this question was also intended to change his own train of thought.

"Yes, milord" said Felix. "Brown has made himself at home."

Felix's face was devoid of expression, his voice devoid of tone. Were they too much so? Was there some subtle implication about Brown of which Hornblower should be aware? It was curious. Yet Brown was still the model servant when Hornblower found him in his room on withdrawing there to make ready for dinner. The portmanteaux and dressing-case were unpacked, the black dress-coat — London's latest fashion — was laid out with the shirt and cravat. A cheerful fire burned in the bedroom grate.

"Are you glad to be here again, Brown?"

"Very glad indeed, my lord."

An accomplished linguist indeed was Brown — he could speak with fluency the language of the servant, the language of the lower deck, the language of the country lanes and of the London alleys, and French besides. It was faintly irritating that he never mixed them up, thought Hornblower, tying his cravat.

In the upper hall Hornblower met Marie, about to descend to dinner like himself. They both of them stood stock still for a moment, as though each of them was the last person in the world the other expected to see. Then Hornblower bowed and offered his arm, and Marie curtsied and took it. The hand she laid on his arm was trembling, and the touch of it sent a wave of warmth against him as though he were passing by an open furnace door.

"My darling! My love!" whispered Hornblower, driven almost beyond his self-control.

The hand on his arm fluttered, but Marie continued un-faltering to walk on down the stair.

Dinner was a cheerful function, for fat Jeanne the cook had surpassed herself, and the Count was in his best form, droll and serious in turns, witty and well-informed. They discussed the policy of the Bourbon Government, wondered about the decisions being reached at the Congress of Vienna, and spared a few passing thoughts for Bonaparte in Elba.

"Before we left Paris," remarked the Count, "there was talk that he was too dangerous a neighbour there. It was being suggested that he should be transferred to a safer place — your island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic was named in that connection."

"Perhaps that would be better," agreed Hornblower.

"Europe will be in a ferment as long as that man can be the centre of intrigues," said Marie. "Why should he be allowed to unsettle us all?"

"The Tsar is sentimental, and was his friend," explained the Count with a shrug. "The Emperor of Austria is, after all, his father-in-law."

"Should they indulge their preferences at the expense of France — of civilisation?" asked Marie, bitterly. Women always seemed to be more hotly partisan than men.

"I don't think Bonaparte constitutes a very active danger," said Hornblower, complacently.

As the Count sipped his coffee after dinner his eyes wandered longingly towards the card-table.

"Have you lost your old skill at whist, 'Oratio?'" he asked. "There are only the three of us, but I thought we might make use of a dummy. In some ways — heretical though the opinion may appear — I feel that the game with a dummy is the more scientific."

Nobody mentioned how Bush used to play with them, but they all thought of him. They cut and shuffled and dealt, cut and shuffled and dealt. There was some truth in what the Count said about whist with a dummy

being more scientific; certainly it allowed for a closer calculation of chances. The Count played with all his old verve, Marie seemingly with all her old solid skill, and Hornblower sought to display his usual scientific precision. Yet something was not quite right. Dummy whist was somehow unsettling — perhaps it was because the need for changing seats as the deal passed broke the continuity of the play. There was no question of simply losing oneself in the game, as Hornblower usually could do. He was vastly conscious of Marie, now beside him, now opposite him, and twice he made minor slips in play. At the end of the second rubber Marie folded her hands on her lap.

"I think I have played all I can this evening," she said. "I am sure 'Oratio is as much a master of piquet as he is of whist. Perhaps you can entertain each other with that while I go to bed."

The Count was on his feet with his usual deferential politeness, asking if she felt quite well, and, when she assured him that she was merely tired, escorting her to the door exactly as he would have escorted a queen.

"Good night, 'Oratio," said Marie.

"Good night, madame," said Horatio, standing by the card-table.

One glance passed between them — one glance, enduring less than one-tenth of a second, but long enough for each to tell the other all.

"I trust Marie was correct in her assumption that you are a master of piquet, 'Oratio," said the Count, returning from the door. "She and I have played much together in default of whist. But I am taking it for granted that you wish to play? How inconsiderate of me! Please —"

Hornblower hastened to assure the Count that he would like nothing better.

"That is delightful," said the Count, shuffling the cards with his slender white fingers. "I am a fortunate man."

He was fortunate at least in his play that night, taking his usual bold risks and being rewarded by unpredictable good luck in his discards. His minor *seizièmes* outranked Hornblower's major quints, a quatorze of knaves saved him when Hornblower had three aces, three kings and three queens, and twice *carte blanche* rescued him from disaster in face of Hornblower's overwhelming hands. When Hornblower was strong, the Count was lucky; and when Hornblower was weak the Count was overpoweringly strong. At the conclusion of the third *partie* Hornblower gazed helplessly across at him.

"I fear this has not been very interesting for you," said the Count remorsefully. "This is a discourteous way to treat a guest."

"I would rather lose in this house," said Hornblower, perfectly truthfully, "than win in any other."

The Count smiled with pleasure.

"That is too high a compliment," he said. "And yet I can only say in reply that with you in this house I care not whether I win or lose. I trust that I shall have the further good fortune of your making a long stay here?"

"Like the fate of Europe," said Hornblower, "that depends on the Congress of Vienna."

"You know this house is yours," said the Count, earnestly. "Marie and I both wish you to look on it as your own."

"You are too good, sir," said Hornblower. "May I ring for my candle?"

"Allow me," said the Count, hastening to the bell-cord. "I trust you are not overtired after your journey? Felix, milord is retiring."

Up the oaken stairs with their carved panelling, Felix hobbling goutily ahead with the candle. A sleepy Brown was waiting for him in the sitting-room of the little suite, to be dismissed at once when Hornblower announced his intention of putting himself to bed. That door there, inconspicuous in the corner, led to the hall outside Marie's suite in the turret — how well Hornblower remembered it. Generations of the Ladons, Counts of Graçay, had conducted intrigues in the *château*; perhaps kings and princes had passed through that door on the way to their lights-of-love.

Marie was waiting for him, weighted down with longing, heavy with love, tender and sweet. To sink into her arms was to sink into peace and happiness, illimitable peace, like that of a sunset-lit sea. The rich bosom on which he could pillow his head made him welcome; its fragrance comforted while it intoxicated. She held him, she loved him, she wept with happiness. She had no more than half his heart, she knew. He was cruel, unthinking, selfish, and yet this bony, slender body that lay in her arms was everything in the world to her. It was monstrous that he should come back to claim her like this. He had made her suffer before, and she knew her suffering in the past would be nothing compared with her suffering that lay in the future. Yet that was his

way. That was how she loved him. Time went so fast; she had only this little moment before a lifetime of unhappiness to come. Oh, it was so urgent! She caught him to her madly, crying out with passion, crying out to time to stand still. It seemed to do so at that moment. Time stood still while the world whirled round her.

CHAPTER XVIII

"May I speak to you, my lord?" asked Brown.

He had put the breakfast tray by the bed, and had drawn aside the window curtains. Spring sunshine was gleaming on the distant Loire. Brown had waited respectfully until Hornblower had drunk his first cup of coffee and was coming slowly back to the world.

"What is it?" asked Hornblower, blinking over at him where he stood against the wall. Brown's attitude was not a usual one. Some of the deferential bearing of the gentleman's servant had been replaced by the disciplined erectness of the old days, when a self-respecting sailor held his head up and his shoulders back whether he was being condemned to the cat or commended for gallantry.

"What is it?" asked Hornblower again, consumed with curiosity.

He had had one moment of wild misgiving, wondering if Brown were going to be such a frantic fool as to say something about his relations with Marie, but the misgiving vanished as he realised the absurdity and impossibility of such a thing. Yet Brown was acting strangely — one might almost think he was feeling shy.

"Well, sir — I mean my lord," (that was the first time Brown had slipped over Hornblower's title since the peerage was conferred,) "I don't know rightly if it's anything your lordship would wish to know about. I don't want to presume, sir — my lord."

"Oh, spit it out, man," said Hornblower testily. "And call me 'sir' if it's any comfort to you."

"It's this way, my lord. I'm wanting to get married."

"Good God!" said Hornblower. He had a vague idea that Brown had been a terror for women, and the possibility of his marrying had never crossed his mind. He hastened to say what he thought would be appropriate. "Who's the lucky woman?"

"Annette, my lord. Jeanne and Bertrand's daughter. And I am the lucky one, my lord."

"Jeanne's daughter? Oh, of course. The pretty one with the dark hair."

Hornblower thought about a lively French girl marrying a sturdy Englishman like Brown, and for the life of him he could see no reason against it at all. Brown would be a better husband than most — it certainly would be a lucky woman who got him.

"You're a man of sense, Brown," he said. "You needn't ask me about these things. I'm sure you've made a wise choice, and you have all my best wishes for your happiness and joy."

"Thank you, my lord."

"If Annette can cook as well as her mother," Hornblower went on meditatively, "you're a lucky man indeed."

"That was another thing I wanted to say to you, my lord. She's a cook second to none, young though she is. Jeanne says so herself, and if she says so —"

"We can be sure of it," agreed Hornblower.

"I was thinking, my lord," went on Brown, "not wanting to presume, that if I was to continue in your service your lordship might consider engaging Annette as cook."

"God bless my soul," said Hornblower.

He mentally looked down a vista a lifetime long of dinners as good as Jeanne cooked. Dinners at Smallbridge had been almost good but most decidedly plain. Smallbridge and French cooking offered a most intriguing study in contrasts. Certainly Smallbridge would be more attractive with Annette as cook. And yet what was he thinking about? What had happened to those doubts and tentative notions about never seeing Smallbridge again? Some such ideas had certainly passed through his mind when he thought about Marie, and yet here he was thinking about Smallbridge and thinking about Annette heading his kitchen. He shook himself out of his reverie.

"Of course I can give no decision on the point myself," he said, fencing for time. "Her Ladyship will have to be consulted, as you understand, Brown. Have you any alternative in mind?"

"Plenty, my lord, as long as you are satisfied. I've thought of starting a small hotel — I have all my prize-money saved."

"Where?"

"In London, perhaps, my lord. But maybe in Paris. Or in Rome. I have been discussing it with Felix and Bertrand and Annette."

"My God!" said Hornblower again. Nothing like this had crossed his mind for a single moment, and yet — "I have no doubt you would be successful, Brown."

"Thank you, my lord."

"Tell me, this seems to have been a lightning courtship. Is that so?"

"Not really, my lord. When I was here last Annette and I — you understand, my lord."

"I do now," said Hornblower.

It was fantastic that Brown, the man who hove the line that saved the *Pluto*, the man who silenced Colonel Caillard with a single blow of his fist, should be talking calmly about the possibility of opening an hotel in Rome. Actually it was no more fantastic than that he himself should have seriously debated with himself the possibility of becoming a French *seigneur*, and turning his back on England. He had done that no later than fast night; love for Marie had grown during the last five days even while his passion was indulged — and Hornblower was not the sort of fool to be ignorant of how much that implied.

"When are you thinking of marrying, Brown?" he asked.

"As soon as the law of this country allows, my lord."

"I've no idea how long that means," said Hornblower.

"I am finding out, my lord. Will that be all you need at present?"

"No. I'll get up at once — can't stay in bed after hearing all this exciting news, Brown. I'll come through with a handsome wedding-present."

"Thank you, my lord. I'll fetch your hot water, then."

Marie was waiting for him in her boudoir when he was dressed. She kissed him good morning, passed a hand over his smoothly shaven cheeks, and, with her arm over his shoulder, led him to her turret window to show him that the apple trees in the orchard below were showing their first blossoms. It was spring; and it was good to be in love and to be loved in this green and lovely land. He took her white hands in his, and he kissed every finger on them, with a surge of reverent passion. As each day passed he had come to admire her the more, her sweetness of character and the unselfishness of her love. For Hornblower respect and love made a heady mixture — he felt he could kneel to her as to a saint. She was conscious of the passion that was carrying him away, as she was conscious of everything about him.

"Oratio," she said — why should it stir him so frightfully to hear that ridiculous name of his pronounced in that fashion?

He clung to her, and she held him and comforted him as she always did. She had no thought for the future now. In the future lay tragedy for her, she knew; but this was the present, and during this present Hornblower had need of her. They came out of their paroxysm of passion smiling as they always did.

"You heard the news about Brown?" he asked.

"He is going to marry Annette. That is very proper."

"It does not seem to be news to you?"

"I knew it before Brown did," said Marie. There was a dimple that came and went in her cheek, and a little light of mischief could sparkle in her eyes. She was wholly and utterly desirable.

"They should make a good pair," said Hornblower.

"Her chest of linens is all ready," said Marie, "and Bertrand had a *dot* for her."

They went downstairs to tell the Count the news, and he heard it with pleasure.

"I can perform the civil ceremony myself," he said. "Do you remember that I am the *maire* here, 'Oratio? A position that is almost a sinecure, thanks to the efficiency of my *adjoint*, and yet I can make use of my powers should the whim ever overtake me."

Fortunately, as regards the saving of time, Brown was able — as they found out on calling him in to ask him — to declare himself an orphan and head of his family, thus obviating the need for parental permission on which French law insisted. And King Louis XVIII and the Chamber had not yet carried out their declared intention of making a religious ceremony a necessary part of the legal marriage. There would be a religious ceremony, all the same, and the blessing of the Church would be given to the union, with the safeguards always insisted on in a mixed marriage. Annette was never to cease to try to convert Brown, and the children were to be brought up in the Catholic faith. Brown nodded as this was explained to him; religious scruples apparently weighed lightly enough on his shoulders.

The village of Smallbridge had already been scandalised by the introduction into its midst of Barbara's negro maid: it had shaken disapproving heads over Hornblower's and Barbara's heathen habit of a daily bath; what it would say in the future about the presence of a popish female and a Popish family Hornblower could hardly imagine. There he was, thinking about Smallbridge again. This was a double life in very truth. He looked uneasily across at the Count whose hospitality he was abusing. It was hard to think of guilty love in connection with Marie — there was no guilt in her. And in himself? Could he be held guilty for something he could do nothing to resist? Was he guilty when the current whirled him away in the Loire, not a mile from where he was standing at present? He shifted his glance to Marie, and felt his passion surge up as strongly as ever, so that he started nervously when it penetrated his consciousness that the Count was addressing him in his gentle voice. "Oratio," said the Count, "shall we dance at the wedding?"

They made quite a gala occasion of it, a little to the surprise of Hornblower, who had vague and incorrect ideas about the attitude of French *seigneurs* of the old regime towards their dependants. The barrels of wine were set up in the back courtyard of the château, and quite an orchestra was assembled, of fiddlers, and of pipers from the Auvergne who played instruments something like Scottish bagpipes that afflicted Hornblower's tone-deaf ear atrociously. The Count led out fat Jeanne in the dance, and the bride's father led out Marie. There was wine, there were great masses of food, there were bawdy jokes and highfalutin speeches. The countryside seemed to show astonishing tolerance towards this marriage of a local girl to an heretical foreigner — local peasant farmers clapped Brown on the back and their wives kissed his weather-beaten cheeks amidst screams of mirth. But then, Brown was universally popular, and seemed to know the dances by instinct.

Hornblower, unable to tell one note of music from another, was constrained to listen intently to the rhythm, and, intently watching the actions of the others, he was able to scramble grotesquely through the movements of the dances, handed on from one apple-cheeked woman to another. At one moment he sat gorged and bloated with food at a trestle table, at another he was skipping madly over the courtyard cobbles between two buxom maidens, hand in hand with them and laughing unrestrainedly. It was extraordinary to him — even here he still had moments of self-analysis — that he could ever enjoy himself so much. Marie smiled at him from under level brows.

He was amazingly weary and yet amazingly happy when he found himself back again in the salon of the château, his legs stretched out in inelegant ease while Felix, transformed again into the perfect major-domo, took the orders of him and the Count.

"There is an odd rumour prevalent," said the Count, sitting upright in his chair apparently as unwearied and as dapper as ever. "I did not wish to disturb the fête by discussing it there. People are saying that Bonaparte has escaped from Elba and has landed in France."

"That is indeed odd," agreed Hornblower lazily, the import of the news taking some time to penetrate his befogged brain. "What can he intend to do?"

"He claims the throne of France again," said the Count, seriously.

"It is less than a year since the people abandoned him."

"That is true. Perhaps Bonaparte will solve the problem for us that we were discussing a few nights ago. There is no doubt that the King will have him shot if he can lay hands on him, and that will be an end of all possibility of intrigue and disturbance."

"Quite so."

"But I wish — foolishly perhaps — that we had heard of Bonaparte's death at the same time as we heard of his landing."

The Count appeared grave, and Hornblower felt a little disturbed. He knew his host to be an acute political observer.

"What is it you fear, sir?" asked Hornblower, gradually gathering his wits about him.

"I fear lest he gain some unexpected success. You know the power of his name, and the King — the King or his advisers — has not acted as temperately as he might have done since his restoration."

The entrance of Marie, smiling and happy, interrupted the conversation, nor was it restarted when they resumed their seats. There were moments during the next two days when Hornblower felt some slight misgivings, even though the only news that came in was a mere confirmation of the rumour of the landing with no amplification. It was a shadow across his happiness, but so great and so intense was the latter that it took more than a slight shadow to chill it. Those lovely spring days, wandering under the orchard blossoms, and beside the rushing Loire; riding — how was it that riding was a pleasure now when always before he had detested it? — through the forest; even driving into Nevers on the one or two ceremonial calls his position demanded of him; those moments were golden, every one of them. Fear of Bonaparte's activity could not cloud them — not even fear of what would be said to him in a letter that must inevitably soon come from Vienna could do that. On the surface Barbara had nothing to complain about; she had gone to Vienna, and during her absence Hornblower was visiting old friends. But Barbara would know. Probably she would say nothing, but she would know.

And great as was Hornblower's happiness it was not untrammelled, as Brown's happiness was untrammelled — Hornblower found himself envying Brown and the public way in which Brown could claim his love.

Hornblower and Marie had to be a little furtive, a little guarded, and his conscience troubled him a little over the Count. Yet even so, he was happy, happier than he had ever been in his tormented life. For once self-analysis brought him no pangs. He had doubts neither about himself nor about Marie, and the novelty of that experience completely overlaid all his fears and misgivings about the future. He could live in peace until trouble should overtake him — if a spice to his happiness were necessary (and it was not), it was the knowledge that trouble lay ahead and that he could ignore it. All that guilt and uncertainty could do was to drive him more madly still into Marie's arms, not consciously to forget, but merely because of the added urgency they brought.

This was love, unalloyed and without reservations. There was an ecstasy in giving, and no amazement in receiving. It had come to him at last, after all these years and tribulations. Cynically it might be thought that it was merely one more example of Hornblower's yearning for the thing he could not have, but if that was the case Hornblower for once was not conscious of it. There was some line from the prayer-book that ran in Hornblower's head during those days — 'Whose service is perfect freedom'. That described his servitude to Marie.

The Loire was still in flood; the cataract where once he had nearly drowned — the cataract which was the cause of his first meeting with Marie — was a rushing slope of green water, foam-bordered. Hornblower could hear the sound of it as he lay in Marie's arms in her room in the turret; often they walked beside it, and Hornblower could contemplate it without a tremor or a thrill. That was all over. His reason told him that he was the same man as boarded the *Castilla*, the same man who faced el Supremo's wrath, the man who fought to the death at Rosas Bay, the man who had walked decks awash with blood, and yet oddly he felt as if those things had happened to someone else. Now he was a man of peace, a man of indolence, and the cataract was not a thing that had nearly killed him.

It seemed perfectly natural when the Count came in with good news.

"The Count d'Artois has defeated Bonaparte in a battle in the south," he said. "Bonaparte is a fugitive, and will soon be a prisoner. The news is from Paris."

That was as it should be; the wars were over.

"I think we can light a bonfire tonight," said the Count, and the bonfire blazed and toasts were drunk to the King.

But it was no later than next morning that Brown, as he put the breakfast tray beside Hornblower's bed, announced that the Count wished to speak to him as early as convenient, and he had hardly uttered the words when the Count came in, haggard and dishevelled in his dressing-gown.

"Pardon this intrusion," said the Count — even at that moment he could not forget his good manners — "but I could not wait. There is bad news. The very worst."

Hornblower could only stare and wait, while the Count gathered his strength to tell his news. It took an effort to say the words.

"Bonaparte is in Paris," said the Count. "The King has fled and Bonaparte is Emperor again. All France has fallen to him."

"But the battle he had lost?"

"Rumour — lies — all lies. Bonaparte is Emperor again."

It took time to understand all that this implied. It meant war again, that was certain. Whatever the other Great Powers might do, England could never tolerate the presence of that treacherous and mighty enemy across the Channel. England and France would be at each other's throats once more. Twenty-two years ago the wars had started; it seemed likely that it would be another twenty-two years before Bonaparte could be pulled from his throne again. There would be another twenty-two years of misery and slaughter. The prospect was utterly hideous.

"How did it happen?" asked Hornblower, more to gain time than because he wanted to know.

The Count spread his delicate hands in a hopeless gesture.

"Not a shot was fired," he said. "The army went over to him *en masse*. Ney, Labédoyère, Soult — they all betrayed the King. In two weeks Bonaparte marched from the Mediterranean to Paris. That would be fast travelling in a coach and six."

"But the people do not want him," protested Hornblower. "We all know that."

"The people's wishes do not weigh against the army's," said the Count. "The news has come with the usurper's first decrees. The classes of 1815 and 1816 are to be called out. The Household troops are disbanded, the Imperial Guard is to be reconstituted. Bonaparte is ready to fight Europe again."

Hornblower vaguely saw himself once more on the deck of a ship, weighed down with responsibility, encompassed by danger, isolated and friendless. It was a bleak prospect.

A tap on the door heralded Marie's entrance, in her dressing-gown, with her magnificent hair over her shoulders.

"You have heard the news, my dear?" asked the Count. He made no comment either on her presence or on her appearance.

"Yes," said Marie. "We are in danger."

"We are indeed," said the Count. "All of us."

So appalling had been the news that Hornblower had not yet had leisure to contemplate its immediate personal implications. As an officer of the British Navy, he would be seized and imprisoned immediately. Not only that, but Bonaparte had intended years ago to try him and shoot him on charges of piracy. He would carry that intention into effect — tyrants have long memories. And the Count, and Marie?

"Bonaparte knows now that you helped me escape," said Hornblower. "He will never forgive that."

"He will shoot me if he can catch me," said the Count; he made no reference to Marie, but he glanced towards her. Bonaparte would shoot her too.

"We must get away," said Hornblower. "The country cannot be settled under Bonaparte yet. With fast horses we can reach the coast —"

He took his bedclothes in his hand to cast them off, restraining himself in the nick of time out of deference to Marie's presence.

"I shall be dressed in ten minutes," said Marie.

As the door closed behind her and the Count, Hornblower hurled himself out of bed shouting for Brown. The transition from the sybarite to the man of action took a few moments, but only a few. As he tore off his nightshirt he conjured up before his mind's eye the map of France, visualising the roads and ports. They could reach La Rochelle over the mountains in two days of hard riding. He hauled up his trousers. The Count had a great name — no one would venture to arrest him or his party without direct orders from Paris; with bluff and self-confidence they could get through. There were two hundred golden napoleons in the secret compartment of his portmanteau — maybe the Count had more. It was enough for bribery. They could bribe a fisherman to take them out to sea — they could steal a boat, for that matter.

It was humiliating thus to run like rabbits at Bonaparte's first reappearance; it was hardly consonant with the dignity of a peer and a commodore, but his first duty was to preserve his life and his usefulness. A dull rage against Bonaparte, the wrecker of the peace, was growing within him, but was still far from mastering him as yet. It was resentment as yet, rather than rage; and his sullen resignation regarding the change in conditions was slowly giving way to tentative wonderings regarding whether he could not play a more active part in the opening of the struggle than merely running away to fight another day. Here he was in France, in the heart of his enemy's country. Surely he could strike a blow here that could be felt. As he hauled on his riding-boots he spoke to Brown.

"What about your wife?" he asked.

"I hoped she could come with us, my lord," said Brown, soberly.

If he left her behind he would not see her again until the end of the war twenty years off; if he stayed with her he would be cast into prison.

"Can she ride?"

"She will, my lord."

"Go and see that she gets ready. We can carry nothing more than saddle-bags. She can attend Mme la Vicomtesse."

"Thank you, my lord."

Two hundred gold napoleons made a heavy mass to carry, but it was essential to have them with him. Hornblower thumped down the stairs in his riding-boots; Marie was already in the main hall wearing a black habit and a saucy tricorne hat with a feather. He ran his eyes keenly over her; there was nothing about her appearance to excite attention — she was merely a lady of fashion soberly dressed.

"Shall we take any of the men with us?" she asked.

"They are all old. It would be better not to. The Count, you, myself, Brown and Annette. We shall need five horses."

"That is what I expected," answered Marie. She was a fine woman in a crisis.

"We can cross the bridge at Nevers, and head for Bourges and La Rochelle. In the Vendée we shall have our best chance."

"It might be better to make for a little fishing village rather than a great port," commented Marie.

"That's very likely true. We can make up our minds about it, though, when we are near the coast."

"Very well."

She appreciated the importance of unity of command even though she was ready with advice.

"What about your valuables?" asked Hornblower.

"I have my diamonds in my saddle-bag here."

As she spoke the Count came in, booted and spurred. He carried a small leather sack which clinked as he put it down.

"Two hundred napoleons," he said.

"The same as I have. It will be ample."

"It would be better if it did not clink, though," said Marie. "I'll pack it with a cloth."

Felix entered with the Count's saddle-bags and the announcement that the horses were ready — Brown and Annette awaited them in the courtyard.

"Let us go," said Hornblower.

It was a sorry business saying goodbye. There were tears from the women — Annette's pretty face was all beslobbered with grief — even though the men, trained in the stoical school of gentlemen's service, kept silence.

"Goodbye, my friend," said the Count, holding out his hand to Felix. They were both old men, and the chances were that they would never meet again.

They rode out of the courtyard, and down to the road along the river; it was ironical that it should be a lovely spring day, with the fruit blossom raining down on them and the Loire sparkling joyously. At the first turn in the road the spires and towers of Nevers came into sight; at the next they could clearly see the ornate Gonzaga palace. Hornblower spared it a casual glance, blinked, and looked again. Marie was beside him and the Count beyond her, and he glanced at them for confirmation.

"That is a white flag," said Marie.

"I thought so too," wondered Hornblower.

"My eyes are such that I can see no flag at all," said the Count ruefully.

Hornblower turned in his saddle to Brown, riding along encouraging Annette.

"That's a white flag over the palace, my lord."

"It hardly seems possible," said the Count. "My news this morning came from Nevers. Beauregard, the Prefect there, had declared at once for Bonaparte."

It was certainly odd — even if the white flag had been hoisted inadvertently it was odd.

"We shall know soon enough," said Hornblower, restraining his natural instinct to push his horse from a trot into a canter.

The white flag still flew as they approached. At the octroi gate stood half a dozen soldiers in smart grey uniforms, their grey horses tethered behind them.

"Those are Grey Musketeers of the Household," said Marie. Hornblower recognised the uniforms. He had seen those troops in attendance on the King both at the Tuileries and at Versailles.

"Grey Musketeers cannot hurt us," said the Count.

The sergeant of the picket looked at them keenly as they approached, and stepped into the road to ask them their names.

"Louis-Antoine-Hector-Savinien de Ladon, Comte de Graçay, and his suite," said the Count.

"You may pass, M. le Comte," said the sergeant. "Her Royal Highness is at the Prefecture."

"Which Royal Highness?" marvelled the Count.

In the Grand Square a score of troopers of the Grey Musketeers sat their horses. A few white banners flew here and there, and as they entered the square a man emerged from the Prefecture and began to stick up a printed poster. They rode up to look at it — the first word was easily read — 'Frenchmen!' it said.

"Her Royal Highness is the Duchess of Angoulême," said the Count.

The proclamation called on all Frenchmen to fight against the usurping tyrant, to be loyal to the ancient House of Bourbon. According to the poster, the King was still in arms around Lille, the south had risen under the Duke d'Angoulême, and all Europe was marching armies to enchain the man-eating ogre and restore the Father of his People to the throne of his ancestors.

In the Prefecture the Duchess received them eagerly. Her beautiful face was drawn with fatigue, and she still wore a mud-splashed riding habit — she had ridden through the night with her squadron of musketeers, entering Nevers by another road on the heels of Bonaparte's proclamation.

"They changed sides quickly enough again," said the Duchess.

Nevers was not a garrison town and contained no troops; her hundred disciplined musketeers made her mistress of the little place without a blow struck.

"I was about to send for you, M. le Comte," went on the Duchess. "I was not aware of our extraordinary good fortune in Lord 'Ornblower's being present here, I want to appoint you Lieutenant-General of the King in the Nivernois."

"You think a rising can succeed, Your Royal Highness?" asked Hornblower.

"A rising?" said the Duchess, with the faintest of interrogative inflections.

To Hornblower that was the note of doom. The Duchess was the most intelligent and spirited of all the Bourbons, but not even she could think of the movement she was trying to head as a 'rising'. Bonaparte was the rebel; she was engaged in suppressing rebellion, even if Bonaparte reigned in the Tuileries and the army obeyed him. But this was war; this was life or death, and he was in no mood to quibble with amateurs.

"Let us not waste time over definitions, madame," he said.

"Do you think there is in France strength enough to drive out Bonaparte?"

"He is the most hated man in this country."

"But that does not answer the question," persisted Hornblower.

"The Vendée will fight," said the Duchess. "Laroche-Jacquelin is there, and they will follow him. My husband is raising the Midi. The King and the Household are holding out in Lille. Gascony will resist the usurper — remember how Bordeaux cast off allegiance to him last year."

The Vendée might rise; probably would. But Hornblower could not imagine the Duke d'Angoulême rousing much spirit of devotion in the south, nor the fat and gouty old King in the north. As for Bordeaux casting off her allegiance, Hornblower remembered Rouen and Le Havre, the apathetic citizens, the refractory conscripts whose sole wish was to fight no one at all. For a year they had now enjoyed the blessings of peace and liberal government, and they might perhaps fight for them. Perhaps.

"All France knows now that Bonaparte *can* be beaten and dethroned," said the Duchess acutely. "That makes a great difference."

"A powder magazine of discontent and disunion," said the Count. "A spark may explode it."

Hornblower had dreamed the same dream when he had entered Le Havre, and used the same metaphor to himself, which was unfortunate.

"Bonaparte has an army," he said. "It takes an army to defeat an army. Where is one to be found? The old soldiers are devoted to Bonaparte. Will the civilians fight, and if so, can they be armed and trained in time?"

"You are in a pessimistic mood, milord," said the Duchess.

"Bonaparte is the most able, the most active, the fiercest and the most cunning soldier the world has ever seen," said Hornblower. "To parry his strokes I ask for a shield of steel, not a paper hoop from a circus."

Hornblower looked round at the faces; the Duchess, the Count, Marie, the silent courtier-general who had stood behind the Duchess since the debate began. They were sombre, but they showed no signs of wavering.

"So you suggest that M. le Comte here, for example, should submit tamely to the usurper and wait until the armies of Europe reconquer France?" asked the Duchess with only faint irony. She could keep her temper better than most Bourbons.

"M. le Comte has to fly for his life on account of his late kindness to me," said Hornblower, but that was begging the question, he knew.

Any movement against Bonaparte in the interior of France might be better than none, however easily suppressed and whatever blood it cost. It might succeed, although he had no hope of it. But at least it would embarrass Bonaparte in his claim to represent all France, at least it would hamper him in the inevitable clash on the north-eastern frontier by forcing him to keep troops here. Hornblower could not look for victory, but he supposed there was a chance, the faintest chance, of beginning a slight guerrilla war, maintained by a few partisans in forests and mountains, which might spread in the end. He was a servant of King George; if he could encompass the death of even one of Bonaparte's soldiers, even at the cost of a hundred peasant lives, it was his duty to do so. A momentary doubt flashed through his mind; was it mere humanitarian motives that had been influencing him? Or were his powers of decision becoming enfeebled? He had sent men on forlorn hopes before this; he had taken part in some himself; but this was, in his opinion, an utterly hopeless venture — and the Count would be involved in it.

"But still," persisted the Duchess, "you recommend supine acquiescence, milord?"

Hornblower felt like a man on a scaffold taking one last look at the sunlit world before being thrust off. The grim inevitabilities of war were all round him.

"No," he said. "I recommend resistance."

The sombre faces round him brightened, and he knew now that peace or war had lain in his choice. Had he continued to argue against rebellion, he would have persuaded them against it. The knowledge increased his unhappiness, even though he tried to assure himself — which was the truth — that fate had put him in a position where he could argue no longer. The die was cast, and he hastened to speak again.

"Your Royal Highness," he said, "accused me of being pessimistic. So I am. This is a desperate adventure, but that does not mean it should not be undertaken. But we must enter upon it in no light-hearted spirit. We must look for no glorious or dramatic successes. It will be inglorious, long, and hard. It will mean shooting French soldiers from behind a tree and then running away. Crawling up in the night to knife a sentry. Burning a bridge, cutting the throats of a few draught horses — those will be our great victories."

He wanted to say 'those will be our Marengos and our Jenas', but he could not mention Bonaparte victories to a Bourbon gathering. He raked back in his memory for Bourbon victories.

"Those will be our Steinkirks and our Fontenoys," he went on. To describe the technique of guerrilla warfare in a few sentences to people absolutely ignorant of the subject was not easy. "The Lieutenant-General for the

King in the Nivernais will be a hunted fugitive. He will sleep among rocks, eat his meat raw lest a fire should betray him. Only by being reconciled to measures of this sort can success be won in the end."

"I am ready to do those things," said the Count, "to my last breath."

The alternative was exile until his death, Hornblower knew.

"I never doubted that I could rely on the loyalty of the Ladons," said the Duchess. "Your commission will be ready immediately, M. le Comte. You will exercise all royal power in the Nivernais."

"What does Your Royal Highness intend to do in person?" asked Hornblower.

"I must go on to Bordeaux, to rally Gascony."

It was probably the best course of action — the wider spread the movement the greater Bonaparte's embarrassment. Marie could accompany the Duchess, too, and then if the enterprise ended in complete disaster escape would be possible by sea.

"And you, milord?" asked the Duchess.

All eyes were upon him, but for once he was not conscious of it. It was an entirely personal decision that he had to make. He was a distinguished naval officer; let him make his way to England and the command of a squadron of ships of the line was his for certain. The vast fleets would range the seas again, and he would play a major part in directing them; a few years of war would see him an admiral with a whole fleet, the man upon whom the welfare of England would depend. And if he stayed here the best he could hope for was the life of a hunted fugitive at the head of a ragged and starving brigand band; at worst a rope and a tree. Perhaps it was his duty to save himself and his talents for England, but England had able naval officers by the score, while he had the advantage of knowing much about France and the French, and even of being known to them. But all these arguments were beside the point. He would not — could not — start a little feeble squib of a rebellion here and then run away and leave his friends to bear the brunt of failure.

"I will stay with M. le Comte," he said. "Provided that Your Royal Highness and he approve of such a course. I hope I will be of assistance."

"Certainly," said the Duchess.

Hornblower caught Marie's eye, and a horrid doubt suddenly assailed him.

"Madame," he said, addressing her, "you will accompany Her Royal Highness, I presume?"

"No," said Marie. "You will need every man, and I am as useful as a man. I know every ford and bridle-path round here. I stay with M. le Comte too."

"But Marie —" said the Count.

Hornblower made no protest at all. He knew he might as well protest about the fall of an elm-tree branch or a change in the direction of the wind. He seemed to recognise destiny — the utterly inevitable — in all this. And one glance at Marie's face silenced the Count's expostulations.

"Very well," said the Duchess.

She looked round at them; it was time for the rebellion to begin in earnest. Hornblower put aside his personal feelings. There was a war to be fought; war with all its problems of space and time and psychology. He set himself, almost without willing it, to pick up the tangled threads. Above the desk where the Prefect had sat to execute instructions from the Paris Government was a large scale map of the Department. On the other walls hung even larger scale maps of the sub-prefectures. He looked over at them. Roads, rivers, forests. Goodbye to England.

"The first important thing to know," he began, "is where the nearest regular troops are stationed."

The campaign of the Upper Loire was begun.

CHAPTER XIX

The forest track which they were following met another at right angles. It was frightfully hot even here in the shade of the pines, thunderstorm weather. Hornblower's feet were badly blistered, and he was hobbling along with difficulty even on the soft pine-needle mould underfoot. There was no wind to call forth any sound from the trees; everything was silent. Even the hoofs of the horses made no sound — the three pack-horses that

carried food and ammunition, the two horses carrying wounded men, and the one horse that carried His Excellency the King's Lieutenant-General for the Nivernais. Twenty men and two women were shuffling along the trail with Hornblower, the main body of His Most Christian Majesty's army. There was an advance guard of five under Brown out ahead, a rearguard of five far behind.

Where the tracks crossed a man was waiting for them, a connecting file that Brown, like a prudent officer, had left behind so as to leave the main body in no doubt about which track he was following; as they came up he turned and pointed to something hanging beside the trail — something grey and white. It was the dead body of a man, clothed in peasant's dress, hanging by his neck from a pine-tree limb; the white colour was a large printed placard fastened to his chest.

"Frenchmen of the Nivernais!" it said. "With my arrival at the head of a large body of troops all foolish attempts to resist the Government of our august Emperor Napoleon must cease forthwith. It is gratifying to me to find that so poor a reception has been given to the Count de Graçay's insane attempt to oppose the Emperor, recalled to his throne by the supplication and suffrages of forty million of his loyal subjects. Yet some unfortunate people have been deluded into taking up arms.

"Know, therefore, I am instructed by the clemency of His Imperial Majesty to proclaim that any Frenchman, with the exceptions mentioned below, who hands in his arms and makes personal surrender to any troops under my command before fifteen days from the date of this proclamation will receive amnesty and pardon. He will be free to return to his farm, to his shop, to the bosom of his family.

"Anyone remaining in arms will receive sentence of death, to be carried out immediately.

"Any village offering shelter to the rebels will be burned to the ground, and its leading inhabitants shot.

"Any person giving assistance to the rebels, whether by acting as guide or by giving them information, will be shot.

"Exceptions to the amnesty. The above-named Count de Graçay. His daughter-in-law, known as the Vicomtesse de Graçay. With them are included the Englishman, known as Lord Hornblower, who is required to pay for a life of outrage and crime.

"Signed,

EMMANUEL CLAUSEN, *Count, General of Division.*

June 6th, 1815.

The Count looked up at the blackened face of the corpse.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Paul-Marie of the mill, sir," said the man who had waited for them.

"Poor Paul-Marie!"

"So they have crossed this track already," said Hornblower. "We're round behind them."

Somebody reached up a hand to the corpse, perhaps to tear off the placard.

"Stop!" said Hornblower, just in time. "They must not know that we have come this way."

"For the same reason we must leave the poor devil un-buried," said the Count.

"We must keep marching," said Hornblower. "Once over the ford and we shall have time to take breath."

He looked round at his pitiful little army. Some of them, at the moment of halting, had sunk to the ground. Some were leaning on their muskets, and some were spelling out the placard that hung on the breast of the dead Paul-Marie. It was not the first copy of it they had seen.

"Come on, my children," said the Count.

The old man's face was white with weariness, and he drooped in his saddle; the wretched horse he rode was hardly in better condition, moving forward reluctantly with hanging head at the prod of the spurs. Shambling, hungry, and ragged, the others followed him, most of them looking up at the dead Paul-Marie as they passed. Hornblower noticed some who lingered, and dropped back to be with them; he had pistols in his belt.

Deserters, as well as being a loss of strength, would give information of their intention to cross the ford.

Clausen had scored a distinct point with his offer of amnesty, for there were many in the band — Hornblower could list in his mind a number of them — who must already be wondering whether it was worth going on with the struggle. Men with nothing save certain death ahead of them fight far harder in a losing battle than those

with a chance to surrender, and his followers must be thinking regretfully of the rapid passing of the fifteen days allowed them in the proclamation. This was June 18th — Sunday, June 18th, 1815. He had to keep his men together for three more days to make sure that they would fight on with their necks at stake. His blistered feet were causing him agony, for the short pause beside Paul-Marie's hanging body had brought back the life into them, and he would have to walk on them for some distance farther before they would be numb again. He had to drive himself to quicken his stride to catch up Marie, walking in the middle of the group with a musket slung across her back and Annette beside her. Marie had cut off her masses of hair — sawed them off with a knife after her first night as a guerrilla soldier — and the ends hung irregularly round her face, which was wet with sweat and streaked with dirt. But both she and Annette were in far better physical condition than Hornblower, stepping out with unblistered feet and still with a certain freedom of stride as compared with Hornblower's leg-weary stagger. They were ten and fifteen years younger than he.

"Why not leave Pierre behind and take his horse, 'Oratio?'" asked Marie.

"No," said Hornblower.

"He will die anyway," argued Marie. "That wound will gangrene."

"Bad for the other men to leave him here to die alone in the forest," said Hornblower. "Besides, Clausen might find him before he died and find out from him what we intend to do."

"Kill him and bury him, then," said Marie.

Women when they go to war are fiercer than men and inclined to carry the logic of war to still greater logical extremes. This was the tender, gentle Marie, the kind and understanding, who had wept for love of him.

"No," said Hornblower again. "We'll capture some more horses soon."

"Providing we do," said Marie.

It was hard to keep horses alive in these conditions; they died or went lame while men still lived and marched. Only two weeks had passed since Clausen, marching down from Briare, had forced them to evacuate Nevers, and in the fierce manhunts that had followed horses had died in dozens. Clausen must be an active and energetic officer; his columns had marched hotfoot after them in unceasing pursuit. Only night-march after night-march, stratagems and cunning, had kept them out of his clutches. Twice there had been fierce little rearguard actions; once they had ambushed a troop of pursuing Hussars — Hornblower remembered the gaily-uniformed soldiers tumbling from their saddles as the volley blazed from the roadside — and now here they were with half their strength gone already, marching by day, having marched the night before, to cross the rear of one of Clausen's circling columns. Marie knew of a dangerous and little-known ford across the Loire ahead. Once over that they could rest for a day in the forest of Runes before showing themselves in the valley of the Allier and causing fresh turmoil there. Clausen would be after them at once, but that was far enough to look ahead; the next move would depend on the new circumstances.

Active and energetic Clausen certainly was — he must have learned about fighting guerrillas in Spain. But he had a considerable force to back him up; Hornblower knew of the 14th Leger and the 40th Ligne — the 14th Light Infantry and the 40th of the Line — and there was another regiment with which he had not yet come into contact, and at least one squadron of the 10th Hussars. Nine battalions or more — six or seven thousand men — all chasing his ragged thirty. He was doing his duty, for those seven thousand men could be better employed on the Belgian frontier, where undoubtedly some action was stirring. And if he could only keep up the struggle he could wear down even those seven thousand men, wear out their boots and wear down their spirits. He could! Hornblower gritted his teeth and marched on; his feet were numb again now and had ceased to pain him. Only the terrible weariness in his legs distressed him now. He became aware of a low muttering roar in the distance. "Guns?" he asked, a little puzzled. "Thunder," said Marie.

They had chattered so light-heartedly once; had walked carefree and gay, hand in hand. It hardly seemed as if it were they two who had walked like that, in that breathing space of peace before Bonaparte returned from Elba. Hornblower was too fatigued to love now. The thunder muttered again; the heat was more oppressive. Inside his clothes Hornblower could feel the prickliness of his sweat. He was thirsty, too, but his thirst was not as severe as his physical weariness. In the forest it was growing dark, not with the approach of evening, which was still far off, but with the massing of storm-clouds overhead. Somebody close behind him groaned, and Hornblower made himself look round and grin.

"Who's that lowing like a cow?" he asked. "Old Father Fermiac? Five years younger than me, and they call him Father Fermiac and he lows like a cow! Cheer up, Father. Maybe we'll find a bull for you the other side of the Loire."

That raised a cackle of laughter — some of it pure hysteria, some of it amusement at his not-quite-perfect French, some of it roused by the incongruity of a great English lord cracking jokes with French peasants. The thunder crashed almost overhead, and they could hear the rain beginning to patter on the trees. A few drops found their way down on their sweating faces.

"Here comes the rain," said someone.

"I've had water underfoot for the past two days," said Hornblower. "You ought to see my blisters. Even the good Jesus never walked on as much water as I have."

The daring blasphemy raised another cackle, got the men along for another hundred yards. The heavens were opening overhead, and the rain was falling in cataracts. Hornblower dropped back to the pack-horses, to make sure that the leather covers were securely over the panniers. He had two thousand rounds of musket ammunition there which he did not want spoiled — it would be harder to replace than food or even shoe-leather. They plodded on, in the semi-darkness, their clothes growing heavier with the rain soaking into them. The earth beneath their feet grew spongy and soggy, while the storm showed no sign of diminishing. The thunder still roared and the lightning flashed, lighting up the dark spaces under the trees.

"How much farther?" asked Hornblower of Marie.

"Two leagues and a half, perhaps."

Three hours more of marching; it would be almost dark, if not quite, by the time they arrived.

"This rain will deepen the ford," said Marie, sounding the first note of a new anxiety.

"My God!" said Hornblower before he could check himself.

There were eighteen half-battalion columns scattered in pursuit of them, and he was threading his way through the midst of them. He was risking almost everything on being able to cross the river at this unexpected point, which would throw off pursuit for a time at least. Their danger would be extreme if they were unable to pass. This was a rocky country in general, with a shallow topsoil, among the headwaters of the great river, and rain would affect the level of the water after only a short interval. He turned on his weary legs to urge the men to lengthen their stride. That was something he had to do every few minutes during the rest of that dreadful march, as darkness closed in prematurely about them, as the rain roared down upon them incessantly, as the led horses stumbled and plunged and the two wounded men groaned in agony. The Count rode without a word, bowed forward in the saddle with the water streaming from him. He was in the last stages of exhaustion, Hornblower knew. Someone ahead challenged through the rain and dark; it was a man sent back from Brown's advanced guard. Brown had reached the edge of the forest, and the river lay a short distance ahead across the rocky flood plain. They all halted together under the last of the trees while scouts moved cautiously forward to discover if this lonely stretch of river bank were patrolled — there could not be too many precautions taken, even though any self-respecting sentry would sneak away to find shelter on a night like this.

"The river sounds loud," said Marie. They could hear it even through the noise of the rain where they lay in the wet mud, and Hornblower dared not think what that implied.

Brown's messenger came back; he had explored the river bank and found no sign of the enemy, as was to be expected. Clausen's division would be sufficiently dispersed guarding likely places, let alone the unlikely ones. They got to their feet, Hornblower feeling new agony as his weight came again on his blisters. He could hardly step at first, and his legs were stiff and weary as well and hardly obeyed his wishes. The Count was able to mount his horse, but the poor brute seemed as leg weary as Hornblower himself. It was a sorry party that limped and hobbled and stumbled forward in the gathering darkness. The thunder had long ceased, but the rain continued to fall steadily, with every promise of going on through the night.

The turbulent surface of the river gleamed in the half-light ahead of them.

"The ford begins down by those trees," said Marie. "It is a ledge under the surface that runs diagonally upstream from there to the middle of the river. That is how you cross the deep part."

"Come on, then," said Hornblower. In his pain and weariness he felt as if he would like to cover that last half-mile on his hands and knees.

They came to the water's edge; the rushing river boiled at their feet among the rocks.

"It is too deep already," said Marie. She was only voicing the suspicion that had formed in every mind. There was no expression in her tone at all; her voice was flat and dead.

"I'll take a horse and try it," she went on, "Here, help Pierre down."

"Let me try, madame," said Brown, but Marie paid him no attention.

She climbed astride into the saddle, hitching up the skirts of her habit to permit her to do so. Then she urged the horse forward into the water. The animal balked, nearly lost his footing among unseen rocks, and went forward with the utmost reluctance under the urging of Marie's heels. The water was almost up to its belly before — as Hornblower guessed — it had reached the end of the ledge of rock that Marie had spoken about. There was another battle of wills between Marie and the horse, and it plunged forward again. Three strides and it was out of its depth, struggling madly over the irregular bottom, almost vanishing from sight, and whirling downstream at frightening speed before it regained its footing. Marie, flung from the saddle, somehow hung on to the pommel, avoiding the lashing hoofs as the horse headed for the shore, and found her footing as it came out from the shallows snorting in fear. Marie struggled onto the bank weighed down by her dripping clothing. No one had uttered a sound while the trial was being made, not even in the moment of Marie's greatest peril. It was plain now to everybody that the ford was impassable.

"We must all walk on water now besides milord," said a voice. It might have been a joke, but anyone who heard it knew that it was not.

Hornblower made himself come out of his daze. He had to think and plan and lead.

"No," he said. "I'm the only one who can do that. And none of us care to swim. Do we? Then let us keep along the river bank until we find a boat. I'll exchange ten miracles for one boat."

The suggestion was received in depressed silence. Hornblower wondered if the men were one-half as tired as he was. He forced himself to his feet, by a fierce effort of will ignoring the pain of the blisters.

"Come on," he said. "At least we cannot stay here."

No guerrilla leader in his senses would camp for the night beside an unfordable river against which he could be hemmed in, and with the rain continuing it would be at least twenty-four hours before it would be passable again.

"Come on," he repeated. "Come on, Frenchmen."

Then he knew he had failed. A few stirred reluctantly; more looked to see how their comrades acted, and then deliberately lay down again, some on their backs, some with their faces pillowed on their forearms, with the rain still dropping on them.

"An hour's rest," pleaded one voice.

Someone — Hornblower guessed it was young Jean, not yet seventeen — was sobbing unashamedly and loudly. The men had reached breaking point. Someone else, someone with greater powers of inspiration, might have got them to move again, Hornblower told himself, but it was beyond him. Had the ford been practicable they would have crossed it, and staggered on a mile or two the other side, but in the face of this disappointment they were capable of nothing further tonight. And they knew, the same as he did, that there was nothing to go on for. The rebellion was at an end, whether they marched till they died or gave up now. The thunderstorm, the flooding of the ford, had balked it. The men were realists after this experience of guerrilla warfare, and knew that anything further they did would be only a gesture. They all knew of Clausen's proclamation offering amnesty, too. Brown was at his side, eloquent in his silence, a hand on the butt of a pistol in his belt. Brown, himself, Marie; the Count and Annette, for what they were worth. One or two more — old Fermiac for one — were all he could count on. It would be enough for the moment. He could shoot a couple of the most obstinate of the objectors, and the rest would get to their feet and march, sulkily. But he could hardly keep unwilling men together in a march in darkness. They could slip away too easily; nor would it be difficult for someone more discontented or desperate than the others to slip a knife into his back on the march or put the muzzle of his musket to his ribs and pull the trigger. He was prepared to face that risk, he was prepared to kill a couple of malcontents, but he could see no real benefit from such action. There was one thing left for him to do, the last resource of the hunted guerrilla leader, to disperse his band and hope for better days to come. It was a bitter pill to swallow, especially in view of the desperate danger to Marie and the

Count, but it was not a matter of choosing the best of possible alternatives. He had to choose the least bad. But failure was a horrible thing.

"Very well," he said. "It is here that we say goodbye."

Some of the men stirred at those words.

"Oratio!" said Marie, and then ceased abruptly. She had learned the lessons of discipline.

"Your lives are safe," went on Hornblower. "You have all read Clausen's proclamation. Tomorrow — tonight if you will — you can make your way to the troops and surrender. You can go to your homes. Madame and the Count and I go on, for go on we must. And we would even if we need not."

The men were stunned into silence by his words. No one stirred, no one spoke in the darkness. The two weeks of toil and danger and hardship through which they had just passed seemed like a lifetime to most of them, and it was hard to realise that a lifetime had come to an end.

"We shall return," continued Hornblower. "Remember us when you are in your homes. Think of us. We shall return with a fresh call to arms. Then we shall all of us gather again in our strength to thrust down the tyrant. Remember that. And now one last cheer for the King! *Vive le Roi!*"

They cheered, feebly enough, but Hornblower had achieved what he set out to do. He had sowed the seeds of a later rebellion; when Clausen's division should move away it would be possible to set the Nivernais in a turmoil once more should a leader arise — should he and the Count ever succeed in making their way back into the province. It was a desperate, slight hope, but it was all that remained.

"In the name of God!" said Fermiac. "I come with you now."

"I also," said another voice in the darkness.

Perhaps with these Frenchmen it might be possible now to make an hysterical appeal to them, carry them away on a wave of emotion, set them marching once more. Hornblower felt the temptation, and he had to balance the pros and cons coldly. That sort of hysteria would hardly survive the shock of the men's feeling their leg weariness. Some of the men simply could not march farther. It would not do; by dawn next day he would not have six men with him, and time would have been irretrievably lost.

"Thank you," said Hornblower. "I shall remember that in time to come, Fermiac, my friend. But we must ride, and ride hard. Four of us and six horses gives us the best chance. Go back to your wife, Fermiac, and try not to beat her on Saturday nights."

He even got a laugh by that, at this moment of all moments. It helped to keep the parting on a sane level, the level he was aiming at with an eye to the future. Yet he knew there was no future; he knew it in his soul, in his bones, even while he gave the order for the pack-horses to be stripped of their loads, even while he forced Brown in a bitter argument to leave Annette behind and make her life safe. He was going to die; probably Brown was going to die. And Marie, dear Marie — while his spirit tossed on wave after wave of emotion, of remorse and self-condemnation, of fear and regret, uncertainty and despair, his love for her endured and increased, so that her name was in his mind as a constant accompaniment to his thoughts, so that her image was in his mind's eye whatever else he was picturing. Dear Marie, sweet, beloved Marie.

She was leading a spare horse, and Brown was leading the other; the four of them were mounted on the best of the six. The animals slipped and plunged over the rough surface at the water's edge until they reached the path above the river. They walked dispiritedly through the darkness. Hornblower could hardly sit in his saddle with his weariness; he felt giddy and sick, so that he had to hold on to the pommel of the saddle in front of him. He closed his eyes for a moment and instantly seemed to be swept over some vast smooth declivity, like the boat going over the cataract of the Loire four years before; he was almost out of his saddle before he recovered himself, jerking himself upright and clinging to the pommel like a drowning man. Yet at the foot of the declivity he had known that Marie was waiting for him with the brooding love in her eyes.

He shook off delirium. He had to make plans, to think how they could escape. He called up before his mind's eye the map of the country, and marked on it what he knew of the situation of Clausen's flying columns. They constituted a semicircular cordon, whose diameter was the river, and at whose centre he found himself at present. So far he had buoyed himself up in this danger with the hope of passing the river by Marie's ford. Hard on their heels, he knew, was marching a half-battalion of the 14th Leger, which had apparently been given the duty of direct pursuit while the other columns headed him off. At nightfall that half-battalion was

presumably six or seven miles behind, unless — as might easily be the case — its commanding officer forced his men to march on in the darkness. Should he try to pierce the cordon or try to pass the river? The Count's horse in front of him fell with a crash and a clatter, and his own nearly threw him as it plunged to avoid treading on it.

"Are you hurt, sir?" came Brown's voice in the darkness; he must have slipped down instantly from the saddle despite the handicap of a led horse.

"No," said the Count quietly. "But I'm afraid the horse is."

There was a chink of bridles as Brown and the Count felt about in the dark.

"Yes. He's slipped his shoulder, sir," reported Brown at length. "I'll change saddles to the other horse."

"Are you sure you are not hurt, Father?" asked Marie, using the intimate form of address which was by no means the rule between them.

"Not in the least, dear," answered the Count, in just the same tone as he would use in a drawing-room.

"If we turn this horse loose they'll find it when they come along, my lord," said Brown.

'They' meant the pursuing troops, of course.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"I'll take him away from the path and shoot him, my lord."

"You won't be able to lead him far," said the Count.

"A few yards may be enough," said Brown, "if you'll be kind enough to hold these two horses, sir."

They sat and stood while Brown persuaded the suffering creature to hobble away to his doom. Through the gentle noise of the rain they heard the click as the pistol misfired, waited while Brown reprimed, and then heard the crack of the weapon.

"Thank you, sir," Hornblower heard Brown say, presumably as he took over the horse the Count had been holding, and then he added. "Can I take over your led horse, madame?"

Hornblower made up his mind at that moment.

"We will keep along the river bank a little longer," he said. "Then we can rest until dawn, and try to make a crossing."

CHAPTER XX

They all of them slept a little that night, an hour or so altogether perhaps, in fits and snatches. They were all of them wearing clothing completely saturated, and although in the dark they found a bit of grassy bank on which to lie, the rock was only just below the surface and made itself felt. But such was their fatigue and shortage of sleep that they lost consciousness now and then, forgot the cold and their aching joints. It was the most natural thing in the world that Hornblower and Marie should lie in each other's arms, with his wet cloak beneath them and hers above. It was warmer that way. Probably they would have slept in each other's arms if they had been nothing to each other; and in one way, as a result of their fatigue, they *were* nothing to each other. The great surge of love and tenderness which Hornblower experienced had nothing to do with the contact of his battered body against Marie's. He was too cold and too tired for passion to rouse itself at all. But Marie lay in the darkness with an arm over him; she was younger and less weary than he was, and maybe she loved more dearly. There was one blessed half-hour after the rain ceased, before the coming of light, when Hornblower slept tranquilly with his head on her shoulder, when he was all hers. War was behind them and death in front of them, and nothing could come between them at that moment. Maybe that was the happiest half-hour that Hornblower had ever given her.

Hornblower woke with the first beginning of light. A heavy mist had arisen from the river and the saturated fields, and through it he saw a faint object a few yards away, which with difficulty he recognised as the Count, sitting up enveloped in his cloak. Brown lay beside him snoring gently — apparently they two had slept together as well. It took Hornblower a moment or two to collect his faculties; the roar of the rapid river close at hand was the next thing he recognised. He sat up and Marie woke beside him. He stood up, to be sharply

reminded of the pain in his blistered feet and the ache in every joint. The pain was hard to ignore, for every step was torture, as frightful as anything the Middle Ages ever devised, but he said no word about it. Soon they were on their way, mounted on horses that seemed in no better condition than the night before. This was the life that killed horses. The day was clearing fast; Hornblower expected one of those typical summer days of central France, breezy and sunny together. He could expect the mist to vanish altogether in an hour or less. Beside them the river roared and sang; when the mist thinned they could see its wide grey surface streaked with white. Not far on their right hand was the great road to Briare and Paris; what they were following was the country path skirting the flood plain. With the river beside him Hornblower sketched rapidly what he intended to do to cross. That great expanse of water concealed shallows over much of its width, as they all knew. The main body of water and the main current was to be found in one channel, sometimes on this side, sometimes on that, sometimes in the middle — how well he remembered that phenomenon from the days when he had escaped down the river in a small boat! If they could get themselves across this channel, and swim the horses over, the shallows would hardly delay them. At Marie's ford they had relied on a ridge of rock which crossed the channel near enough to the surface to be passable at low water; as that ridge had failed them they must rely on other means. Even a little rowing-boat such as most riverside farms possessed would suffice. Marie's ford would have been far better, in that the pursuers would have no means of guessing that they had crossed, but anything was better than nothing. Across the river they could steal fresh horses for themselves and shake off pursuit. The Count snorted a little when Hornblower used the word 'steal'; but did not carry his protest into actual words.

The sun had broken through the mist now, and was shining at them almost level over the ridge on their right hand; the river's surface still steamed a little. Certainly it was going to be a hot day. And then they saw what they were seeking, a small farm and outbuildings sheltering below the ridge and above the water's edge. It stood bold and black against the mist with the sun on it. The instinct of war made them wheel instantly into a low basin screened by willows, and dismount for concealment.

"Shall I go ahead, my lord?" asked Brown.

Perhaps it was his way of keeping himself sane, thus to speak formally and with the bearing of the good servant.

"Yes, go on," said Hornblower.

Hornblower edged himself forward to a position of advantage whence he could watch Brown carefully worm his way towards the farm. If there were troops anywhere near, they would be quartered here. But then, on the other hand, at this time in the morning troops would be moving about round the outbuildings, and not a uniformed man was visible. A young woman made her appearance, and then an old man, while Hornblower watched. And then he saw something else, something which made him choke with anticipation and hope. Lying on the rocky bank of the river, at the water's edge below the farm, was a boat — the outline was unmistakable. The young woman was on her way towards the vineyard above the farm, when Brown, concealed in the ditch, attracted her attention. Hornblower saw the two in conversation, saw Brown rise to his feet, and walk towards the building. A minute later he appeared again and waved an arm to tell them all was well. They mounted, and with Marie leading Brown's horse and Hornblower leading the spare they trotted down to the farm. Brown awaited them, his pistol handy in his belt, and the old man stared at them as they dismounted. They were something to stare at, Hornblower realised, dirty and bedraggled and unshaven. Marie looked like a beggar's wench.

"The Frogs were here yesterday, my lord," said Brown. "Cavalry, the same Hussars as we beat last week, as far as I can make out. But they left early yesterday morning."

"Very good," said Hornblower. "Let's get the boat launched."

"The boat!" exclaimed the old man, staring at them. "The boat!"

"Why do you say that?" asked Hornblower sharply, wondering with a pang what fresh blow Fate had to deal him.

"Look at the boat!" said the old man.

They walked down towards it. Someone with an axe had struck it four powerful blows; in four different places the bottom was smashed in.

"The Hussars did that," piped the old man, dwelling on the horrid details with zest. "'Smash that boat' said the officer, so they smashed it."

The troops had been as fully aware, of course, as Hornblower had been of the importance of keeping the river barred. They had taken all the precautions they could think of to prevent unauthorised persons crossing. That was why Marie's ford would have been invaluable if they had been able to cross it yesterday.

It was a staggering blow; Hornblower looked out over the raging river and the fields and vineyards warm in the young day. Marie and the Count were waiting for a decision from him.

"We can make that boat float," said Hornblower. "The oars are still here. Two empty kegs fastened under the thwarts — there'll be kegs to be found here, seeing they make wine. We can patch a little, stuff the holes, and with the kegs to keep her afloat we'll cross all right. Brown, you and I had better get it done."

"Aye aye, sir," said Brown. "There'll be tools in the wagon shed yonder."

It was necessary to guard against surprise; the repair work on the boat would take some hours.

"Marie," said Hornblower.

"Yes, 'Oratio?'"

"Ride up above the vineyard there. Keep a watch on the highroad. Remember to keep yourself and your horse hidden."

"Yes, 'Oratio.'"

Simply 'Yes, 'Oratio', as Hornblower realised a moment later. Any other woman would have made it clear by word or intonation that the last sentence of his instructions was superfluous to someone who had learned her job. As it was she mounted and rode off in simple obedience. Hornblower caught the Count's eye. He wanted to tell him to rest — the Count's face was as grey as the stubble that grew thick on his cheeks — but he refrained from brutally saying so. It was necessary to keep the Count in good spirits, and that was not the way to do so.

"We shall need your help, sir, soon," he said. "Can we call on you when it is needed?"

"Of course," said the Count.

Brown appeared with barrel staves, hammer, and nails, some lengths of cord.

"Excellent!" said Hornblower.

Feverishly they went to work on the boat. In two places both strakes and frames were smashed. To patch the holes was a comparatively simple matter, but the broken frames presented a more difficult problem. To cross that fast current they would have to row vigorously, and the boat might buckle under the strain. The simplest way to stiffen it would be to strengthen the strakes with one or two diagonal thicknesses of new planking.

"When we turn her over we'll see how she looks," said Hornblower.

The hammers rang out as they drove the nails home and clinched them. Hornblower thought of the lusty tugs on the oars necessary to drive the boat through those turbulent waters. Both longitudinally and transversely the strain on the fabric would be severe. They worked furiously. The old man hovered round them. He expected the Hussars back again at any moment, he said — they were constantly patrolling along the river bank. He told them this with that seeming delight in calamity that distinguished his type.

And he had hardly repeated his warning when the sound of hoofs caused them to look up from their work; it was Marie, pushing her horse down the slope as hard as it would move.

"Hussars!" she said briefly. "Coming along the main road from the south. Twenty of them, I should think."

It did not seem possible that Fate could be as unkind as she appeared to be. Another hour's work would see the boat ready to float.

"They'll come down here," said the old man gloatingly. "They always do."

Once more it was a matter for instant decision.

"We must ride off and hide," said Hornblower. "Nothing else for it. Come on."

"But the repairs on the boat, sir? They'll see 'em," said Brown.

"They were only a mile away," said Marie. "They'll be here in five minutes."

"Come on," said Hornblower. "Count, please get on your horse."

"Tell the Hussars if they come it was you who was making these repairs," said Brown to the old man. Brown thrust his shaggy face close to the wrinkled one.

"Come along, Brown," said Hornblower.

They rode back to the hollow place where they had hidden themselves before. They tethered the horses to the willows, and crawled back among the rocks to watch. They had hardly settled themselves when a murmur from Marie called their attention to the coming of the Hussars. It was only a small patrol — half a dozen troopers and a non-commissioned officer. The plumed busbies came in sight first, over the ridge, and then the grey jackets. They trotted down the cart-track beside the vineyard to the farm. The old man was waiting for them at the entrance to the courtyard, and the fugitives watched as they reined up and questioned him. There was a catch in Hornblower's breath as he watched the old man, his face raised to the mounted men, replying to the questions. Hornblower saw the non-commissioned officer lean out of his saddle and take the old man by the breast of his coat and shake him. He knew now they would get the truth out of him. Those threats in Clausen's proclamation were not empty ones. A single reminder would make the old man talk — he would only hesitate long enough to salve his conscience. The non-commissioned officer shook him again; a trooper apparently idly walked his horse towards the river and the boat and returned at once with the news of the repairs. Now the old man was talking; excitement was infecting the Hussars' horses, which were moving about restlessly. At a wave from the non-commissioned officer's hand a trooper set his horse up the slope, clearly to carry word to the remainder of the squadron. The old man was pointing in their direction; the Hussars wheeled their horses about, and, spreading out, began to trot towards them. This was the end.

Hornblower glanced at his companions, who looked back at him. In the flying seconds minds worked quickly. There was no purpose in trying to ride away — the fresh horses of the Hussars would overtake them in an instant. The Count had drawn his pistols and looked to the priming.

"I left my musket at the ford," said Marie, in a choking tone, but she, too, had a pistol in her hand.

Brown was coolly looking about him at the tactical situation.

They were going to fight it out to the very end, then. All the feeling of finality, of inevitability, that had haunted Hornblower from the very beginning of the rebellion — since the interview with the Duchess d'Angoulême — came over him with renewed force. This was indeed the end. To die among the rocks today, or before a firing party tomorrow. Neither of them very dignified ends, but perhaps this one was the better. Yet it did not seem right or fitting that he should die now. For the moment he could not accept his fate with the apparent indifference of his companions; he knew actual fear. Then it passed as suddenly as it came, and he was ready to fight, ready to play out the losing hand to the drop of the last card.

A trooper was riding towards them, not more than a few yards away now. Brown levelled his pistol and fired.

"Missed him, by God!" said Brown.

The Hussar reined his horse round and galloped out of range; the sound of the shot attracted the notice of all the rest of the patrol, which promptly sheered away out of musket-shot and began to circle, spreading out. The forlorn situation of the group in the rocky hollow must have become apparent to them immediately. Any attempt on the fugitives' part to escape must result in their being immediately ridden down, so that there was no need for hurry. The Hussars sat their horses and waited.

It was not more than half an hour before reinforcements arrived, two more troops under an officer whose aigrette and gold-laced dolman displayed the dandyism traditional in the Hussar regiments; the trumpeter beside him was nearly as resplendent. Hornblower watched as the sergeant's hand pointed out the tactical situation, and then he saw the officer's hand indicate the movements he wanted his men to make. The officer could see at a glance the ground was too broken for concerted mounted action; with disciplined rapidity the new arrivals dismounted, and the horses were led off by threes while the remainder of the two troops, carbine in hand, prepared to advance in skirmishing order against the hollow from two directions. For dismounted cavalry deployed as skirmishers, with their long boots and spurs and inaccurate carbines and lack of drill, Hornblower would nominally have felt nothing but contempt, but fifty of them advancing against three men and a woman armed only with pistols meant defeat and death.

"Make every shot tell, this time," said Hornblower — the first words anyone had spoken for a long time.

Brown and the Count were lying in niches between rocks; Marie was crawling round so as to bring herself to face the flanking column. At a hundred yards the skirmishers grew more cautious, stealing forward trying to shelter themselves behind bushes and rocks, and obviously expecting the musket-shots that did not come. One or two of them fired their carbines, so wildly that Hornblower did not even hear the bullets; he could imagine the non-commissioned officers rating the men who were thus wasting ammunition. They were within

possible range now of his own rifled pistols — Barbara's gift to him. He lay with his right arm extended, his forearm supported on the rock that sheltered him, and took prolonged and careful aim at the easiest mark before him — a Hussar walking towards him in the open, his carbine across his body. He pressed the trigger, and through the smoke saw the Hussar whirl round and fall, to rise to a sitting position a moment later with his hand to his wounded arm. Hot with a new battle fury, Hornblower fired the other barrel, and the Hussar fell back, limp and motionless; Hornblower cursed himself for wasting a shot and for killing a wounded man who would have been out of the battle in any event. A fierce yell went up from the ring of skirmishers, while Hornblower reloaded his empty pistol, restraining himself as his fever tempted him to hurry. He poured the charges into the barrels, wrapped the bullets and rammed them home, and carefully placed the caps upon the nipples. The sight of their comrade's fall had instilled extra caution into the skirmishers, despite their battle yell — no one wished to be the next inglorious victim. That was a sergeant, there, calling to his men to come on. Hornblower sighted again and fired, and the sergeant dropped. This was better. There was a savage satisfaction in killing when he was about to be killed. Carbines were firing from all round the ring; Hornblower could hear the bullets passing overhead.

At that moment a loud fanfare from the trumpet attracted the attention of everyone; it was repeated, and Hornblower looked round while the carbine-fire died away. The officer was walking his horse towards them, a white handkerchief waving from his hand, while the trumpeter rode close behind blowing for a parley in accordance with military etiquette.

"Shall I kill him, sir?" asked Brown.

"No," said Hornblower. It would be pleasant to take the officer with him to hell, but it would give Bonaparte too good an opportunity to sully his name and thus discredit the Bourbon movement. He knelt up behind his rock and shouted, "Come no farther!"

The officer reined up.

"Why not surrender?" he shouted back. "You have nothing to gain by further resistance."

"What terms do you offer?"

The officer with difficulty suppressed a shrug.

"A fair trial," he shouted back. "You can appeal to the mercy of the Emperor."

The irony of those sentences could not have been greater if it had been deliberate.

"To hell with you!" yelled Hornblower. "And to hell with the 10th Hussars! Run, or I fire!"

He raised his pistol, and the officer hastily wheeled his horse and trotted back without dignity. Why should it be that with death only half an hour away there should be any satisfaction in thus humiliating the man? He had only been doing his duty, trying to save the lives of his men; why this bitter personal animosity? This insane self-analysis coursed through Hornblower's mind even while he dropped on his stomach again and wriggled into a firing position. He had time to think scorn of himself before a bullet passing close above his head drove him to think about nothing save the business in hand. If the Hussars would only rise to their feet and charge in they might lose half a dozen lives but it would be over quickly. Marie's pistol cracked not far from his right hand, and he looked round at her.

At that moment it happened; Hornblower heard the impact of the bullet, saw the force of it half roll her over. He saw the puzzled look on her face, saw the puzzled look change to a grimace of agony, and without even knowing what he was doing he sprang to her and knelt beside her. A bullet had struck her on the thigh; Hornblower turned back the short skirt of her riding habit. One leg of her dark breeches was already soaked with blood, and while he was gathering himself to act he twice saw the blood pulsate redly — the great artery of the thigh was torn. A tourniquet — pressure — Hornblower's mind hastily recalled all it had ever learned about emergency treatment of the wounded. He thrust his fingers into her groin, unavailingly, the folds of the breeches balking his attempt to apply pressure to the artery. Yet every moment was precious. He felt for his penknife to rip open her breeches, and at the same time a shattering blow on his shoulder flung him onto the ground beside her. He had beard nothing of the Hussars' charge, nothing of the pistol-shots fired by Brown and the Count unavailingly to turn the charge back. Until the carbine-butt struck him down he had been ignorant of what was going on. Even as it was he struggled to his knees again with only the thought in his head of the urgent need to stop the artery. He vaguely heard a shout beside him as a sergeant stopped a trooper from striking him again, but he thought nothing of it. He opened his knife, but Marie's body was limp and

lifeless under his hands. He glanced at her grimy face; it was white under the dirt and sunburn, her mouth hung open, and her eyes stared up at the sky as only the eyes of the dead stare. Hornblower knelt, looking down on her, his open penknife still in his hand, completely numb. The penknife fell from his fingers, and he became aware of another face beside his own looking down on Marie.

"She is dead," said a French voice. "A pity."

The officer rose again to his feet, while Hornblower knelt over the body.

"Come, you," said a harsher voice, and Hornblower was roughly shaken by a hand on his shoulder. He stood up, still dazed, and looked round him. There was the Count, on his feet, between two Hussars; there was Brown sitting on the ground with his hand to his head slowly recovering from the blow which had struck him senseless, while over him stood a trooper with his carbine cocked.

"Madame's life would have been spared after trial," said the officer, his voice coming from miles away. The bitterness of that remark helped to clear the fog from Hornblower's brain. He made a wild movement, and two men sprang forward and seized his arms, sending a wave of agony through his shoulder where the carbine-butt had struck him. There was a momentary pause.

"I shall take these men to headquarters," announced the officer. "Sergeant, take the bodies down to the farmhouse. I will send you orders later."

A low moan came from the Count's lips like the cry of a hurt child.

"Very well, sir," said the sergeant.

"Bring the horses up" went on the officer. "Is that man well enough to ride? Yes."

Brown was looking dazedly around him, one side of his face swollen and bruised. It was all like a dream, with Marie lying there glaring at the sky.

"Come along," said someone, and they dragged at Hornblower's arms to lead him out of the hollow. His legs were weak under him, his blistered feet resented the movement, and he would have fallen if they had not helped him up and dragged him forward.

"Courage, coward," said one of his guards.

No one — save himself — had ever called him that before. He tried to shake himself free, but they only held him the harder, his shoulder paining him excruciatingly. A third man put his hands on his back and all three ran him up out of the hollow without dignity. Here were the horses, a hundred of them, moving about restlessly still under the influence of the recent excitement. They shoved him up into the saddle of a horse, and divided the reins, a trooper mounting on each side and taking half the reins each. It added to Hornblower's feeling of helplessness to sit in a saddle with no reins to hold, and he was so exhausted that he could hardly sit upright. As the horse fidgeted under him he saw Brown and the Count made to mount as well, and then the cavalcade moved up to the road. There they broke into a rapid trot, which tossed him about in his saddle as he held onto the pommel. Once he came near to losing his balance, and the trooper beside him put an arm round him and hove him back into a vertical position.

"If you fell in a column like this," said the trooper, not unkindly, "that would be the end of your troubles."

His troubles! Marie was dead back there, and it might just as well have been his own hand that killed her. She was dead — dead — dead. He had been mad to try to start this rebellion, madder still, infinitely madder, to allow Marie to take part in it. Why had he done it? And a man more skilful with his hands, more ready of resource, would have been able to compress that spouting artery. Hankey, the surgeon of the *Lydia*, had said once (as though licking his lips) that thirty seconds was as long as anyone ever lived after the femoral artery was cut. No matter. He had allowed Marie to die under his hands. He had had thirty seconds, and he had failed. Failed everywhere, failed in war, failed in love, failed with Barbara — God, why did he think of Barbara? The pain in his shoulder may have saved him from madness, for the jolting of the horse was causing him agony of which he could no longer remain ignorant. He slipped his dangling hand between the buttons of his coat as a makeshift sling, which brought him a little relief, and a short while later he received further relief when a shouted order from the officer at the head of the column reduced the horses' pace to a walk. Exhaustion was overcoming him, too; although thoughts were whirling through his brain they were ceasing to be well-defined and logical thoughts — rather were they nightmare images, terrifying but blurred. He had sunk into a delirious stupor when a new order which sent the horses into a trot again roused him from it. Walk and trot, walk and trot; the cavalry was pushing along the road as fast as the horses could go, hurrying him to his doom.

The château guarded by half a battalion of soldiers was General Clausen's headquarters; the prisoners and their escorts rode into the courtyard and dismounted there. The Count was almost unrecognisable by reason of the grey stubble thick over his face; Brown, as well as being bearded, had one eye and cheek swollen purple with a bruise. There was no time to exchange more than a look, no time for a word, when a dapper dismounted officer came out to them.

"The General is waiting for you," he said.

"Come along," said the Hussar officer. Two soldiers put their hands under Hornblower's arms to urge him forward, and once again his legs refused to function. There was not a voluntary contraction left in his muscles, and his blistered feet flinched from any contact with the earth. He tried to take a step, and his knees gave way under him. The Hussars held him up, and he tried again, but it was unavailing — his legs floundered like those of a leg-weary horse, and, indeed, for the same reason.

"Hurry up!" snapped the officer.

The Hussars supported him, and with his legs half trailing, half walking, they dragged him along, up a brief marble stair under a portico, and into a panelled room where behind a table sat General Clausen — a big Alsatian with bulging blue eyes and red cheeks and a bristling red moustache.

The blue eyes bulged a little wider still at the sight of the three wrecks of men dragged in before him. He looked from one to another with uncontrolled surprise; the dapper aide-de-camp who had slipped into a seat beside him, with paper and pens before him, made more effort to conceal his astonishment.

"Who are you?" asked the General.

After a moment the Count spoke first

"Louis-Antoine-Hector-Savinien de Ladon, Comte de Graçay," he said, with a lift of his chin.

The round blue eyes turned towards Brown.

"And you?"

"My name is Brown."

"Ah, the servant who was one of the ringleaders. And you?"

"Horatio, Lord Hornblower." Hornblower's voice cracked as he spoke; his throat was parched.

"Lord 'Ornblower. The Comte de Graçay," said the General, looking from one to the other. He made no spoken comment — his mere glance was a commentary. The head of the oldest family in France, the most distinguished of the younger officers of the British Navy — these two exhausted tatterdemalions.

"The court martial which will try you will assemble this evening," said the General. "You have today in which to prepare your defence."

He did not add 'if any'.

A thought came into Hornblower's mind. He made himself speak.

"This man Brown, monsieur. He is a prisoner of war."

The arched sandy eyebrows arched higher yet.

"He is a sailor of His Britannic Majesty's Navy. He was doing his duty under my orders as his superior officer. He is not amenable to court martial in consequence. He is a legitimate combatant."

"He fought with rebels."

"That does not affect the case, sir. He is a member of the armed forces of the British Crown, with the grade of — of —"

For the life of him Hornblower could not remember the French equivalent of 'coxswain', and for lack of anything better he used the English word. The blue eyes suddenly narrowed.

"This is the same defence as you will be putting forward at your court martial," said Clausen. "It will not avail you."

"I had not thought about my defence," said Hornblower, so genuinely that his tone could not but carry conviction. "I was only thinking about Brown. There is nothing of which you can accuse him. You are a soldier yourself, and must understand that."

His interest in the present discussion made him forget his weariness, made him forget his own instant peril. The genuineness and sincerity of his anxiety about Brown's welfare had their effect on Clausen, who could not fail to be affected by these pleadings for a subordinate by a man who himself was about to lose his life. The blue eyes softened with a hint of admiration that was lost on Hornblower, keenwitted and sympathetic though

the latter was. To him it was such an obvious thing to do to look after Brown that it did not cross his mind that it might be admirable as well.

"I will take the matter under consideration," said Clausen, and then, addressing the escort. "Take the prisoners away".

The dapper aide-de-camp whispered hurriedly to him, and he nodded with Alsatian solemnity.

"Take what measures you think fit," he said. "I make you responsible."

The aide-de-camp rose from his seat and accompanied them out of the hall as the soldiers helped Hornblower to walk. Once through the door the aide-de-camp issued his orders.

"Take that man" — indicating Brown — "to the guardhouse. That man" — this was the Count — "to the room there. Sergeant, you will have charge of him. Lieutenant, you will be personally responsible for this man 'Ornblower. You will keep two men with you, and you and they will never let him out of your sight. Not for a moment. There is a dungeon under the château here. Take him to it, and stay there with him, and I will come and inspect at intervals. This is the man who escaped four years ago from the Imperial gendarmerie, and who has already been condemned to death in his absence. He is desperate, and you can expect him to be cunning."

"Very well, sir," said the lieutenant.

A stone staircase led down to the dungeon, a relic of the not so distant days when the lord of the manor had the right of the high justice, the middle and the low. Now the dungeon showed every sign of long disuse when the clashing bars opened the door into it. It was not damp; on the contrary, it was thick with dust. Through the high barred window came a shaft of sunlight, just sufficient to illuminate the place. The lieutenant looked round at the bare walls; two iron chains stapled to the floor comprised the only furniture.

"Bring some chairs," he said to one of the men with him, and, after a glance at his weary prisoner. "And find a mattress and bring that too. A palliasse of straw at the least."

It was chill in the dungeon, and yet Hornblower felt sweat upon his forehead. His weakness was growing with every second, his legs giving way under him even while he stood still, his head swimming. The mattress had hardly been laid upon the floor before he staggered to it and collapsed across it. Everything was forgotten in that moment, even his misery regarding Marie's death. There was no room for remorse, none for apprehension. He lay there face downward, not quite unconscious, not quite asleep, but oblivious; the throbbing in his legs, the roaring in his ears, the pain in his shoulder, the misery in his soul — all these were nothings at that moment of collapse.

When the bars at the door clashed to herald the entrance of the aide-de-camp Hornblower had recovered somewhat. He was still lying face downward, by now almost enjoying the lack of need to move or think, when the aide-de-camp came in.

"Has the prisoner spoken at all?" he heard the aide-de-camp ask.

"Not a single word," said the lieutenant.

"The depths of despair," commented the aide-de-camp with facile sententiousness.

The remark irritated Hornblower, and he was further annoyed at being caught in such an undignified attitude. He turned over and sat up on his palliasse and glared up at the aide-de-camp.

"You have no requests to make?" asked the latter. "No letters you wish to write?"

He did not wish to write a letter upon which his gaolers would fall like vultures upon a corpse. Yet he had to be exigent, had to do something to remove that impression of being in despair. And with that he knew what he wanted and how desperately he wanted it.

"A bath," he said. He put his hand to his hairy face. "A shave. Clean clothes."

"A bath?" repeated the aide-de-camp, a little startled. Then a look of suspicion came into his face. "I cannot trust you with a razor. You would try to cheat the firing party."

"Have one of your men shave me," said Hornblower, and seeking for something to say to irritate he added.

"You can tie my hands while he does it. But first a bucket of hot water, soap, and a towel. And a clean shirt at least."

The aide-de-camp yielded.

"Very well," he said.

A queer mood of light-headed exaltation came to Hornblower's rescue. It was nothing to strip himself naked under the eyes of four curious men, to wash the filth from his body and to towel himself dry, ignoring the pain

in his injured shoulder. It was not the legendary and strange Englishman that they were interested in so much as in the man about to die. This man soaping himself was shortly to pass through the gates ahead of them all; this white body was soon to be torn asunder by musket bullets. Telepathically he felt his gaolers' morbid curiosity, and proudly and disdainfully he would indulge it. He dressed himself again while they watched his every movement. A trooper came in with his hands full of lather-bowls and razors.

"The regimental barber," said the aide-de-camp. "He will shave you."

There was no suggestion now of tying his hands; as Hornblower sat with the razor rasping over his throat he thought of reaching suddenly up and grasping the blade. His jugular vein, his carotid artery were there; one deep cut at the side and he would be out of his torment, and there would be the additional satisfaction of having completely outwitted the supercilious aide-de-camp. The temptation was momentarily keen; he could visualise his corpse collapsing in the chair, blood pouring from his throat, to the consternation of the officers. So clear was the vision for the moment that he dallied with it, enjoying it. But the fate of a suicide would not arouse nearly as much resentment as a judicial murder. He must let Bonaparte kill him, he must make that one last sacrifice to his duty. And Barbara — he would not like Barbara to think of him as a suicide.

The barber held a mirror before him just in time to break this new chain of thought; the face he looked at was the same familiar one, deeply sunburned. The lines about his mouth were perhaps more noticeable. The eyes were perhaps more pathetic than ever, more appealing. Disgustingly the forehead was a little higher, the scalp more visible. He nodded his approval to the barber, and rose to his feet as the towel was taken from under his chin, making himself stand firm despite the pain of the blisters on his feet. He swept his glance imperiously round, abashing the curious stares. The aide-de-camp pulled out his watch, most likely to conceal some embarrassment.

"In an hour the court martial will assemble," he said. "Do you wish for food?"

"Certainly," said Hornblower.

They brought him an omelette, bread, wine, cheese. There was no suggestion that anyone should eat with him; they sat and stared as he carried each mouthful to his lips. He had not eaten for a long time, and now that he felt clean he was ravenously hungry. Let them stare; he wanted to eat and drink. The wine was delicious, and he drank of it thirstily.

"The Emperor won two great victories last week," said the aide-de-camp suddenly, breaking into Hornblower's mood. Hornblower paused in the act of wiping his mouth with his napkin to stare at him.

"Your Wellington," went on the aide-de-camp, "has met his destiny at last. Ney beat him thoroughly at a place south of Brussels called Les Quatre Bras, and on the same day His Majesty destroyed Blücher and the Prussians at Ligny, which is the old battlefield of Fleurus, according to the map. It was a pair of victories as decisive as Jena and Auerstadt."

Hornblower forced himself to complete the wiping of his mouth apparently unmoved. He addressed himself to pouring himself out another glass of wine; he felt that the aide-de-camp, annoyed by his apparent indifference to his fate, was telling him this news in an endeavour to penetrate his armour. He tried to think of a riposte.

"How did this news reach you?" he asked, apparently all polite attention.

"The official bulletin reached us three days back. The Emperor was in full march for Brussels."

"My felicitations, monsieur. For your sake I hope the news is true. But is there not a saying in your army about 'to lie like a bulletin'?"

"This bulletin is from the Emperor's own headquarters," said the aide-de-camp indignantly.

"Then there can be no doubt about it, of course. Let us hope that Ney informed the Emperor correctly of the facts, for his defeat of Wellington is a remarkable reversal of history. In Spain Wellington defeated Ney several times, as well as Massena and Soult and Victor and Junot and all the others."

The aide-de-camp's expression showed how much the speech nettled him.

"There can be no doubt of this victory," he said, and he added viciously, "Paris will hear the same day of the Emperor's entry into Brussels and of the final suppression of brigandage in the Nivernais."

"Oh," said Hornblower politely, with raised eyebrows. "You have brigands in the Nivernais? I commiserate with you, sir — but I met none in my travels through the country."

The aide-de-camp's mortification showed in his face more plainly than ever, and Hornblower sipped his wine and felt pleased with himself. What with the wine and his lightheaded elation he could find little to fear in the

prospect that soon he would be condemned to death. The aide-de-camp rose and clanked out of the cell, while Hornblower pushed back his chair and stretched his legs with an elaborate pose of well-being that was only partly assumed. They sat on in silence, himself and his three watchers, for some considerable time before the clash of the bars told of the door being opened afresh.

"The court is waiting. Come," said the aide-de-camp.

No sense of well-being could disguise from Hornblower the soreness of his feet. He tried to walk with dignity, but he could only limp grotesquely — he remembered how only yesterday he had found that the first hundred yards after a halt was acutely painful until his feet grew numb. And today it was far less than a hundred yards to the great hall of the château. As Hornblower and his escort came up onto ground level they met the Count, walking between two Hussars, and the groups paused for a moment.

"My son, my son," said the Count, "forgive me for what I have done."

There was nothing odd to Hornblower's mind in being addressed as 'son' by the Count. Quite automatically he made the equivalent reply.

"There is nothing for me to forgive, Father," he said, "but it is I who ask forgiveness."

What compelling motive was it that made him drop on his knee and bow his head? And why did an old free-thinker and Voltairean like the Count extend his hand to him?

"Bless you, my son. God bless you," he said.

Then he passed on, and when Hornblower looked back the grey head and spare figure turned the corner and disappeared.

"He is to be shot at dawn tomorrow," explained the aide-de-camp, as he opened the door into the great hall. Clausen at his table was now flanked by three officers on either side, and at each end of the table sat a junior officer with papers before them. Hornblower hobbled towards them, struggling and failing to walk with any dignity. When he reached the table the officer at one end rose.

"Your name?" he asked.

"Horatio, Lord Hornblower, Knight of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, Commodore in His Britannic Majesty's Navy."

The court exchanged glances; the officer at the other end of the table, who was apparently acting as secretary, scribbled furiously. The officer who had asked the question — clearly the prosecutor — turned to address the court.

"The prisoner has admitted his identity. And I understand that he had previously already done so, to General Count Clausen and to Captain Fleury. His appearance also corresponds with his published description. It is submitted, then, that his identity is proved."

Clausen looked round at his fellow judges, who nodded.

"It only remains, then," went on the prosecutor, "to submit to the court the verdict of a court martial held on June 10th, 1811, wherein this said 'Oratio 'Ornblower was condemned to death, he having purposely absented himself, on charges of piracy and violation of the laws of war; that sentence being confirmed on June 14th of the same year by His Imperial and Royal Majesty the Emperor. The judges will find attested copies before them. I must request that the death sentence be enforced."

Again Clausen looked at his fellow judges, and received a sixfold nod. Clausen looked down at the table before him, and drummed for a moment with his fingers before he looked up again. He was making himself meet Hornblower's eyes, and when he did Hornblower's strange clairvoyance told him of the repeated orders that had come from Bonaparte to Clausen — 'this Hornblower is to be taken and shot wherever found', or something to that effect. There was a decided apology in Clausen's blue eyes.

"It is the order of this military commission," said Clausen slowly, "that the said 'Oratio 'Ornblower suffer death by shooting at dawn tomorrow, immediately after the execution of the rebel Graçay."

"Pirates are hanged, Your Excellency," said the prosecutor.

"It is the order of this commission that 'Ornblower be shot," repeated Clausen. "Remove the prisoner. The commission is terminated."

There it was. Hornblower knew that every eye was on his back as he turned away and walked down the hall. He wished he could stride out, head up and shoulders back, but he could only hobble out, with halting steps and shoulders bent. He had had no opportunity to say a word in his own defence, and perhaps it was as well.

He might have stammered and hesitated, tongue-tied, for he had made no speech ready. He hobbled down the steps. At least he was to be shot and not hanged — but would the impact of the bullets on his chest be any less agonising than the tightening of the rope round his throat? He stumbled into the cell, which was now quite dark. He found the mattress and sat down on it. This was final defeat — he had not looked upon it in that light before. Bonaparte had won the last round of the struggle he had waged against him for twenty years. There was no arguing with bullets.

They brought in three candles, which brightly lit the cell. Yes, this was defeat. With bitter self-contempt Hornblower remembered so recently preening himself on his silly verbal victories over the aide-de-camp. Fool that he was! The Count condemned to death, and Marie — oh, Marie, Marie! He found actual tears in his eyes, and he hurriedly shifted his position on the mattress so that the watchers should not see them. Marie had loved him, and his own folly had killed her. His own folly and Bonaparte's superior genius. God, if only he could have the chance to live the last three months over again. Marie, Marie. He was going to sink his head into his hands, and checked himself when he remembered there were three pairs of eyes stolidly watching him. He must not have it said of himself that he died like a coward. For little Richard's sake, for Barbara's sake, that must not be. Barbara would love and cherish Richard, he could be sure of that. What would she think of her late husband? She would know — she would guess — why he had come to France, and she would guess at his infidelity. She would be deeply hurt. She would be blameless if she held no allegiance to his memory. She would marry again. Still young, beautiful, wealthy, well connected; of course she would. Oh God, that added to the pain, to think of Barbara in another man's arms, laughing with the joy of it. And yet he had lain in Marie's. Oh, Marie.

His nails were hurting his palms, so tightly were his fists clenched. He glanced round to find the eyes still on him. He must show no weakness. If that thunderstorm had not burst and flooded the Loire, he would still be at liberty, Marie would still be alive, the rebellion would still be active. It had called for the direct interposition of fate as well as Bonaparte's genius to defeat him. Those battles that had been fought in Belgium — maybe the bulletins had lied about Bonaparte's victories. Maybe they were not decisive. Maybe Clausen's division, kept inactive in the Nivernais, might have made them decisive had it been present. Maybe — what a fool he was to try to comfort himself with these vain delusions! He was going to die, he was going to solve the mystery that he had only sometimes allowed himself to think about. By this time tomorrow — in a few hours — he would have gone the road so many others had trodden before him.

They were lighting fresh candles; the old ones were burned to stubs. Was the night then passing so fast? Dawn would be here soon, soon — day breaks early in June. He met the eyes of one of the watchers, although the latter tried to evade his glance. He tried to force himself to smile, and knew instantly that the smile was lopsided and forced. A rattle outside the door. That could not be that they were coming for him already! Yes it was, the bars were clashing, the door was opening, the aide-de-camp was entering. Hornblower tried to rise to his feet, and to his horror found that his legs were too weak to support him. He made another effort to stand, unavailing again. He must sit and let them drag him out like a coward. He forced himself to raise his chin and look at the aide-de-camp, trying not to make it the fixed and glassy stare he knew it to be.

"It is not death," said the aide-de-camp.

Hornblower looked; he tried to speak, but no word came from his open mouth. And the aide-de-camp was trying to force a smile too — an ingratiating smile.

"There is news from Belgium," said the aide-de-camp. "The Emperor has been defeated in a great battle. At a place called Waterloo. Already Wellington and Blücher are over the frontier and marching on Paris. The Emperor is there already and the Senate are demanding that he abdicate again."

Hornblower's heart was pounding so hard that he was still incapable of speech.

"His Excellency the General," went on the aide-de-camp, "has decided that in this case the executions are not to take place this morning."

Hornblower found speech at last.

"I will not insist," he said.

The aide-de-camp went on to say something about the restoration of His Most Christian Majesty, but Hornblower did not listen to him. He was wondering about Richard. And Barbara.

The Point and the Edge

C. S. Forester
(1963)

The time is 1819, with Hornblower a senior captain on half pay. His restlessness, as always, demands exercise, and he has been for long taking fencing lessons; his memories of a dozen hand-to-hand fights are now colored by the strengthened realization of how the point will always beat the edge when skillfully used. England at this time is in the depths of a postwar slump; people are starving through lack of employment, and despite the savage laws, which enact that a man may be hanged for the theft of five shillings, crime is rampant.

Hornblower has been invited to dine at Portsmouth on the flagship of a friend – say Lord Exmouth – who is fortunate enough to have employment in the exiguous navy that England still maintains. Hornblower travels down with Barbara, and puts up at the George. In the late afternoon Barbara looks him over, sees that his civilian clothes are in good order, that he is wearing his gold watch and chain, his gold-topped ebony walking stick, and sees him off, while she spends – like a dutiful wife – a dull evening alone.

Exmouth and Hornblower, of course, spend a pleasant evening, discussing the state of the nation and naval policy; Exmouth, rubbing his hands with glee, tells Hornblower of the revolution in recruiting methods nowadays. No flamboyant posters, no press gangs – starving seamen stand in line, waiting for the chance to enlist in the Royal Navy. Captains can pick and choose. Dinner over, Hornblower, fashionable clothes, gold-topped walking stick and all, starts back to the George. At a dark corner a man springs out at him. He is barefooted, wearing only a tattered shirt and trousers, and starving. In his hand is a branch torn from a tree – his entire stock in trade, his entire working capital. Threatening Hornblower with this improvised club he demands Hornblower's money. This footpad is actually risking his life, risking hanging, for a meal.

Hornblower's liberal feelings have no time to assert themselves. He reacts violently against compulsion, and without a thought he lunges with his walking stick, a quick, instant thrust. The point beats the edge – it lands on the footpad's cheek, half stunning him, so that he reels back momentarily incapacitated. Hornblower cracks him over the wrist so that he drops his club and is at Hornblower's mercy. Hornblower could now call the watch and have this man seized and taken away to certain death, but he naturally cannot bring himself to do so. Instead he drives him before him back to Exmouth's ship. "My Lord, would you please do me one more favor? Would you be so kind as to enlist this man into your crew?"



A HORATIO HORNBLOWER TALE OF THE SEA

C. S. FORESTER

HORNBLOWER IN THE WEST INDIES

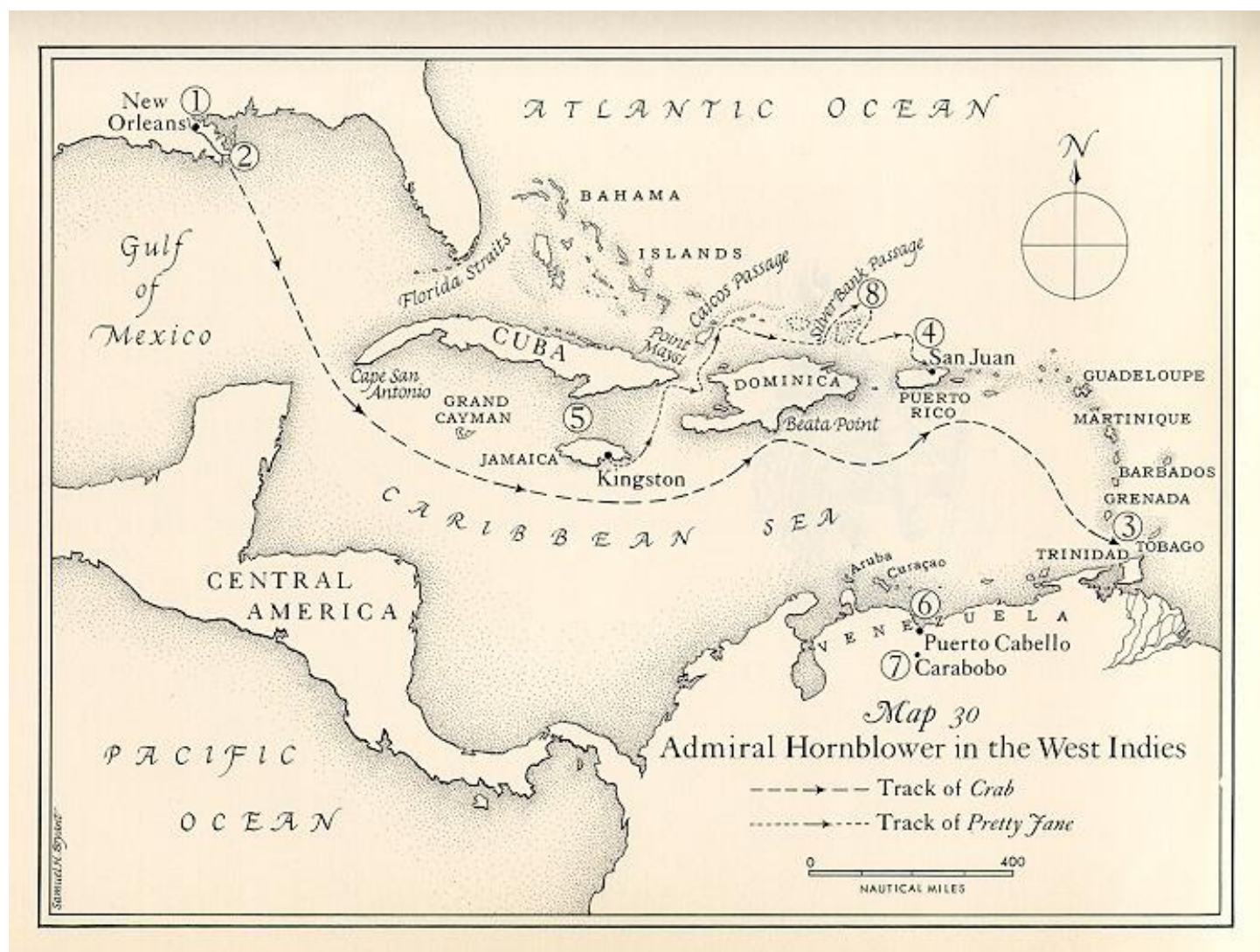
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Admiral Hornblower in the West Indies May, 1821 to October, 1823

Map 30 - General Map

- ① Meeting with *Daring*.
- ② Decision taken for new course.
- ③ Second meeting with *Daring*.
- ④ *Clorinda* and *Esrella del Sur*.
- ⑤ The Bewildered Pirates.
- ⑥ *Clorinda* and *Bride of Abydos*.
- ⑦ Battles of Carabobo.
- ⑧ Hurricane strikes.

Hornblower in the West Indies

(Published in the US as: "Admiral Hornblower in the West Indies")

C. S. Forester
(1958)

ST ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY

Rear admiral Lord Hornblower, for all his proud appointment as Commander-in-Chief of His Majesty's Ships and Vessels in the West Indies, paid his official visit to New Orleans in HM schooner *Crab*, only mounting two six-pounders and with a crew of no more than sixteen men, not counting supernumeraries.

His Britannic Majesty's Consul-General at New Orleans, Mr Cloudesley Sharpe, remarked on the fact.

"I hardly expected to see Your Lordship in so diminutive a craft," he said, looking round him. He had driven down in his carriage to the pier against which *Crab* was lying, and had sent his liveried footman to the gangway to announce him, and it had been something of an anticlimax to be received by the trilling of the only two bosun's calls that *Crab* could muster, and to find on the quarterdeck to receive him, besides the Admiral and his flag-lieutenant, a mere lieutenant in command.

"The exigencies of the service, sir," explained Hornblower. "But if I may lead the way below I can offer you whatever hospitality this temporary flagship of mine affords."

Mr Sharpe — surely there never was a name that accorded so ill with its possessor's figure, for he was a fat man, a mountain of puffy flesh — squeezed himself into a chair at the table in the pleasant little cabin, and replied to Hornblower's suggestion of breakfast with the statement that he had already broken his fast. He obviously had the gravest doubts as to the quality of any breakfast that could be served in this little ship. Gerard, the flag-lieutenant, made himself inconspicuous in a corner of the cabin, notebook and pencil on his knee, while Hornblower reopened the conversation.

"*Phoebe* was struck by lightning off Morant Cape," said Hornblower. "She was the ship I had planned to come in. *Clorinda* was already in dock, refitting. And *Roebuck*'s off Curacao, keeping an eye on the Dutchmen — there's a brisk trade in arms with Venezuela at present."

"Well I know that," said Sharpe.

"Those are my three frigates," said Hornblower. "With the arrangements all made I judged it better to come in this schooner rather than not to come at all."

"How are the mighty fallen!" was Mr Sharpe's comment. "Your Lordship, a commander-in-chief, with no more than three frigates and half a dozen sloops and schooners."

"Fourteen sloops and schooners, sir," corrected Hornblower. "They are very desirable craft for the duties I have to perform."

"No doubt, My Lord," said Sharpe. "But I can remember the days when the commander-in-chief on the West India Station disposed of a squadron of ships of the line."

"That was in time of war, sir," explained Hornblower, recalling the verbal comments of the First Sea Lord in the interview when he had been offered this command. "The House of Commons would sooner allow the Royal Navy to rot at its moorings than reimpose the income tax."

"At any rate, Your Lordship has arrived," said Sharpe. "Your Lordship exchanged salutes with Fort St Philip?"

"Gun for gun, as your despatch informed me had been arranged."

"Excellent!" said Sharpe.

It had been a strange little formality; all hands on board *Crab* had lined the rail, very properly, during the salute, and the officers had stood at attention on the quarterdeck, but 'all hands' amounted to very little with

four men manning the saluting gun, and one at the signal halliards and one at the helm. It had poured with rain, too; Hornblower's glittering uniform had clung damply around him.

"Your Lordship made use of the services of a steam tug?"

"Yes, by George!" exclaimed Hornblower.

"A remarkable experience for Your Lordship, apparently?"

"Indeed, yes," said Hornblower. "I —"

He held himself back from giving utterance to all his thoughts on that subject; they would lead to too many exciting irrelevancies. But a steam tug had brought *Crab* against the hundred miles of current from the sea to New Orleans between dawn and dusk, arriving at the very minute the tug captain had predicted. And here was New Orleans, crowded not merely with ocean-going sailing ships, but also with a fleet of long, narrow steamers, manoeuvring out into the stream and against piers with a facility (thanks to their two paddlewheels) that even *Crab* with her handy fore and aft rig could not attempt to emulate. And with a thrash of those paddlewheels they would go flying upstream with a rapidity almost unbelievable.

"Steam has laid open a continent, My Lord," said Sharpe, echoing Hornblower's thoughts. "A veritable empire. Thousands and thousands of miles of navigable waterways. The population of the Mississippi valley will be counted in millions within a few years."

Hornblower remembered discussions at home, when he was a half-pay officer awaiting his promotion to flag rank, when the 'steam kettles' had been mentioned. Even the possibility of ocean-going ships propelled by steam had been suggested, and had been properly laughed to scorn — it would mean the ruin of good seamanship. Hornblower had not been quite so sure on either point, but he had been careful to keep his opinions to himself, having no desire to be regarded as a dangerous crank. He did not want to be drawn into any similar discussions now, not even with a mere civilian.

"What intelligence do you have for me, sir?" he asked.

"A considerable amount, My Lord."

Mr Sharpe produced a fold of papers from his tail pocket.

"Here are the latest advices from New Granada — more recent I expect than anything you have had. The insurgents —"

Mr Sharpe entered into a rapid exposition of the military and political situation in Central America. The Spanish colonies were entering into the final stage of their struggle for independence.

"It cannot be long before His Majesty's Government recognises that independence," said Sharpe. "And our Minister in Washington informs me that the Government of the United States meditates a similar recognition. It remains to be seen what the Holy Alliance will have to say on that score, My Lord."

Europe under the rule of absolute monarchy would turn a jaundiced eye upon the establishment of a whole new series of republics, no doubt. But it hardly mattered what Europe had to say, as long as the Royal Navy — even the depleted peacetime navy — controlled the seas, and the two English-speaking governments continued in amity.

"Cuba shows small signs of restlessness," went on Sharpe, "and I have information of the issue of further letters of marque by the Spanish Government to vessels sailing from Havana —"

Letters of marque were one of the principal sources of Hornblower's troubles. They were being issued by insurgent and nationalist governments alike, to prey upon ships flying the old flags and the new, and the bearers of letters of marque turned pirates in the twinkling of an eye in the absence of legitimate prizes and efficient prize courts. Thirteen of Hornblower's fourteen small craft were scattered over the Caribbean keeping an eye on the activities of the privateers.

"I have prepared duplicates of my reports for Your Lordship's information," concluded Sharpe. "I have them here to give to Your Lordship, along with copies of the complaints of the master-mariners concerned."

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower, while Gerard took the papers into his charge.

"Now for the slave trade, with Your Lordship's permission," went on Sharpe, opening a fresh series of papers.

The slave trade was as acute a question as piracy, even more acute in some ways, because the Anti-Slavery Society in England commanded a great deal of powerful and vocal support in both Houses of Parliament, and would raise an even more violent to-do about a cargo of slaves run into Havana or Rio de Janeiro, than a shipping company pestered by privateers.

"At this moment, My Lord," said Sharpe, "a raw hand newly brought from the Slave Coast is selling for eighty pounds in the Havana baracoons — and he cost no more than a pound in trade goods at Whydah. Those profits are tempting, My Lord."

"Naturally," said Hornblower.

"I have reason to believe that ships of both British and American registry are engaged in the traffic, My Lord." "So have I."

The First Sea Lord had tapped ominously on the table in that interview when touching on this part of his instructions to Hornblower. Under the new law British subjects who engaged in the slave trade could be hanged, and the ships seized. But care would be necessary in dealing with ships flying American colours. If they refused to heave-to on the high seas for examination the utmost tact would have to be employed. To shoot away an American spar or to kill an American citizen would mean trouble. America had gone to war with England only nine years before over matters very similar.

"We want no trouble, My Lord," said Sharpe. He had a pair of hard, intelligent, grey eyes deep-set in his puffy face.

"I am aware of that, sir."

"And in this connection, My Lord, I must employ special emphasis in calling Your Lordship's attention to a vessel making ready for sea here in New Orleans."

"Which ship is this?"

"She is visible from the deck, My Lord. In fact" — Sharpe struggled out of his chair and walked to the cabin window — "Yes, there she is. What do you make of her, My Lord?"

Hornblower looked out from beside Sharpe. He saw a beautiful ship of eight hundred tons or more. Her fine lines, the lofty rake of her masts, the wide spread of her yards, were all clear indications of speed, for which some sacrifice of cargo-carrying capacity had been made. She was flush decked, with six painted gun-ports along each side. American shipbuilders had always evinced a tendency towards building fast ships, but this was an advanced example of the type.

"Are there guns behind those ports?" asked Hornblower.

"Twelve pounders, My Lord."

Even in these days of peace it was not unusual for merchant vessels to carry guns, whether for voyages in the West Indies or the East, but this was a heavier armament than usual.

"She was built as a privateer," said Hornblower.

"Quite right, My Lord. She's the *Daring*; she was built during the war and made one voyage and took six prizes from us before the Treaty of Ghent. And now, My Lord?"

"She could be a slaver."

"Your Lordship is right again, of course."

That heavy armament would be desirable in a slaver anchoring up a West African river liable to a treacherous attack; she could easily have a slave deck with that flush build; her speed would minimise deaths among the slaves during the Middle Passage; her lack of capacity for bulk cargo would be unimportant in a slaver.

"Is she a slaver?" asked Hornblower.

"Apparently not, My Lord, despite her appearance. She is being chartered to carry a great many men, all the same."

"I would like you to explain further, if you please, Mr Sharpe."

"I can only tell Your Lordship the facts as disclosed to me. She is under charter to a French General, Count Cambronne."

"Cambronne? Cambronne? The man who commanded the Imperial Guard at Waterloo?"

"That's the man, My Lord."

"The man who said, 'The Old Guard dies but does not surrender'?"

"Yes, My Lord, although report says he actually used a ruder expression. He was wounded and taken prisoner, but he did not die."

"So I have heard. But what does he want with this ship?"

"It is all open and above board, apparently. After the war, Boney's Old Guard formed an organisation for mutual aid. In 1816 they decided to become colonists — Your Lordship must have heard something about the project?"

"Hardly anything."

"They came out and seized an area of land on the coast of Texas, the province of Mexico adjacent to this State of Louisiana."

"I have heard about it, but that is the extent of my knowledge."

"It was easy enough to start, with Mexico in the throes of her revolt against Spain. There was no opposition to them, as you understand, My Lord. But it was not so easy to continue. I cannot imagine that soldiers of the Old Guard would ever make good agriculturists. And on that pestilential coast — It is a series of dreary lagoons, with hardly an inhabitant."

"The scheme failed?"

"As Your Lordship might expect. Half of them died of malaria and yellow fever, and half of the rest simply starved. Cambronne has come out from France to carry the survivors home, five hundred of them. The Government of the United States never liked the project, as Your Lordship can imagine, and now the insurgent government is strong enough to take exception to the presence on the shores of Mexico of a large body of trained soldiers, however peaceable their intentions. Your Lordship can see Cambronne's story could be perfectly true."

"Yes."

An eight-hundred-ton ship, equipped as a slaver, could pack five hundred soldiers on board and feed them during a long passage.

"Cambronne is stocking her largely with rice and water — slave rations, My Lord, but the best adapted to the purpose for that very reason."

The slave trade had had long experience of how to keep alive a close-packed body of men.

"If Cambronne is going to take them back to France I should do nothing to hinder him," said Hornblower.

"Rather on the contrary."

"Exactly, My Lord."

Sharpe's grey eyes met Hornblower's in an expressionless stare. The presence of five hundred trained soldiers afloat in the Gulf of Mexico was very much the concern of the British Admiral commanding in chief, when the shores of the Gulf and of the Caribbean were in as much of a turmoil as at present. Bolivar and the other Spanish-American insurgents would pay a high price for their services in the present war. Or someone might be meditating the conquest of Haiti, or a piratical descent upon Havana. Any sort of filibustering expedition was possible. The actual Bourbon Government in France might be looking for a pie in which to put a finger, for that matter, a chance to snap up a colony and confront the English-speaking powers with a *fait accompli*.

"I'll keep my eye on them until they are safely out of the way," said Hornblower.

"I have called Your Lordship's attention officially to the matter," said Sharpe.

It would be one more drain upon Hornblower's limited resources for the policing of the Caribbean; he already was wondering which of his few craft he could detach to observe the Gulf Coast.

"And now, My Lord," said Sharpe, "it is my duty to discuss the details of Your Lordship's stay here in New Orleans. I have arranged a programme of official calls for Your Lordship. Does Your Lordship speak French?"

"Yes," said Hornblower, fighting down the urge to say, 'My Lordship does.'

"That is excellent, because French is commonly spoken among good society here. Your Lordship will, of course, be calling upon the naval authorities here, and upon the Governor. There is an evening reception planned for Your Lordship. My carriage is, of course, at Your Lordship's disposition."

"That is extremely kind of you, sir."

"No kindness at all, My Lord. It is a great pleasure to me to assist in making Your Lordship's visit to New Orleans as enjoyable as possible. I have here a list of the prominent people Your Lordship will meet, along with brief notes regarding them. Perhaps it might be as well if I explain it to Your Lordship's flag-lieutenant?"

"Certainly," said Hornblower; he was able now to relax his attention a little; Gerard was a good flag-lieutenant and had supported his commander-in-chief very satisfactorily during the ten months that Hornblower had held

command. He supplied some of the social flair that Hornblower was too indifferent to acquire. The business was rapidly settled.

"Very well, then, My Lord," said Sharpe. "Now I can take my leave. I will have the pleasure of seeing Your Lordship again at the Governor's house."

"I am deeply obliged to you, sir."

This city of New Orleans was an enchanting place. Hornblower was bubbling internally with excitement at the prospect of exploring it. Nor was he the only one, as appeared as soon as Sharpe had taken his leave, when Lieutenant Harcourt, captain of the *Crab*, intercepted Hornblower on the quarterdeck.

"Pardon, My Lord," he said, saluting. "Are there any orders for me?"

There could be no doubt about what Harcourt had in mind. Forward of the mainmast most of the crew of *Crab* were congregated together looking eagerly aft — in a tiny ship like this everyone was aware of everyone else's business, and discipline ran on lines different from those in a big ship.

"Can you trust your men to be steady on shore, Mr Harcourt?" asked Hornblower.

"Yes, My Lord."

Hornblower looked forward again. The hands looked remarkably smart — they had been labouring on making new clothes for themselves all the way from Kingston, from the moment when it was announced that *Crab* would have the astonishing distinction of flying the Admiral's flag. They were wearing neat blue frock-jumpers and white ducks and shady straw hats; Hornblower saw their self-conscious poses as he glanced towards them — they knew perfectly well what was being discussed. These were peacetime sailors, voluntarily enlisted: Hornblower had had twenty years of wartime service with pressed crews who could never be trusted not to desert, and even now he had consciously to adjust his mind to the change.

"If you could give me notice of when you intend to sail, sir — I mean My Lord," said Harcourt.

"Until dawn tomorrow in any case," said Hornblower coming to a sudden decision; his day was full until then.

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Would the grogshops of New Orleans waterfront be any different from the grogshops of Kingston or Port of Spain?

"Now perhaps I can have my breakfast, Mr Gerard," said Hornblower. "Unless you have any objection?"

"Aye aye, My Lord," answered Gerard, carefully ignoring the sarcasm. He had long learned that his Admiral objected to nothing in the world as much as having to be active before breakfast.

It was after breakfast that a coloured man, trotting barefooted along the pier, came bearing on his head a basket of fruit which he handed in at the gangway at the moment when Hornblower was about to start off on his official round of calls.

"There's a note with it, My Lord," said Gerard. "Shall I open it?"

"Yes."

"It is from Mr Sharpe," reported Gerard, after breaking the seal, and then some seconds later, "I think you had better read this yourself, My Lord."

Hornblower took the thing impatiently.

My Lord [read the note],

I have imposed upon myself the pleasure of sending some fruit to Your Lordship.

It is my duty to inform Your Lordship that I have just received information that the freight which Count Cambronne brought out here from France, and which has been lying in bond in charge of the United States Customs Services, will shortly be transferred by lighter through the agency of a bonded carrier to the *Daring*. As Your Lordship will, of course, understand, this is an indication that the *Daring* will be sailing soon. My information is that the amount of bonded freight is very considerable, and I am endeavouring to discover in what it consists. Perhaps Your Lordship might, from Your Lordship's coign of vantage, find an opportunity of observing the nature of this freight.

I am, with great respect,

Your Lordship's humble and obedient servant,
Cloudesley Sharpe,
HBM's Consul-General at New Orleans.

Now what could Cambronne have possibly brought from France in large amount that could be legitimately needed for the purpose he had avowed when he chartered the *Daring*? Not personal effects, certainly. Not food or liquor — he could pick those up cheaply in New Orleans. Then what? Warm-weather clothing would be a possible explanation. Those Guardsmen might well need it when returning to France from the Gulf of Mexico. It was possible. But a French General, with five hundred men of the Imperial Guard at his disposal, would bear the closest watching when the Caribbean was in such a turmoil. It would be a great help to know what kind of freight he was shipping.

"Mr Harcourt!"

"Sir — My Lord!"

"I would like your company in the cabin for a moment, if you please."

The young lieutenant stood at attention in the cabin a little apprehensively waiting to hear what his Admiral had to say.

"This isn't a reprimand, Mr Harcourt," said Hornblower testily. "Not even an admonition."

"Thank you, My Lord," said Harcourt, relaxing.

Hornblower took him to the cabin window and pointed out through it, just as Sharpe had done previously.

"That's the *Daring*," he said. "An ex-privateer, now under charter to a French General."

Harcourt looked his astonishment.

"That is the case," went on Hornblower. "And today she will be taking on some cargo out of bond. It will be brought round to her out of bond by lighter."

"Yes, My Lord."

"I want to know as much about that cargo as possible."

"Yes, My Lord."

"Naturally, I do not want the world to know that I am interested. I want nobody to know unnecessarily."

"Yes, My Lord. I could use a telescope from here and see a good deal, with luck."

"Very true. You can take note of whether it is bales or boxes or bags. How many there are of each. From the tackle employed you can guess at the weights. You can do all that."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

"Make careful note of all you see."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Hornblower fixed his eyes on his youthful flag-captain's face, trying to estimate his discretion. He remembered so well the emphatic words of the First Sea Lord regarding the necessity for the utmost tenderness regarding American susceptibilities. Hornblower decided the young man could be trusted.

"Now, Mr Harcourt," he said, "pay special attention to what I have to say. The more I know about that cargo the better. But don't go at it like a bull at a gate. Should an opportunity present itself for finding out what it is, you must seize upon it. I can't imagine what that opportunity may be, but opportunities come to those who are ready for them."

Long, long ago, Barbara had said to him that good fortune is the portion of those who merit it.

"I understand, My Lord."

"If the slightest hint of this gets out — if the Americans or the French get to know what you are doing — you will be sorry you were ever born, Mr Harcourt."

"Yes, My Lord."

"I've no use for a dashing young officer in this connection, Mr Harcourt. I want someone with ingenuity, someone with cunning. You are sure you understand?"

"Yes, My Lord."

Hornblower at last took his eyes from Harcourt's face. He himself had been a dashing young officer once. Now he had far more sympathy than ever before with the older men who had entrusted him with enterprises. A senior officer had perforce to trust his juniors, while still carrying the ultimate responsibility. If Harcourt should blunder, if he should be guilty of some indiscretion leading to a diplomatic protest, it would certainly be true that he might wish he had never been born — Hornblower would see to that. But Hornblower would be

wishing he himself had never been born, too. But there was no useful purpose to be served in pointing that out.

"That is all, then, Mr Harcourt."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Come on, Mr Gerard. We're late already."

The upholstery of Mr Sharpe's carriage was of green satin, and the carriage was admirably sprung, so that although it lurched and swayed over the uneven street surfaces, it did not jolt or jerk. Yet after five minutes of lurching and swaying — the carriage had been standing for some time in the hot May sun — Hornblower felt himself turning as green as the upholstery. The Rue Royale, the Place d'armes, the Cathedral, received hardly a glance from him. He welcomed the halts despite the fact that each halt meant a formal meeting with strangers, the kind of meeting he disliked most heartily. He stood and gulped in the humid air during the blessed moments between descending from the carriage and entering in under the ornate porticoes that stood to welcome him. It had never occurred to him before that an Admiral's full dress uniform might with advantage be made of something thinner than broadcloth, and he had worn his broad red ribbon and his glittering star far too often by now to feel the slightest pleasure in displaying it.

At the Naval Headquarters he drank an excellent Madeira; the General gave him a heavy Marsala; at the Governor's mansion he was given a tall drink which had been iced (presumably with ice sent down during the winter from New England and preserved in an icehouse until nearly at midsummer it was more precious than gold) extraordinarily to the point where actual frost was visible on the tumbler. The delicious cold contents of that tumbler disappeared rapidly, and the tumbler was as rapidly refilled. He checked himself abruptly when he found himself talking a little too loudly and dogmatically regarding some point of trivial importance. He was glad to catch Gerard's eye and withdraw as gracefully as he could; he was also glad that Gerard seemed perfectly cool and sober and had charge of the cardcase, dropping the necessary number of cards into the silver trays that the coloured butlers held out to receive them. By the time he reached Sharpe's house he was glad to see a friendly face — friendly even though it was only that morning that he had first set eyes on it.

"It is an hour before the guests are due to arrive, My Lord," said Sharpe. "Would Your Lordship care for a short rest?"

"I would indeed," said Hornblower.

Mr Sharpe's house had a contrivance which merited much attention. It was a douche bath — Hornblower only knew the French name for it. It was in a corner of the bathroom, floored and walled with the most excellent teak; from the ceiling hung an apparatus of perforated zinc, and from this hung a bronze chain. When Hornblower stood under this apparatus and pulled the chain a deluge of delicious cold water came streaming down on him from some unseen reservoir above. It was as refreshing as ever it had been to stand under the wash-deck pump on the deck of a ship at sea, with the additional advantage of employing fresh water — and in his present condition, after his experiences of the day, it was doubly refreshing. Hornblower stood under the raining water for a long time, reviving with every second. He made a mental note to install a similar contrivance at Smallbridge House if ever he found himself at home again.

A coloured valet in livery stood by with towels to save him from the reheating exertion of drying himself, and while he was being dabbed a knock at the door heralded Gerard's entrance.

"I sent to the ship for a fresh shirt for you, My Lord," he said.

Gerard was really displaying intelligence; Hornblower put on the fresh shirt with gratitude, but it was with distaste that he tightened his stook and pulled on his heavy uniform coat again. He hung the red ribbon over his shoulder, adjusted his star, and was ready to face the next situation. The darkness of evening was descending, but it had not brought much relief from the heat; on the contrary, the drawing-room of Mr Sharpe's house was brightly lit with wax candles that made it feel like an oven. Sharpe was awaiting him, wearing a black coat; his ruffled shirt made his bulky form appear larger than ever. Mrs Sharpe, sweeping in in turquoise blue, was of much the same size; she curtsied deeply in response to Hornblower's bow when Sharpe presented him, and made him welcome to the house in a French whose soft tang rang pleasantly on Hornblower's ears.

"A little refreshment, My Lord?" asked Sharpe.

"Not at present, thank you, sir," said Hornblower hastily.

"We are expecting twenty-eight guests beside Your Lordship and Mr Gerard," said Sharpe. "Some of them Your Lordship already met during Your Lordship's official calls today. In addition there are —"

Hornblower did his best to keep the list of names in his mind with mental labels attached. Gerard, who came in and found himself a secluded chair, listened intently.

"And there will be Cambronne, of course," said Sharpe.

"Indeed?"

"I could hardly give a dinner party of this magnitude without inviting the most distinguished foreign visitor, after Your Lordship, present in this city."

"Of course not," agreed Hornblower.

Yet six years of peace had hardly stilled the prejudices established during twenty years of war, there was something a little unnatural about the prospect of meeting a French General on friendly terms, especially the late commander-in-chief of Bonaparte's Imperial Guard, and the meeting might be a little strained because Bonaparte was under lock and key in St Helena and complaining bitterly about it.

"The French Consul-General will accompany him," said Sharpe. "And there will be the Dutch Consul-General, the Swedish —"

The list seemed interminable; there was only just time to complete it before the first of the guests was announced. Substantial citizens and their substantial wives; the naval and military officers whom he had already met, and their ladies; the diplomatic officers; soon even that vast drawing-room was crowded, men bowing and women curtsying. Hornblower straightened up from a bow to find Sharpe at his elbow again.

"I have the honour of making two distinguished figures acquainted with each other," he said, in French.

"Son Excellence Rear Admiral Milord Hornblower, Chevalier de l'Ordre Militaire du Bain. Son Excellence le Lieutenant-General le Comte de Cambronne, Grand Cordon de la Legion d'Honneur."

Hornblower could not help being impressed, even at this moment, at the neat way in which Sharpe had evaded the thorny question of whom to introduce to whom, a French General and count and an English Admiral and peer. Cambronne was an immensely tall bean-pole of a man. Across one lean cheek and the beaky nose ran a purple scar — perhaps the wound he had received at Waterloo; perhaps a wound received at Austerlitz or Jena or any other of the battles in which the French Army had overthrown nations. He was wearing a blue uniform covered with gold lace, girt about with the watered red silk ribbon of the Legion of Honour, a vast plaque of gold on his left breast.

"Enchanted to make your acquaintance, sir," said Hornblower in his best French.

"No more enchanted than I am to make yours, milord," replied Cambronne. He had a cold, greeny-grey eye with a twinkle in it; a grey cat's-whisker moustache adorned his upper lip.

"The Baroness de Vautour," said Sharpe. "The Baron de Vautour, His Most Christian Majesty's Consul-General."

Hornblower bowed and said again that he was enchanted. His Most Christian Majesty was Louis XVIII of France, using the Papal title conferred on his house centuries earlier.

"The Count is being mischievous," said Vautour. He indicated Cambronne's star. "He is wearing the Grand Eagle, given him during the last régime. Officially the Grand Cordon has been substituted, as our host very properly said."

Vautour called attention to his own star, a more modest affair. Cambronne's displayed an immense eagle of gold, the badge of the now defunct French Empire.

"I won this on the field of battle," said Cambronne.

"Don Alphonso de Versage," said Sharpe. "His Most Catholic Majesty's Consul-General."

This was the representative of Spain, then. A word or two with him regarding this pending cession of Florida might be informative, but Hornblower had hardly time to exchange formal courtesies before another presentation was being made. It was some time before Hornblower had a breathing space, and could look round the pretty scene in the candlelight, with the uniforms and the broadcloth coats, the bare arms and shoulders of the women in their bright gowns and flashing jewellery, and the two Sharpes moving unobtrusively through the throng marshalling their guests in order of precedence. The entrance of the Governor and his lady was the signal for the announcement of dinner.

The dining-room was as vast as the drawing-room; the table with covers for thirty-two stood comfortably in it with ample room all round for the numerous footmen. The candlelight was more subdued here, but it glittered impressively on the silver which crowded the long table. Hornblower, seated between the Governor's lady and Mrs Sharpe, reminded himself that he must be alert and careful regarding his table manners; it was the more necessary to be alert because he had to speak French on one side of him and English on the other. He looked dubiously at the six different wine glasses that stood at each place — the sherry was already being poured into the first of the glasses. He could see Cambronne seated between two pretty girls and obviously making himself pleasant to both of them. He did not look as if he had a care in the world; if he were meditating a filibustering expedition it did not weigh very heavily on his mind.

A steaming plate of turtle soup, thick with gobbets of green fat. This was to be a dinner served in the Continental fashion which had come in after Waterloo, with no hodge-podge of dishes set out on the table for the guests to help themselves. He spooned cautiously at the hot soup, and applied himself to making small talk with his dinner partners. Dish succeeded dish, and soon he had to face in the hot room the delicate question of etiquette as to whether it was more ungentlemanly to mop the sweat from his face or to leave it there, flowing and visible; his discomfort decided him in the end to mop, furtively. Now Sharpe was catching his eye, and he had to rise to his feet, striving to make his stupefied brain work while the buzz of conversation died down. He raised his glass.

"The President of the United States," he said; he had been about to continue, idiotically, 'Long may he reign.' He checked himself with a jerk and went on, "Long may the great nation of which he is President enjoy prosperity and the international amity of which this gathering is symbolic."

The toast was drunk with acclaim, with nothing said about the fact that over half the continent Spaniards and Spanish-Americans were busy killing each other. He sat down and mopped again. Now Cambronne was on his feet.

"His Britannic Majesty George the Fourth, King of Great Britain and Ireland."

The toast was drunk and now it was Hornblower's turn again, as evidenced by Sharpe's glance. He stood up, glass in hand, and began the long list.

"His Most Christian Majesty. His Most Catholic Majesty. His Most Faithful Majesty." That disposed of France and Spain and Portugal. "His Majesty the King of the Netherlands."

For the life of him he could not remember who came next. But Gerard caught his despairing eye and gave a significant jerk of his thumb.

"His Majesty the King of Sweden," gulped Hornblower. "His Majesty the King of Prussia."

A reassuring nod from Gerard told him that he had now included all the nations represented, and he plucked the rest of his speech out of the whirlpool of his mind.

"Long may Their Majesties reign, in increasing honour and glory."

Well, that was over, and he could sit down again. But now the Governor was on his feet, speaking in rhetorical phrases, and it broke in upon Hornblower's dulled intelligence that his own health was the next to be drunk. He tried to listen. He was aware of keen glances shot at him from around the table when the Governor alluded to the defence of this city of New Orleans from the 'misguided hordes' who had assailed it in vain — the allusion was perhaps inevitable even though it was over six years since the battle — and he tried to force a smile. At long last the Governor reached his end.

"His Lordship Admiral Hornblower, and I couple with his name a toast to the British Navy."

Hornblower climbed back upon his feet as the approving murmur of the company died down.

"Thank you for this unexpected honour," he said, and gulped as he sought for further words. "And to have my name coupled with that of the great navy in which it has been my privilege to serve so long is an additional honour for which to thank you."

The ladies were all rising, now that he had sat down, and he stood again while they withdrew. The highly trained footmen swept the table clear of its accessories in a trice, and the men gathered to one end of the table as the decanter was put into circulation. The glasses were filled as Sharpe brought one of the merchants present into the conversation with a question about the cotton crop. It was safe ground from which to make brief and cautious sorties upon the much more debatable ground of world conditions. But only a few minutes

later the butler came in and murmured something to Sharpe, who turned to convey the news he brought to the French Consul-General. Vautour rose to his feet with an expression of dismay.

"Perhaps you will accept my excuses, sir," he said. "I much regret the necessity."

"No more than I regret it, Baron," said Sharpe. "I trust it is only a slight indisposition."

"I trust so," said Vautour.

"The Baroness finds herself indisposed," explained Sharpe to the company. "I am sure you gentlemen will all join me in hoping, as I said, that the indisposition is slight, and regretting that it involves the loss to us of the Baron's charming company."

There was a sympathetic murmur, and Vautour turned to Cambronne.

"Shall I send back the carriage for you, Count?" he asked.

Cambronne pulled at his cat's-whisker moustache.

"Perhaps it might be better if I came with you," he said. "Much as I regret leaving this delightful assembly."

The two Frenchmen took their leave, after polite farewells.

"It is a great pleasure having made your acquaintance, milord," said Cambronne, bowing to Hornblower. The stiffness of his bow was mitigated by the twinkle in his eye.

"It has been a profound experience to meet so distinguished a soldier of the late Empire," replied Hornblower. The Frenchmen were escorted out of the room by Sharpe, voluble in his regrets.

"Your glasses need refilling, gentlemen," said Sharpe on his return.

There was nothing Hornblower disliked more than drinking large glasses of port in a hot and humid room, even though he now found himself free to discuss the Florida question with the Spanish Consul-General. He was glad when Sharpe made the move to rejoin the ladies. Somewhere within earshot of the drawing-room a string orchestra was playing, but luckily in a subdued manner, so that Hornblower was spared much of the irritation that he usually suffered when he was compelled to listen to music with his tone-deaf ear. He found himself sitting next to one of the pretty young women beside whom Cambronne had been sitting at dinner. In reply to her questions he was forced to admit that on this, his first day, he had seen almost nothing of the city of New Orleans, but the admission led to a discussion of other places he had visited. Two cups of coffee, poured for him by a footman passing round the drawing-room, cleared his head a little; the young woman was attentive and listened well, and nodded sympathetically when the conversation revealed that Hornblower had left behind, at the call of duty, a wife and a ten-year-old son in England.

Gradually the night wore on, and at last the Governor and his lady rose to their feet and the party was over. There were the last few weary minutes of awkward conversation as the carriages were announced one by one, and then Sharpe returned to the drawing-room after escorting the last of the guests to the door.

"A successful evening, I fancy. I trust Your Lordship agrees with me," he said, and turned to his wife. "But I must ask you, my dear, to remember to reprimand Grover about the soufflé."

The entry of the butler with another murmured message prevented Mrs Sharpe's reply.

"Your Lordship's pardon for a moment," said Sharpe. He wore an expression of dismay and hastened out of the room, leaving Hornblower and Gerard to begin polite words of thanks to his hostess for his pleasant evening.

"Cambronne's stolen a march on us!" exclaimed Sharpe, returning with a rapid waddle. "*Daring* left her mooring three hours ago! Cambronne must have gone on board her the moment he left here."

He swung round on his wife.

"Was the Baroness really ill?" he demanded of her.

"She seemed decidedly faint," replied Mrs Sharpe.

"It must have been all a plant," said Sharpe. "She was acting. Cambronne put the Vautours up to it because he wanted a chance to get clear away."

"What do you think he means to do?" asked Hornblower.

"God knows. But I expect he was disconcerted by the arrival of a King's ship here. His leaving in this fashion means he's up to no good. San Domingo — Cartagena — where'll he take that Imperial Guard of his?"

"I'll get after him in any case," said Hornblower, rising to his feet.

"You'll find it hard to overtake him," said Sharpe — the fact that he said 'you' and not 'Your Lordship' was a proof of his agitation. "He has taken two tugs — the *Lightning* and the *Star* — and with the new lighthouses on

the river a galloping horse wouldn't overtake him before he reaches the Pass. He'll be clear out to sea by daylight. I don't know if we can find a tug for you tonight in any case, My Lord."

"I'll start after him, all the same," said Hornblower.

"I've ordered the carriage round, My Lord," said Sharpe. "Forgive me, my dear, if we leave without ceremony." Mrs Sharpe received the hasty bows of the three men; the butler was waiting with their hats; the carriage stood at the door, and they scrambled in.

"Cambronne's bonded freight went on board at nightfall," said Sharpe. "My man is meeting me at your ship with his report."

"That may help us make up our minds," said Hornblower.

The carriage lurched in along the pitch dark streets.

"May I make a suggestion, My Lord?" asked Gerard.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Whatever scheme Cambronne has in mind, My Lord, Vautour is party to it. And he is a servant of the French Government."

"You're right. The Bourbons want a finger in every pie," agreed Sharpe, thoughtfully. "They take every opportunity to assert themselves. Anyone would think it was them that we beat at Waterloo, and not Boney." The sound of the horses' hoofs changed suddenly as the carriage reached the pier. They stopped, and Sharpe had the door open before the footman could leap down from the box, but as the three men scrambled out he stood beside the door hat in hand, his dark face illuminated by the carriage lamps.

"Wait!" snapped Sharpe.

They almost ran along the pier to where the glimmer of a lamp revealed the gangway; the two hands of the anchor watch stood at attention in the darkness as they hastened on board.

"Mr Harcourt!" shouted Hornblower as soon as his foot touched the deck; this was no time to stand on ceremony. There was a light in the companion and Harcourt was there.

"Here, My Lord."

Hornblower pushed his way into the after cabin; a lighted lantern dangled from the deck beam, and Gerard brought in another one.

"What's your report, Mr Harcourt?"

"The *Daring* sailed at five bells in the first watch, My Lord," said Harcourt. "She had two tugs with her."

"I know. What else?"

"The lighter with the freight came alongside her early in the second dog-watch. Just after dark, My Lord." A short, dark man came unobtrusively into the cabin as he spoke, and remained in the background.

"Well?"

"This gentleman whom Mr Sharpe sent kept watch as well as me on what they took on board, My Lord."

"What was it?"

"I kept count as they swayed it up, My Lord. They had lights in the mizzen stay."

"Well?"

Harcourt had a piece of paper in his hand, and he proceeded to read from it.

"There were twenty-five wooden cases, My Lord." Harcourt went on just in time to forestall an exasperated exclamation from Hornblower. "I recognised those cases, My Lord. They are the usual ones in which muskets are shipped, twenty-four stand of arms in each case."

"Six hundred muskets and bayonets," put in Gerard, calculating rapidly.

"I guessed as much," said Sharpe.

"What else?" demanded Hornblower.

"There were twelve large bales, My Lord. Oblong ones, and twenty other bales, long, narrow ones."

"Couldn't you guess —"

"Would you hear the report of the hand I sent, My Lord?"

"Very well."

"Come down here, Jones," yelled Harcourt up the companion, and then turned back to Hornblower. "Jones is a good swimmer, My Lord. I sent him and another hand off in the quarterboat, and Jones swam to the lighter. Tell His Lordship what you found, Jones."

Jones was a skinny, stunted young man, who came in blinking at the lights, ill at ease in this distinguished company. When he opened his mouth he spoke with the accent of Seven Dials.

"Uniforms, they was, in them big bales, sir."

"How do you know?"

"I swum to the side of the lighter, sir. I could reach over an' feel 'em, sir."

"Did anyone see you?" This was from Sharpe.

"No, sir. No one didn't see me at all, sir. They was all busy swayin' up the cases. Uniforms, they was, in the bales, like I said, sir. What I could feel through the sacking was buttons, sir. Not flat buttons, sir, like yours, sir. Round buttons, like bullets, sir, rows of 'em, on each Coat. An' I thought I could feel hembroidery, too, gold lace, p'raps, sir. Uniforms, they was, sir, I'm sure of it."

The dark man came forward at this moment; in his hands was a limp something that looked like a drowned black cat. Jones pointed to the object before he went on.

"I couldn't guess for the life of me what was in the other bales, sir, the long ones. So I outs with my knife —"

"You're sure no one saw you?"

"Certain sure, sir. I outs with my knife an' cuts the stitching at the end. They'll think it come apart in the handlin', sir. An' I takes the end one out an' I swims with it back to the quarterboat, sir."

The dark man held it forward for inspection, and Hornblower took it gingerly, a black, soggy, wet mass of hair, but his fingers encountered metal as he turned it in his hands.

"Heagles, sir," said Jones.

There was a brass chain and a big brass badge — the same displayed eagle as he had seen that evening on Cambronne's chest. What he held in his hands was a bearskin uniform cap, soaked with its recent immersion, and adorned with the brass finery.

"Is that what the Imperial Guard wore, My Lord?" suggested Gerard.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

He had seen prints for sale often enough purporting to illustrate the last stand of the Guard at Waterloo. In London now the Guards sported bearskin caps not unlike this that he held in his hand; they had been awarded to the Guards in recognition of their overthrow of the Imperial Guard at the crisis of the battle.

"Then we know all we need to know," said Sharpe.

"I must try and catch him," said Hornblower. "Call all hands, Mr Harcourt."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

After the automatic reply Harcourt opened his mouth again to speak, but he could make no sound come from it.

"I remember," said Hornblower, his cup of unhappiness filling to the brim. "I said I would not need the hands before morning."

"Yes, My Lord. But they'll not be far. I'll send along the waterfront and find 'em. I'll have 'em back here in an hour."

"Thank you, Mr Harcourt. Do your best. Mr Sharpe, we shall need to be towed as far as the Pass. Will you send and order a steam tug for us?"

Sharpe looked over at the dark man who had brought in the bearskin cap.

"Doubt if there'll be one before noon," said the dark man. "*Daring* took two — and I know now why she did.

The *President Madison*'s laid up. *Toueur*'s gone up to Baton Rouge with flat boats. *Ecrevisse* — the one that brought this ship up — went down again in the afternoon. I think *Temeraire*'s on her way up. We might be able to get her to turn round as soon as she arrives. And that's all there are."

"Noon," said Hornblower. "Thirteen hours' start. *Daring*'ll be at sea before we leave here."

"And she's one of the fastest ships built," said Sharpe. "She logged fifteen knots when she was being chased by *Tenedos* during the war."

"What's the Mexican port where she'll take the soldiers on board?"

"It's only a village on a lagoon, Corpus Christi, My Lord. Five hundred miles and a fair wind."

Hornblower could picture the *Daring*, with her beautiful lines and enormous spread of canvas, booming along before the trade wind. The little *Crab* in whose cabin he stood was not intended for fast ocean runs. She had been built and rigged small and handy, to work in and out of obscure inlets, doing the police work of the West

Indian archipelago. On the run to Corpus Christi *Daring* would certainly gain several hours, a day or more, perhaps, to add to the twelve hours' lead she already enjoyed. It would not take long to march or to ferry five hundred disciplined men on board, and then she would sail again. Where? Hornblower's weary brain baulked at the contemplation of the immensely complex political situation in the lands within easy run of Corpus Christi. If he could guess, he might be able to anticipate *Daring's* arrival at the danger point; if he merely pursued her to Corpus Christi he would almost certainly arrive there to find her already gone, soldiers and all, having vanished out into the trackless sea on whatever errand of mischief she meditated.

"*Daring's* an American ship, My Lord," said Sharpe, to add to his troubles.

That was an important point, a very important point. *Daring* had an ostensibly legal errand, and she flew the Stars and Stripes. He could think of no excuse for taking her into port for examination. His instructions had been very strict regarding his treatment of the American flag. No more than nine years ago America had gone boldly to war against the greatest maritime power in the world on account of the Royal Navy's attitude towards the American mercantile marine.

"She's armed, and she'll be full of men, My Lord," said Gerard.

That was another important point, and a very positive point at that. With her twelve-pounders and five hundred disciplined soldiers — and her large American crew as well — she could laugh at anything *Crab* could threaten with her six-pounders and her crew of sixteen. *Daring* would be within her rights to refuse to obey any signals from *Crab*, and *Crab* could do nothing to compel obedience. Shoot away a spar? Not so easy with a six-pounder, and even if no one were to be killed by accident there would be a terrible diplomatic storm if he were to fire on the Stars and Stripes. Could he shadow her, so at least to be on hand when her real purpose was revealed? No; impossible. Anywhere out at sea *Daring* had only to spread her wings to a fair wind to leave *Crab* below the horizon in an afternoon, and then *Daring* could resume her true course un-pursued.

Sweating in the stifling night, Hornblower felt like a lassoed wild animal. At every moment some fresh coil was being wound about him to render him more helpless. He was tempted, like a wild animal, to lose all self control, to lapse into mad panic, to fling away all his strength in an explosion of rage. He had sometimes seen, during his long professional career, senior officers giving vent to explosions of that sort. But it would not help. He looked round at the circle of faces in the lamplight; the faces wore the sober expressions of men who were witnessing a failure, men who were aware that they were in the presence of an Admiral who had made a woeful hash of the first important business he had encountered. That in itself could drive him insane with fury. Pride came to help him. He would not sink to human weaknesses in the sight of these men.

"I shall sail in any case," he said, coldly, "as soon as I have a crew and a steam tug."

"May I ask what Your Lordship intends to do?" asked Sharpe.

Hornblower had to think quickly to make a reasonable answer to this question; he had no idea. All he knew was that he was not going to give up without a struggle; no crisis was ever alleviated by wasting time.

"I shall employ what time I have here in the composition of orders for my squadron," he said. "My flag-lieutenant will write them at my dictation, and I shall ask you, Mr Sharpe, to undertake the distribution of them by all the means you find available."

"Very good, My Lord."

Hornblower remembered at that moment something he should have done already. It was not too late; this part of his duty he must still carry out. And it would at least disguise the anguish he felt.

"Mr Harcourt," he said. "I have to commend you greatly on the excellent way in which you executed my orders. You carried out the task of observing *Daring* in most exemplary fashion. You can be sure I shall call the attention of Their Lordships to your behaviour."

"Thank you, My Lord."

"And this man Jones," went on Hornblower. "No seaman could have acted with more intelligence. You made a good selection, Mr Harcourt, and Jones justified it. I have it in mind to reward him. I can give him an acting rating and confirm it as soon as possible."

"Thank you, My Lord. He has been rated before and disrated."

"Drink? Is that why he was denied shore leave?"

"I'm afraid so, My Lord."

"Then what do you recommend?"

Harcourt was at a loss.

"You could say to his face what you've already said to me, My Lord. You could shake his hand —"

Hornblower laughed.

"And be known through the Navy as the meanest Admiral who ever flew a flag? No. A golden guinea at least. Two guineas. I'll give them to him myself, and I shall request you to give him three days' leave as soon as we see Kingston again. Let him have his debauch, if that is the only way in which we can reward him. I have to consider the feelings of the whole squadron."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

"Now, Mr Gerard, I'll begin the writing of those orders."

It was indeed noon before *Crab* cast off and was taken in tow by the tug *Temeraire*; it was significant of Hornblower's state of mind that he never gave a thought to the implication of that glorious name. The interval before sailing, all the long, stifling morning, was taken up by the dictation of orders, to be dispersed to every ship of his squadron. An infinity of copies was necessary. Sharpe would send them under seal by every British ship leaving New Orleans for the West Indies, in the hope that should one of them encounter a King's ship his orders would be passed on without the delay of being sent to Kingston and then transmitted through official channels. Every ship of the West India squadron was to keep a sharp lookout for the American ship *Daring*. Every ship was to enquire her business, and was to ascertain, if possible, whether *Daring* had troops on board; but (Hornblower sweated more feverishly than ever as he worded this) captains of HM's vessels were reminded of that passage in the Commander-in-Chief's original instructions regarding behaviour towards the American flag. If troops were not on board an effort was to be made to ascertain where they had been landed; if they were, *Daring* was to be kept in sight until they should be landed. Captains were to exercise a wide discretion regarding any interference with *Daring's* operations.

Seeing that these orders would not leave New Orleans until tomorrow, and would travel by slow merchant ship, it was hardly likely that they would reach any ship of the squadron before *Daring* had done whatever she planned to do. Yet it was necessary to take every possible precaution.

Hornblower signed twenty copies of his orders with a sweating hand, saw them sealed, and handed them over to Sharpe. They shook hands before Sharpe went down the gangway.

"Cambronne will head for Port au Prince or Havana, in my opinion, My Lord," said Sharpe.

The two places were not more than a thousand miles apart.

"Might it not be Cartagena or La Guayra?" asked Hornblower with elaborate irony. Those places were about a thousand miles apart as well, and more than a thousand miles from Havana.

"It well might be," said Sharpe, the irony quite wasted on him. Yet it could not be said that he was unsympathetic regarding Hornblower's difficulties, for he went on — "The very best of good fortune, My Lord, in any case. I am certain Your Lordship will command success."

Crab cast off, and *Temeraire* had her in tow, smoke and sparks belching from her chimneys, much to Harcourt's indignation. He was afraid not only of fire but of stains on his spotless deck; he had the hands at work pumping up water from overside continuously soaking deck and rigging.

"Breakfast, My Lord?" said Gerard at Hornblower's elbow.

Breakfast? It was one o'clock in the afternoon. He had not been to bed. He had drunk far too much last night, and he had had a busy morning, an anxious morning, and he was as desperately anxious at this moment. His first reaction was to say no; then he remembered how he had complained yesterday (only yesterday? It seemed more like a week ago) about his delayed breakfast. He would not allow his agitation to be so obvious. "Of course. It could have been served more promptly, Mr Gerard," he said, hoping he was displaying the irascibility of a man who had not broken his fast.

"Aye aye, My Lord," said Gerard. He had been Hornblower's flag-lieutenant for several months now, and knew nearly as much about Hornblower's moods as a wife might have done. He knew, too, of Hornblower's kindly interior. He had received his appointment as the son of an old friend, at a moment when admiral's sons and duke's sons had yearned to serve as flag-lieutenant to the fabulous Hornblower.

Hornblower forced himself to eat his fruit and his boiled eggs, to drink his coffee despite the heat. He whiled away a considerable time before he came on deck again, and during that period he had actually contrived to forget his problems — at least nearly to forget them. But they returned in full force as soon as he came on

deck again. So harassing were they that he could feel no interest in this still unusual method of navigating a river, no interest in the low banks that were going by so fast alongside. This hurried departure from New Orleans was only a gesture of despair, after all. He could not hope to catch the *Daring*. She would bring off whatever coup she had in mind almost under his very nose and leave him the laughing-stock of the world — of his world, at least. This would be the last command he would ever hold. Hornblower looked back over the years of half pay he had endured since Waterloo. They had been dignified and happy years, one would think, with a seat in the Lords and a position of influence in the County, a loving wife and a growing son, but he had not been living the right life, even so. The five years after Waterloo until at last the course of nature brought his promotion to flag rank had been fretful years; he had only realised it when he knew the intense joy of his appointment to the West Indies. Now all the years to come until he went down into the grave would be as dreary as those five, more dreary, because they would be unrelieved by the hope of future employment at sea.

Here he was, pitying himself, he said to himself bitterly, when what he should be doing was working out the problems set him. What was it Cambronne had in mind? If he could head him off, arrive triumphantly at the place where Cambronne intended to strike his blow, he could retrieve his reputation. He might be able with great good fortune to intervene decisively. But there was turmoil everywhere through Spanish America, and through the West Indies as well, save for the British colonies. One place was as likely as another; in any case it would be extremely doubtful if he would have any excuse to interfere — Cambronne probably held a commission from Bolivar or some other leader; but on the other hand the precautions Cambronne had taken seemed to imply that he would at least prefer that the Royal Navy would not have a chance to intervene. Intervene? With a crew of sixteen not counting supernumeraries, and with nothing larger than a six-pounder? Rubbish. He was a fool. But he must think, think, think.

"It will be sunset before we sight St Philip, My Lord," reported Harcourt, saluting.

"Very well, Mr Harcourt."

There would be no salutes fired, then. He would make his departure from the United States with his tail between his legs, so to speak. There could hardly fail to be comment about the briefness of his visit. Sharpe might do his best to explain why he had left so hurriedly, but any explanation would be unsatisfactory. In every way this command for which he had yearned was turning out to be a ridiculous fiasco.

Even this visit, to which he had looked forward so eagerly, was a disappointment. He had seen almost nothing of New Orleans, of America, or of the Americans. He could take no interest in this vast Mississippi. His problems deprived him of interest in his surroundings and his surroundings distracted him from a proper attention to his problems. This fantastic method of progression, for instance — *Crab* was going through the water at a good five knots, and there was the current as well. Quite a breeze was blowing past him in consequence; it was extraordinary to be going ahead with the wind dead foul, without a heel or a pitch, with the standing rigging uttering a faint note and yet not a creak from the running rigging.

"Your dinner is served, My Lord," said Gerard, appearing on deck again.

Darkness was closing in round the *Crab* as Hornblower went below, but the cabin was hot and stuffy.

"Scotch broth, My Lord," said Giles, putting a steaming plate before him.

Hornblower dipped his spoon perfunctorily into the plate, tried to swallow a few mouthfuls, and laid his spoon down again, Giles poured him a glass of wine; he wanted neither wine nor soup, yet he must not display human weaknesses. He forced himself to take a little more of the soup, enough to preserve appearances.

"Chicken Marengo, My Lord," said Giles, putting another plate before him.

Appearances were more easily preserved with chicken; Hornblower haggled the joints apart, ate a couple of mouthfuls, and laid down his knife and fork. They would report to him from the deck if the miracle had happened, if *Daring's* two steam tugs had broken down, or if *Daring* had run aground, and they were passing her triumphantly. Absurd hope. He was a fool.

Giles cleared the table, reset it with cheese dish and cheese plate, and poured a glass of port. A sliver of cheese, a sip of port, and dinner might be considered over. Giles set out the silver spirit lamp, the silver coffee pot, the porcelain cup — Barbara's last present to him. Somehow there was comfort in coffee despite his misery; the only comfort in a black world.

On deck again it was quite dark. On the starboard bow gleamed a light, moving steadily aft to the starboard beam; that must be one of the lighthouses installed by the Americans to make the navigation of the Mississippi as convenient by night as by day. It was one more proof of the importance of this developing commerce — the fact that as many as six steam tugs were being constantly employed was a further proof. "If you please, My Lord," said Harcourt in the darkness beside him. "We are approaching the Pass. What orders, My Lord?"

What could he do? He could only play a losing game out to the bitter end. He could only follow *Daring*, far, far astern of her, in the hope of a miracle, a fortunate accident. The odds were a hundred to one that by the time he reached Corpus Christi the bird would be flown, completely vanished. Yet perhaps the Mexican authorities, if there were any, or local gossip, if he could pick up any, might afford him some indication of the next destination of the Imperial Guard.

"As soon as we are at sea, set a course for Corpus Christi, if you please, Mr Harcourt."

"Aye aye, My Lord. Corpus Christi."

"Study your Sailing Directions for the Gulf of Mexico, Mr Harcourt, for the pass into the lagoon there."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

That was done, then the decision was taken. Yet he stayed up on deck, trying to wrestle with the problem in all its vague and maddening complexity.

He felt rain on his face and soon it was falling in torrents, roaring on the deck, soaking his best uniform. His cocked hat weighed on his head like lead with the accumulation of water in the brim. He was about to take shelter below when his mind began to follow an old train of thought, and he stayed. Gerard loomed up in the darkness with his sou'wester and oilskins, but he paid no attention to him. Was it possible that all this was a false alarm? That Cambronne had nothing else in mind than to take back the Guard to France? No, of course not. He would not have taken six hundred muskets on board in that case, nor bales of uniforms, and there would have been no need for a hurried and clandestine departure.

"If you please, My Lord," said Gerard, standing insistently by with his oilskins.

Hornblower remembered how, before he left England, Barbara had taken Gerard to one side and had talked to him long and earnestly. No doubt she had been telling him of the need to see he did not get wet and that he had his meals regularly.

"Too late now, Mr Gerard," he said, with a grin. "I'm soaked through."

"Then please, My Lord, go below and shift your clothes."

There was genuine anxiety in Gerard's voice, a real concern. The rain was roaring on Gerard's oilskins in the darkness like the nitre-crusher of a powder-mill.

"Oh, very well," said Hornblower.

He made his way down the little companion, Gerard following him.

"Giles!" called Gerard sharply; Hornblower's servant appeared at once. "Put out dry clothes for His Lordship."

Giles began to bustle round the little cabin, kneeling on the deck to fish a fresh shirt out of the chest. Half a gallon of water cascaded down beside him as Hornblower took off his hat.

"See that His Lordship's things are properly dried," ordered Gerard.

"Aye aye, sir," said Giles, with sufficient restrained patience in his tone to make Gerard aware that it was an unnecessary order. Hornblower knew that these men were both fond of him. So far their affection had survived his failure — for how long?

"Very well," he said in momentary irritation. "I can look after myself now."

He stood alone in the cabin, stooping under the deck beams. Unbuttoning his soaking uniform coat he realised he was still wearing his ribbon and star; the ribbon, as he passed it over his head, was soaking wet too. Ribbon and star mocked at his failure, just at the very moment when he was sneering at himself for hoping again that *Daring* might have gone aground somewhere during her passage down the river.

A tap at the door brought Gerard back into the cabin.

"I said I could look after myself," snapped Hornblower.

"Message from Mr Harcourt, My Lord," said Gerard, unabashed. "The tug will be casting off soon. The wind is fair, a strong breeze, east by north."

"Very well."

A strong breeze, a fair wind, would be all in *Daring's* favour. *Crab* might have stood a chance of overhauling her in fluky, contrary airs. Fate had done everything possible to load the dice against him.

Giles had taken the opportunity to slip back into the cabin. He took the wet coat from Hornblower's hand.

"Didn't I tell you to get out?" blared Hornblower, cruelly.

"Aye aye, My Lord," replied Giles imperturbably. "What about this — this cap, My Lord?"

He had picked up the bearskin cap of the Imperial Guard which was still lying in the locker.

"Oh, take it away!" roared Hornblower.

He had kicked off his shoes and was beginning to peel off his stockings when the thought struck him; he remained stooping to consider it.

A bearskin cap — bales and bales of bearskin caps. Why? Muskets and bayonets he could understand.

Uniforms, too, perhaps. But who in their sane senses would outfit a regiment for service in tropical America with bearskin caps? He straightened up slowly, and stood still again, thinking deeply. Even uniform coats with buttons and embroidery would be out of place among the ragged ranks of Bolivar's hordes; bearskin caps would be quite absurd.

"Giles!" he roared, and when Giles appeared round the door. "Bring that cap back to me!"

He took it into his hands again; within him surged the feeling that he held in his hands the clue to the mystery. There was the heavy chain of lacquered brass, the brazen Imperial eagle. Cambronne was a fighting soldier of twenty years' experience in the field; he would never expect men wearing things like this to wage war in the pestilential swamps of Central America or the Stirling canebrakes of the West Indies. Then — ? The Imperial Guard in their uniforms and bearskins, already historic, would be associated in everyone's mind with the Bonapartist tradition, even now making itself felt as a political force. A Bonapartist movement? In Mexico? Impossible. In France, then?

Within his wet clothes Hornblower felt a sudden surge of warmth as his blood ran hot with the knowledge that he had guessed the solution. St Helena! Bonaparte was there, a prisoner, an exile in one of the loneliest islands in the world. Five hundred disciplined troops arriving by surprise out of a ship flying American colours would set him free. And then? There were few ships in the world faster than the *Daring*. Sailing for France she would arrive there before any warning could reach the civilised world. Bonaparte would land with his Guard — oh, the purpose of the uniforms and bearskins was quite plain. Everyone would remember the glories of the Empire. The French Army would flock to his standard as it had done once before when he returned from Elba. The Bourbons had already outworn their welcome — Sharpe had remarked how they were acting as international busybodies in the hope of dazzling the people with a successful foreign policy. Bonaparte would march again to Paris without opposition. Then the world would be in a turmoil once more. Europe would experience again the bloody cycle of defeat and victory.

After Elba a campaign of a hundred days had been needed to overthrow Bonaparte at Waterloo, but a hundred thousand men had died during those hundred days, millions and millions of money had been expended. This time it might not even be as easy as that. Bonaparte might find allies in the disturbed state of Europe. There might be twenty more years of war, leaving Europe in ruins. Hornblower had fought through twenty years of war; he felt physically sick at the thought of their repetition. The prospect was so monstrous that he went back through the deductions he had been making, but he could not avoid reaching the same conclusion.

Cambronne was a Bonapartist; no man who had been Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Guard could be anything else. It was even indicated by a trifle — he had worn the Bonapartist Grand Eagle of the Legion of Honour instead of the Bourbon Grand Cordon which had been substituted for it. He had done that with Vautour's knowledge and agreement. Vautour was a servant of the Bourbons, but he must be a traitorous one; the whole business of chartering the *Daring* and sending her fatal freight on board could only have been carried out with the connivance of the French authorities — presumably France was riddled with a fresh Bonapartist conspiracy. The Baroness's behaviour was further proof.

Central America and the West Indies might be in a turmoil, but there was no particular strategic point there (as he well knew after so much pondering about it) inviting an invasion by the Imperial Guard in uniforms and bearskins. It must be St Helena, and then France. He could have no doubt about it now. Now the lives of millions, the peace of the whole world, depended on the decisions he had to make at this moment.

There was a rush of feet on the deck just above his head. He heard ropes slapping down upon it, orders being given, loud creakings. The cabin suddenly leaned over sideways with the setting of sail, catching him completely unaware, so that he staggered and dropped the bearskin cap, which lay unnoticed at his feet. *Crab* rose to an even keel again. The deck under his feet felt suddenly lively, as if the breath of life had been breathed into it. They were at sea; they were heading for Corpus Christi. With the wind east by north *Crab* would be running wing-and-wing, possibly. Now he had to think fast, with every second of value. He could not afford to run to leeward in this fashion if he were going to change his plans.

And he knew he was going to change them. He had yearned so desperately for a chance to guess whither *Daring* would head after calling at Corpus Christi. Now he could intervene. Now he had a chance to preserve the peace of the world. With his eyes, unseeing, focused upon an infinite distance, he stood in the swaying cabin calling up into his mental sight the charts of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. The North-east Trades blew across them, not quite as reliably at this time of year as during the winter, but constantly enough to be a calculable factor. A ship bound for the South Atlantic — for St Helena — from Corpus Christi would be bound to take the Yucatan Channel. Then — especially if her business were such as not to invite attention — she would head for the shoulder of South America, down the centre of the Caribbean, with scores of miles of open sea on either beam. But she would have to pass through the chain of the Antilles before breaking through into the Atlantic.

There were a hundred passages available, but only one obvious one, only one route that would be considered for a moment by a captain bound for St Helena and with the trade winds to contend with. He would round Galera Point, the northernmost extremity of Trinidad. He would give it as wide a berth as possible, but he could not give it a very wide berth because to the northward of Galera Point lay the island of Tobago, and the Tobago Channel between the two was no more than — Hornblower could not be sure exactly — certainly no more than fifty miles wide. In favourable conditions a single ship could patrol that channel and make certain that nothing passed through unsighted. It was a typical example of maritime strategy on a tiny scale. Sea power made its influence felt all over the wide oceans, but it was in the narrow seas, at the focal points, that the decisive moments occurred. The Yucatan Channel would not be nearly as suitable as the Tobago Channel, for the former was more than a hundred miles wide. *Crab* would get there first; that could be taken for granted seeing that *Daring* would have two sides of a triangle to cover, calling at Corpus Christi, and with a long beat to windward as a result. It would be best to employ the advantage so gained to hasten to the Tobago Channel. There would be just time to anticipate *Daring* there — just time — and there was a substantial chance that on the way he might meet some ship of his squadron, to take her along with him. A frigate, now. That would give him all the force he needed. He made his resolve at that moment, conscious as he did so of his quickened heartbeat.

"Giles!" shouted Hornblower.

Giles reappeared, and within the wide discretion of a spoiled servant displayed shocked disapproval at the sight of him still in his wet shirt and ducks.

"My compliments to Mr Harcourt, and I would be glad to see him here as quickly as is convenient to him."

That was very quickly, naturally, when an Admiral needed the presence of a lieutenant.

"Mr Harcourt, I have decided on a change of plan. There is no time to be lost. Kindly set a course for Cape San Antonio."

"Cape San Antonio. Aye aye, sir."

Harcourt was a good officer. There was neither surprise nor doubt in his voice as he heard the surprising order.

"When we are on the new course I will explain what I intend to do, if you will have the goodness to report to me with the charts, Mr Harcourt. Bring Mr Gerard with you."

"Aye aye, sir."

Now he could take off his wet shirt and trousers, and dab himself dry with a towel. Somehow the little cabin did not seem so oppressively hot; perhaps because they were out at sea, perhaps because he had reached a decision. He was putting on his trousers at the moment when Harcourt had the helm put down. *Crab* came round like a top, with lusty arms hauling in on the sheets. She lay far over to starboard, with the wind abeam, and Hornblower, one leg in his trousers, after a frantic hop, trying to preserve his balance, fell on his nose across his cot with his legs in the air. He struggled to his feet again; *Crab* still heeled over to starboard, farther

and then less, as each roller of the beam sea passed under her, each roll taking Hornblower by surprise as he tried to put his other leg into his trousers so that he sat down twice, abruptly, on his coat before he managed it. It was as well that Harcourt and Gerard re-entered the cabin only after he had succeeded. They listened soberly while Hornblower told them of his deductions regarding *Daring's* plans and of his intention to intercept her at the Tobago Channel; Harcourt took his dividers and measured off the distances, and nodded when he had finished.

"We can gain four days on her to San Antonio, My Lord," he said. "That means we'll be three days ahead of her there."

Three days should be just enough start for *Crab* in the long, long race down the length of the Caribbean.

"Could we call at Kingston on our way, My Lord?" asked Gerard.

It was tempting to consider it, but Hornblower shook his head. It would be no use calling at headquarters, telling the news, possibly picking up reinforcements, if *Daring* slipped past them as they were doing so.

"It would take too long to work in," he said. "Even if we had the sea breeze. And there would be delay while we were there. We've nothing to spare as it is."

"I suppose not, My Lord," agreed Gerard, grudgingly. He was playing the part of the staff officer, whose duty it was to be critical of any suggested plan. "Then what do we do when we meet her?"

Hornblower met Gerard's eyes with a steady glance; Gerard was asking the question that had been already asked and left unanswered.

"I am forming plans to meet that situation," said Hornblower, and there was a rasping tone in his voice which forbade Gerard to press the matter.

"There's not more than twenty miles of navigable water in the Tobago Channel, My Lord," said Harcourt, still busy with his dividers.

"Then she can hardly pass us unobserved even by night," said Hornblower. "I think, gentlemen, that we are acting on the best possible plan. Perhaps the only possible plan."

"Yes, My Lord," said Harcourt; his imagination was hard at work. "If Boney once gets loose again —" He could not go on. He could not face that appalling possibility.

"We have to see to it that he does not, gentlemen. And now that we have done all that we can it would be sensible if we took some rest. I don't think any one of us has had any sleep for a considerable time."

That was true. Now that he had made up his mind upon a course of action, now that he was committed to it, for good or ill, Hornblower felt his eyelids drooping and sleep overcoming him. He lay down on his cot after his officers had left him. With the wind on the port beam and the cot against the bulkhead to starboard he could relax completely with no fear of rolling out. He closed his eyes. Already he had begun to form the answer to the question Gerard had asked. The answer was a hideous one, something horrible to contemplate. But it seemed to be inevitable. He had his duty to do, and now he could be sure that he was doing it to the best of his ability. With his conscience clear, with a reassuring certainty that he was using the best of his judgment, the inevitability of the rest of the future reinforced his need for sleep. He slept until dawn; he even dozed for a few minutes after that, before he began to think clearly enough again in the daylight for that horrible thought to begin to nag at him again.

That was how the *Crab* began her historic race to the Tobago Channel, over a distance nearly as great as the Atlantic is wide, with the brave trade wind laying her over as she thrashed along. All hands on board knew that she was engaged in a race, for in a little ship like *Crab* nothing could be kept secret; and all hands entered into the spirit of the race with the enthusiasm to be expected of them. Sympathetic eyes were turned towards the lonely figure of the Admiral standing braced on the tiny quarterdeck with the wind singing round him. Everyone knew the chances he was taking; everyone thought that he deserved to win, and no one could guess at his real torment over the certainty that was crystallising in his mind that this was the end of his career, whether he should win the race or lose it.

No one on board begrudged the constant labour involved in getting every yard of speed out of *Crab*, the continual hauling in and letting out of the sheets as the sails were trimmed to the least variation of the wind, the lightening and urgent shortening of canvas at the last possible moment as squalls came hurtling down upon them, the instant resetting as the squalls passed on their way. All hands constituted themselves as unofficial lookouts; there was really no need for the Admiral to have offered a golden guinea to the man who

should first sight *Daring* — there was always the chance of an encounter even before reaching the Tobago Channel. Nobody minded wet shirts and wet beds as the spray burst over *Crab*'s bows in dazzling rainbows and found its way below through the deck as the over-driven schooner worked her seams open in the heavy swell. The hourly casting of the log, the daily calculation of the ship's run, were eagerly anticipated by men who usually displayed all the fatalistic indifference towards these matters of the hardened sailor.

"I am shortening the water allowance, My Lord," said Harcourt to Hornblower the first morning out.

"To how much?" Hornblower asked the question trying to appear as if he were really interested in the answer, so that his misery over something else should not be apparent.

"To half a gallon, My Lord."

Two quarts of fresh water a day per man — that would be hardship for men labouring hard in the tropics.

"You are quite right, Mr Harcourt," said Hornblower.

Every possible precaution must be taken. It was impossible to predict how long the voyage would last, nor how long they would have to remain on patrol without refilling their water casks; it would be absurd if they were driven prematurely into port as a result of thoughtless extravagance.

"I'll instruct Giles," went on Hornblower, "to draw the same ration for me."

Harcourt blinked a little at that; his small experience with Admirals led him to think they led a life of maximum luxury. He had not thought sufficiently far into the problem to realise that if Giles had a free hand as regards drinking water for his Admiral, Giles, and perhaps all Giles's friends, would also have all the drinking water they needed. And there was no smile on Hornblower's face as he spoke; Hornblower wore the same bleak and friendless expression that he had displayed towards everyone since reaching his decision when they went to sea.

They sighted Cape San Antonio one afternoon, and knew they were through the Yucatan Channel; not only did this give them a fresh departure, but they knew that from now on it would not be extremely unlikely for them to sight *Daring* at any moment; they were pursuing very much the same course as she would be taking, from this point onwards. Two nights later they passed Grand Cayman; they did not sight it but they heard the roar of the surf on one of the outlying reefs. That was a proof of how closely Harcourt was cutting his corners; Hornblower felt that he would have given Grand Cayman a wider berth than that — it was a moment when he chafed more than usual at the convention which prohibited an Admiral from interfering in the management of his flagship. The following night they picked up soundings on the Pedro Bank, and knew that Jamaica and Kingston were a scant hundred miles to windward of them. From this new departure Harcourt could set a fresh course, direct for the Tobago Channel, but he could not hold it. The trade wind took it into its head to veer round south of east, as was not surprising with midsummer approaching, and it blew dead foul. Harcourt laid *Crab* on the starboard tack — never voluntarily would any captain worth his salt yield a yard to the southward in the Caribbean — and clawed his way as close to the wind as *Crab* would lie.

"I see you've taken in the tops'ls, Mr Harcourt," remarked Hornblower, venturing on ticklish ground.

"Yes, My Lord." In response to his Admiral's continued enquiring glance Harcourt condescended to explain further. "A beamy schooner like this isn't intended to sail on her side, My Lord. We make less leeway under moderate sail like this, My Lord, as long as we're close-hauled with a strong breeze."

"You know your own ship best, of course, Mr Harcourt," said Hornblower, grudgingly.

It was hard to believe that *Crab* was making better progress without her magnificent square topsails spread to the breeze. He could be sure that *Daring* would have every stitch of canvas spread — perhaps a single reef. *Crab* thrashed on her way, once or twice shipping it green over her starboard bow; those were the moments when it was necessary for every man to grab and hold on. At dawn next morning there was land right ahead, a blue line on the horizon — the mountains of Haiti. Harcourt held on until noon, raising them farther and farther out of the water, and then he went about. Hornblower approved — in an hour or two the land breeze might set in and there was Beata Point to weather. It was maddening that on this tack they would actually be losing a little ground, for it was perfectly possible that *Daring*, wherever she was, might have the wind a point or two more in her favour and could be able to hold her course direct. And it was quite remarkable to see the foremast hands raising wetted fingers to test the wind, and studying the windward horizon, and criticising the way the quartermaster at the tiller struggled to gain every yard to windward that he could.

For a day and a half the wind blew foul; in the middle of the second night Hornblower, lying sleepless in his cot, was roused by the call for all hands. He sat up and reached for his dressing-gown while feet came running above his head. *Crab* was leaping madly.

"All hands shorten sail!"

"Three reefs in the mains'!" Harcourt's voice was peeling out as Hornblower reached the deck.

The wind blew the tails of Hornblower's dressing-gown and nightshirt up round him as he stood out of the way by the taffrail; darkness was roaring all round him. A midsummer squall had come hurtling at them in the night, but someone had had a weather eye lifting and had been prepared for it. Out of the southward had come the squall.

"Let her pay off!" shouted Harcourt. "Hands to the sheets!"

Crab came round in a welter of confused water, plunged and then steadied. Now she was flying along in the darkness, belying her unlovely name. She was gaining precious distance to the northward; an invaluable squall this was, as long as it permitted them to hold this course. The roaring night was hurrying by; Hornblower's dressing-gown was whipping about his legs. It was impossible not to feel exhilarated to stand thus, compelling the elements to work in their favour, cheating the wind that thought to take them by surprise.

"Well done, Mr Harcourt," shouted Hornblower into the wind as Harcourt came and stood beside him in the darkness.

"Thank you, sir — My Lord. Two hours of this is what we need."

Fate granted them an hour and a half at any rate, before the squall died away and the trade wind pigheadedly resumed its former direction of east by south. But next morning at breakfast Giles was able to report good news.

"Wind's backing to the nor'rard, My Lord," he said — Giles was as interested as everyone else in the vessel's progress.

"Excellent," said Hornblower; it was only some seconds later that the dull pain grew up again inside him. That wind would bear him more swiftly to his fate.

As the day wore on the trade wind displayed some of its midsummer freakishness. It died away, died away more and more, until it blew only in fitful puffs, so that there were intervals when *Crab* drifted idly over the glassy blue sea, turning her head to all points of the compass in turn, while the vertical sun blazed down upon a deck in whose seams the pitch melted. Flying fish left fleeting dark tracks upon the enamel surface of the sea. No one cared; every eye was scanning the horizon for the first hint of the next cat's-paw of wind creeping towards them. Perhaps, not too far away in this moody Caribbean, *Daring* was holding her course with all sail set and drawing. The day ended and the night went by, and still the trade wind did not blow; only occasionally would a puff send *Crab* ghosting along momentarily towards the Tobago Channel. The sun blazed down, and men limited to two quarts of water a day were thirsty, thirsty all the time.

They had seen very few sail, and the ones they saw were of no use in furthering Hornblower's plans. An island schooner bound to Belize. A Dutchman homeward bound from Curaçao, no one with whom Hornblower could entrust a letter, and no ship of his own squadron — that was something almost beyond the bounds of possibility. Hornblower could only wait, as the days went by, in grim, bleak patience. At last the freakish wind blew again, from one point north of east, and they were able to hold their course, with topsails set again, heading steadily for the Antilles, reeling off as much as six knots hour after hour. Now as they approached the islands they saw more sails, but they were only inter-island sloops trading between the Leeward Islands and Trinidad. A square rigger seen on the horizon roused momentary excitement, but she was not the *Daring*. She flew the red and gold of Spain — a Spanish frigate heading for the Venezuelan coast, presumably to deal with the insurgents. The voyage was nearly completed; Hornblower heard the cry of land from the masthead lookout, and it was only a moment before Gerard came into the cabin.

"Grenada in sight, My Lord."

"Very well."

Now they were entering the waters where they could really expect to meet *Daring*; now the direction of the wind was of more importance than ever. It was blowing from the northeast, now, and that was helpful. It extinguished the very faint possibility that *Daring* might pass to the northward of Tobago instead of through the Tobago Channel.

"*Daring's*, bound to make the same landfall, My Lord," said Gerard, "and by daylight if she can."

"We can hope for it, at least," said Hornblower.

If *Daring* had been as long out of sight of land as had *Crab*, in the fluky winds and unpredictable currents of the Caribbean, her captain would certainly take all precautions in his approach.

"I think, Mr Harcourt," said Hornblower, "that we can safely hold our course for Point Galera."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Now was the worst period of waiting, of wondering whether the whole voyage might not prove to be a fool's errand, patrolling, beating up to within sight of Trinidad and then going about and reaching past Tobago again towards Grenada. Waiting was bad; if the voyage should not turn out to be a fool's errand it meant something that Hornblower, and Hornblower alone, knew to be worse. Gerard raised the question again.

"How do you propose to stop him, My Lord?"

"There may be means," answered Hornblower, trying to keep the harshness out of his voice that would betray his anxiety.

It was on a blue and gold, blazing day, with *Crab* ghosting along before only the faintest breeze, that the masthead lookout hailed the deck with the news of the sighting.

"Sail ho! Dead to loo'ard, sir!"

A sail might be anything, but at long intervals, as *Crab* crept closer, the successive reports made it more and more likely that the strange sail was *Daring*. Three masts — even that first supplementary report made it reasonably sure, for not many big ships plied out into the South Atlantic from the Caribbean. All sail set, even skysails, and stu'ns'ls to the royals. That did not mean quite so much.

"She looks like an American, sir!"

The skysails had already hinted strongly in the same direction. Then Harcourt went up to the mainmast head with his own glass, and came down again with his eyes shining with excitement.

"That's *Daring*, My Lord. I'm sure of it."

Ten miles apart they lay, on the brilliant blue of the sea with the brilliant blue of the sky above them, and on the far horizon a smudge of land. *Crab* had won her race by twenty-five hours. *Daring* was 'boxing the compass', swinging idly in all directions under her pyramids of sails in the absence of all wind; *Crab* carried her way for a while longer, and then she, too, fell motionless under the blazing sun. All eyes turned on the Admiral standing stiffly with his hands locked behind him gazing at the distant white rectangles that indicated where lay his fate. The schooner's big mainsail flapped idly, flapped again, and then the boom began to swing over.

"Hands to the sheets!" yelled Harcourt.

The air was so light that they could not even feel it on their sweating faces, but it sufficed to push the booms out, and a moment later the helmsman could feel the rudder take hold just enough to give him control. With *Crab's* bowsprit pointed straight at *Daring* the breath of wind was coming in over the starboard quarter, almost dead astern, almost dead foul for *Daring* if ever it should reach her, but she was still becalmed. The breath of wind increased until they could feel it, until they could hear under the bows the music of the schooner's progress through the water, and then it died away abruptly, leaving *Crab* to wallow on the swell. Then it breathed again, over the port quarter this time, and then it drew farther aft, so that the topsails were braced square and the foresail could be hauled over to the port side and *Crab* ran wing-and-wing for ten blessed minutes until the wind dropped again, to a dead, flaming calm. They could see *Daring* catch a wind, see her trim her sails, but only momentarily, only long enough to reveal her intentions before she lay once more helpless. Despite her vast sail area her greater dead weight made her less susceptible to these very faint airs.

"Thank God for that," said Gerard, glass to his eye, as he watched her swing idly again. "I think she aims to pass us beyond cannon-shot, My Lord."

"I shouldn't be surprised at that," agreed Hornblower.

Another breath, another slight closing of the gap, another dead calm.

"Mr Harcourt, perhaps it would be best if you let the men have their dinners now."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Salt beef and pease pudding under a noonday sun in the tropics — who could have any appetite for that, especially with the excitement of watching for a wind? And in the middle of dinner hands were sent again to the sheets and braces to take advantage of another breath of wind.

"At what time will you have your dinner, My Lord?" asked Giles.

"Not now," was all the answer Hornblower would give him, glass to eye.

"He's hoisted his colours, My Lord," pointed out Gerard. "American colours."

The Stars and Stripes, regarding which he had been expressly ordered to be particularly tender. But he could be nothing else in any case, seeing that *Daring* mounted twelve-pounders and was full of men.

Now both vessels had a wind, but *Crab* was creeping bravely along at a full two knots, and *Daring*, trying to head to the southward close-hauled, was hardly moving; now she was not moving at all, turning aimlessly in a breeze too faint to give her steerage way.

"I can see very few people on her deck, My Lord," said Harcourt; the eye with which he had been staring through his glass was watering with the glare of sun and sea.

"She'd keep 'em below out of sight," said Gerard.

That was so likely as to be certain. Whatever *Daring*, and Cambronne, thought of *Crab*'s intentions, it would be safest to conceal the fact that she had five hundred men on board while heading for the South Atlantic. And between her and that South Atlantic lay *Crab*, the frailest barrier imaginable. Let *Daring* once pass through the channel out into the open sea and nothing could be done to stop her. No ship could hope to overtake her. She would reach St Helena to strike her blow there, and no possible warning could be given. It was now or never, and it was Hornblower's fault that matters had reached such a pass. He had been utterly fooled in New Orleans. He had allowed Cambronne to steal a march on him. Now he had to make any sacrifice that circumstances demanded of him, any sacrifice whatever, to redeem the peace of the world. *Crab* could do nothing to stop *Daring*. It could only be done by his own personal exertions.

"Mr Harcourt," said Hornblower, in his harsh, expressionless monotone. "I'll have the quarterboat cleared away ready to lower, if you please. Have a full boat's crew told off, to double bank the oars."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

"Who'll go in her, My Lord?" asked Gerard.

"I will," said Hornblower.

The mainsail flapped, the boom came creaking inboard, swung out again, swung in. The breeze was dying away again. For a few minutes more *Crab* held her course, and then the bowsprit began to turn away from *Daring*.

"Can't keep her on her course, sir," reported the quartermaster.

Hornblower swept his gaze round the horizon in the blazing afternoon. There was no sign of a further breeze. The decisive moment had come, and he snapped his telescope shut.

"I'll take that boat now, Mr Harcourt."

"Let me come too, My Lord," said Gerard, a note of protest in his voice.

"No," said Hornblower.

In case a breeze should get up during the next half hour, he wanted no useless weight in the boat while crossing the two-mile gap.

"Put your backs into it," said Hornblower to the boat's crew as they shoved off. The oarblades dipped in the blue, blue water, shining gold against the blue. The boat rounded *Crab*'s stern, with anxious eyes looking down on them; Hornblower brought the tiller over and pointed straight for *Daring*. They soared up a gentle swell, and down again, up again and down again; with each rise and fall *Crab* was perceptibly smaller and *Daring* perceptibly larger, lovely in the afternoon light, during what Hornblower told himself were the last hours of his professional life. They drew nearer and nearer to *Daring*, until at last a hail came borne by the heated air.

"Boat ahoy!"

"Coming aboard!" hailed Hornblower back again. He stood up in the stern-sheets so that his gold-laced Admiral's uniform was in plain sight.

"Keep off!" hailed the voice, but Hornblower held his course.

There could be no international incident made out of this, an unarmed boat's crew taking an Admiral alone on board a becalmed ship. He directed the boat towards the mizzen chains.

"Keep off!" hailed the voice, an American voice.

Hornblower swung the boat in.

"In oars!" he ordered.

With the way she carried the boat surged towards the ship; Hornblower timed his movements to the best of his ability, knowing his own clumsiness. He leaped for the chains, got one shoe full of water, but held on and dragged himself up.

"Lie off and wait for me!" he ordered the boat's crew, and then turned to swing himself over on to the deck of the ship.

The tall, thin man with a cigar in his mouth must be the American captain; the burly fellow beside him one of the mates. The guns were cast off, although not run out, and the American seamen were standing round them ready to open fire.

"Did you hear me say keep off, mister?" asked the captain.

"I must apologise for this intrusion, sir," said Hornblower. "I am Rear Admiral Lord Hornblower of His Britannic Majesty's service, and I have the most urgent business with Count Cambronne."

For a moment on the sunlit deck they stood and looked at each other, and then Hornblower saw Cambronne approaching.

"Ah, Count," said Hornblower, and then made himself speak French. "It is a pleasure to meet Monsieur le Comte again."

He took off his cocked hat and held it over his breast and doubled himself in a bow which he knew to be ungainly.

"And to what do I owe this pleasure, milord?" asked Cambronne. He was standing very stiff and straight, his cat's-whisker moustache bristling out on either side.

"I have come to bring you the very worst of news, I regret to say," said Hornblower. Through many sleepless nights he had rehearsed these speeches to himself. Now he was forcing himself to make them naturally. "And I have come also to do you a service, Count."

"What do you wish to say, milord?"

"Bad news."

"Well?"

"It is with the deepest regret, Count, that I have to inform you of the death of your Emperor."

"No!"

"The Emperor Napoleon died at St Helena last month. I offer you my sympathy, Count."

Hornblower told the lie with every effort to appear like a man speaking the truth.

"It cannot be true!"

"I assure you that it is, Count."

A muscle in the Count's cheek twitched restlessly beside the purple scar. His hard, slightly protruding eyes bored into Hornblower's like gimlets.

"I received the news two days back in Port of Spain," said Hornblower. "In consequence I cancelled the arrangements I had made for the arrest of this ship."

Cambronne could not guess that *Crab* had not made as quick a passage as he indicated.

"I do not believe you," said Cambronne, nevertheless. It was just the sort of tale that might be told to halt *Daring* in her passage.

"Sir!" said Hornblower, haughtily. He drew himself up even stiffer, acting as well as he could the part of the man of honour whose word was being impugned. The pose was almost successful.

"You must understand the importance of what you are saying, milord," said Cambronne, with the faintest hint of apology in his voice. But then he said the fatal dreaded words that Hornblower had been expecting.

"Milord, do you give me your word of honour as a gentleman that what you say is true?"

"My word of honour as a gentleman," said Hornblower.

He had anticipated this moment in misery for days and days. He was ready for it. He compelled himself to make his answer in the manner of a man of honour. He made himself say it steadily and sincerely, as if it did not break his heart to say it. He had been sure that Cambronne would ask him for his word of honour.

It was the last sacrifice he could make. In twenty years of war he had freely risked his life for his country. He had endured danger, anxiety, hardship. He had never until now been asked to give his honour. This was the further price he had to pay. It was through his own fault that the peace of the world was in peril. It was fitting that he should pay the price. And the honour of one man was a small price to pay for the peace of the world, to save his country from the renewal of the deadly perils she had so narrowly survived for twenty years. In those happy years of the past, returning to his country after an arduous campaign, he had looked about him and he had breathed English air and he had told himself with fatuous patriotism that England was worth fighting for, was worth dying for. England was worth a man's honour, too. Oh, it was true. But it was heartrending, it was far, far worse than death that it should be his honour that had to be sacrificed. A little group of officers had appeared on deck and were standing grouped on either side of Cambronne listening to every word; to one side stood the American captain and his mate. Facing them, alone, his gaudy uniform flashing in the sun, stood Hornblower, waiting. The officer on Cambronne's right spoke next. He was some kind of adjutant or staff officer, clearly, of the breed that Hornblower hated. Of course, he had to repeat the question, to turn the iron in the wound.

"Your word of honour, milord?"

"My word of honour," repeated Hornblower, still steadily, still like a man of honour.

No one could disbelieve the word of honour of a British Admiral, of a man who had held His Majesty's commission for more than twenty years. He went on now with the arguments he had rehearsed.

"This exploit of yours can be forgotten now, Count," he said. "With the Emperor's death all hope of reconstituting the Empire is at an end. No one need know of what you had intended. You, and these gentlemen, and the Imperial Guard below decks, can remain uncompromised with the regime that rules France. You can carry them all home as you had said you would do, and on the way you can drop your warlike stores quietly overboard. It is for this reason that I have visited you like this, alone. My country, your country, do not desire any new incident to imperil the amity of the world. No one need know; this incident can remain a secret between us."

Cambronne heard what he said, and listened to it, but the first news he had heard was of such moving importance that he could speak of nothing else.

"The Emperor is dead!" he said.

"I have already assured you of my sympathy, Count," said Hornblower. "I offer it to these gentlemen as well. My very deepest sympathy."

The American captain broke into the murmurs of Cambronne's staff.

"There's a cat's-paw of wind coming towards us," he said. "We'll be under way again in five minutes. Are you coming with us, mister, or are you going over the side?"

"Wait," said Cambronne; he seemingly had some English. He turned to his staff, and they plunged into debate. When they all spoke at once Hornblower's French was inadequate to follow the conversation in detail. But he could see they were all convinced. He might have been pleased, if there had been any pleasure left in the world for him. Someone walked across the deck and shouted down the hatchway, and next moment the Imperial Guard began to pour up on deck. The Old Guard, Bonaparte's Old Guard; they were all in full uniform, apparently in readiness for battle if *Crab* had been foolish enough to risk one. There were five hundred of them in their plumes and bearskins, muskets in hand. A shouted order formed them up on deck, line behind line, gaunt, whiskered men who had marched into every capital in Europe save London alone. They carried their muskets and stood at rigid attention; only a few of them did not look straight to their front, but darted curious glances at the British Admiral. The tears were running down Cambronne's scarred cheeks as he turned and spoke to them. He told them the news in broken sentences, for he could hardly speak for sorrow. They growled like beasts as he spoke. They were thinking of their Emperor dying in his island prison under the harsh treatment of his English jailers; the looks that were turned upon Hornblower now showed hatred instead of curiosity, but Cambronne caught their attention again as he went on to speak of the future. He spoke of France and peace.

"The Emperor is dead!" he said again, as if he were saying that the world had come to an end.

The ranks were ragged now; emotion had broken down even the iron discipline of the Old Guard. Cambronne drew his sword, raising the hilt to his lips in the beautiful gesture of the salute; the steel flashed in the light of the sinking sun.

"I drew this sword for the Emperor," said Cambronne. "I shall never draw it again."

He took the blade in both hands close to the hilt, and put it across his lifted knee. With a convulsive effort of his lean, powerful body he snapped the blade across, and, turning, he flung the fragments into the sea. The sound that came from the Old Guard was like a long drawn moan. One man took his musket by the muzzle, swung the butt over his head, and brought it crashing down on the deck, breaking the weapon at the small of the butt. Others followed his example. The muskets rained overside.

The American captain was regarding the scene apparently unmoved, as if nothing more would ever surprise him, but the unlit cigar in his mouth was now much shorter, and he must have chewed off the end. He approached Hornblower obviously to ask the explanation of the scene, but the French adjutant interposed.

"France," said the adjutant. "We go to France."

"France?" repeated the captain. "Not — ?"

He did not say the words 'St Helena', but they were implicit in his expression.

"France," repeated the adjutant, heavily.

Cambronne came towards them, stiffer and straighter than ever as he mastered his emotion.

"I will intrude no further on your sorrow, Count," said Hornblower. "Remember always you have the sympathy of an Englishman."

Cambronne would remember those words later, when he found he had been tricked by a dishonourable Englishman, but they had to be said at this moment, all the same.

"I will remember," said Cambronne. He was forcing himself to observe the necessary formalities. "I must thank you, milord, for your courtesy and consideration."

"I have done my duty towards the world," said Hornblower.

He would not hold out his hand; Cambronne later would feel contaminated if he touched him. He came stiffly to attention and raised his hand instead in salute.

"Goodbye, Count," he said. "I hope we shall meet again in happier circumstances."

"Goodbye, milord," said Cambronne, heavily.

Hornblower climbed into the mizzen chains and the boat pulled in to him, and he fell, rather than climbed, into the stern-sheets.

"Give way," he said. No one could feel as utterly exhausted as he felt. No one could feel as utterly unhappy.

They were waiting for him eagerly on board *Crab*, Harcourt and Gerard and the others. He still had to preserve an unmoved countenance as he went on board. He still had duties to do.

"You can let *Daring* go past, Mr Harcourt," he said. "It is all arranged."

"Arranged, My Lord?" This was from Gerard.

"Cambronne has given up the attempt. They are going quietly to France."

"France? To France? My Lord — ?"

"You heard what I said."

They looked across the strip of sea, purple now in the dying day; *Daring* was bracing round her yards to catch the faint breeze that was blowing.

"Your orders are to let them pass, My Lord?" persisted Gerard.

"Yes, damn you," said Hornblower, and instantly regretted the flash of rage and bad language. He turned to the other. "Mr Harcourt, we can now proceed into Port of Spain. I presume that even if the wind is fair you will prefer not to risk the Dragon's Mouth by night. You have my permission to wait until daylight."

"Aye aye, my Lord."

Even then they would not leave him in peace as he turned to go below.

"Dinner, My Lord?" asked Gerard. "I'll give orders for it at once."

Hopeless to snarl back that he wanted no dinner; the discussion that would have ensued would have been worse than going through the form of eating dinner. Even so it meant that on entering his cabin he could not do as he wanted and fall on his cot with his face in his hands and abandon himself to his misery. He had to sit up stiff and square while Giles laid and served and cleared away, while the tropical sunset flamed in the sky

and black night swooped down upon the little ship on the purple sea. Only then, after Giles's last "Goodnight, My Lord," could he think again, and work back through all the horror of his thoughts.

He had ceased to be a gentleman. He was disgraced. Everything was at an end. He would have to resign his command — he would have to resign his commission. How would he ever face Barbara? When little Richard grew up and could understand what had happened how would he ever be able to meet his eyes? And Barbara's aristocratic family would sneer knowingly to each other. And never again would he walk a quarterdeck, and never again step on board with his hand to his hat and the bosun's calls shrilling in salute. Never again; his professional life was at an end — everything was at an end. He had made the sacrifice deliberately and cold-bloodedly, but that did not make it any less horrible.

His thoughts moved into the other half of the circle. He could have done nothing else. If he had turned aside to Kingston or Port of Spain *Daring* would have slipped past him, as her time of arrival off Tobago proved, and any additional strength he might have brought with him — if any, as was not likely — would have been useless. If he had stayed at Kingston and sent a despatch to London? If he had done that he might at least have covered himself with the authorities. But it would have been unavailing. How much time would elapse between the arrival of his letter in London and the arrival of *Daring* on the coast of France with Bonaparte on board? Two week; Very likely less than that. The clerks at the Admiralty would have treated his despatch at first as coming from a madman. There would be delay in its reaching the First Lord's hands, delay in its being laid before the Cabinet, delay while action was being debated, delay while the French ambassador was informed, delay while joint action was being agreed upon.

And what action, if any — if the Cabinet did not dismiss his letter as that of an unbalanced alarmist? The peacetime navy of England could never have been got to sea in time and in sufficient numbers to cover the whole coast of France so as to make it impossible for *Daring* to land her deadly cargo. And the mere inevitable leakage of the news that Bonaparte was at sea and expected to land would throw France into immediate revolution — no doubt about that, and Italy was in a turmoil too. By writing to London he would have covered himself, as he had already decided, from the censure of the Government. But it was not the measure of a man's duty to avoid blame. He had a positive duty to do, and he had done it, in the only way possible. Nothing else would have stopped Cambronne. Nothing else. He had seen where his duty lay. He had seen what the price would be, and now he was paying it. He had bought the peace of the world at the price of his own honour. He had ceased to be a gentleman — his thoughts completed the other half of the circle.

His mind plunged on, struggling desperately, like a man in utter darkness waist deep in a slough. It would not be long before the world knew of his dishonour. Cambronne would talk, and so would the other Frenchmen. The world would hear soon of a British Admiral giving his plighted word in the certain knowledge that he was telling a lie. Before then he would have left the Service, resigned his command and his commission. That must be done at once; his contaminated flag must fly no longer; he must give no further orders to gentlemen. In Port of Spain there was the Governor of Trinidad. Tomorrow he would tell him that the West India squadron no longer had a Commander-in-Chief. The Governor could take all the necessary official action, in circularising the squadron and informing the Government — just as if yellow fever or apoplexy had taken off the Commander-in-Chief. In this way anarchy would be reduced to a minimum, and a change of command arranged as simply as possible; that was the last service he could perform for his country, the very last. The Governor would think he was mad, of course — he might be in a strait-jacket tomorrow unless he confessed his shame. And then the Governor would pity him; the first of the pity, the first of the contempt, he would have to face for the rest of his life. Barbara — Richard — the lost soul plunged on through the stinking slough, through the dark night.

At the end of that dark night a knock at the door brought in Gerard. The message he was bearing died on his lips as he looked at Hornblower's face, white under the tan, and at his hollow eyes.

"Are you quite well, My Lord?" he asked, anxiously.

"Quite well. What is it?"

"Mr Harcourt's respects, My Lord, and we are off the Dragon's Mouth. The wind is fair at nor'-nor'-east and we can make the passage as soon as day breaks, in half an hour, My Lord. We'll drop anchor in Port of Spain by two bells in the forenoon watch, My Lord."

"Thank you, Mr Gerard." The words came slowly and coldly as he forced himself to utter them. "My compliments to Mr Harcourt and that will do very well."

"Aye aye, My Lord. This will be the first appearance of your flag in Port of Spain, and a salute will be fired."

"Very well."

"The Governor, by virtue of his appointment, takes precedence of you, My Lord. Your Lordship must therefore pay the first call. Shall I make a signal to that effect?"

"Thank you, Mr Gerard. I would be obliged if you would."

The horror still had to be gone through and endured. He had to make himself spick and span; he could not appear on deck unshaven and dirty and untidy. He had to shave and endure Giles's conversation.

"Fresh water, My Lord," said Giles, bringing in a steaming can. "Cap'n's given permission, seeing that we'll be watering today."

There might once have been sheer sensuous pleasure in shaving in fresh water, but now there was none. There might have been pleasure in standing on deck watching *Crab* make the passage of the Dragon's Mouth, in looking about him at new lands, in entering a new port, but now there was none. There might have been pleasure once in fresh linen, even in a crisp new neckcloth, even in his ribbon and star and gold-hilted sword. There might have been pleasure in hearing the thirteen guns of his salute fired and answered, but there was none now — there was only the agony of knowing that never again would a salute be fired for him, never again would the whole ship stand at attention for him as he went over the side. He had to hold himself stiff and straight so as not to droop like a weakling in his misery. He even had to blink hard to keep the tears from overflowing down his cheeks as if he were a sentimental Frenchman. The blazing blue sky overhead might have been black for all he knew.

The Governor was a ponderous Major-General, with a red ribbon and a star, too. He went rigidly through the formalities of the reception, and then unbent as soon as they were alone together.

"Delighted to have this visit from you, My Lord," he said. "Please sit down. I think you will find that chair comfortable. I have some sherry which I think you will find tolerable. May I pour Your Lordship a glass?"

He did not wait for an answer, but busied himself with the decanter and glasses.

"By the way, My Lord, have you heard the news? Boney's dead."

Hornblower had not sat down. He had intended to refuse the sherry; the Governor would not care to drink with a man who had lost his honour. Now he sat down with a jerk, and automatically took the glass offered him. The sound he made in reply to the Governor's news was only a croak.

"Yes," went on the Governor. "He died three weeks back in St Helena. They've buried him there, and that's the last of him. Well — are you quite well, My Lord?"

"Quite well, thank you," said Hornblower.

The cool twilight room was swimming round him. As he came back to sanity he thought of St Elizabeth of Hungary. She, disobeying her husband's commands, had been carrying food to the poor — an apron full of bread — when her husband saw her.

"What have you in your apron?" he demanded.

"Roses," lied St Elizabeth.

"Show me," said her husband.

St Elizabeth showed him — and her apron was full of roses.

Life could begin anew, thought Hornblower.

THE STAR OF THE SOUTH

Here where the trade winds blew at their freshest, just within the tropics, in the wide unbroken Atlantic, was, as Hornblower decided at that moment, the finest stretch of water for a yachting excursion to be found anywhere on the globe. This was nothing more than a yachting excursion, to his mind. Only recently he had emerged from a profound spiritual experience during which the peace of the whole world had depended on

his judgement; by comparison it seemed now as if the responsibilities of being Commander-in-Chief on the West Indian Station were mere nothings. He stood on the quarterdeck of His Britannic Majesty's frigate *Clorinda*, balancing easily as she reached to windward under moderate sail, and allowed the morning sunshine to stream down on him and the trade wind to blow round his ears. With the pitch and the roll as *Clorinda* shouldered against the sea the shadows of the weather rigging swooped back and forth over the deck; when she took a roll to windward, towards the nearly level morning sun, the shadows of the ratlines of the mizzen shrouds flicked across his eyes in rapid succession, hypnotically adding to his feeling of well-being. To be a Commander-in-Chief, with nothing more to worry about than the suppression of the slave trade, the hunting down of piracy, and the policing of the Caribbean, was an experience more pleasant than any Emperor, or even any poet, could ever know. The bare-legged seamen washing down the decks were laughing and joking; the level sun was calling up dazzling rainbows in the spray flung up by the weather bow; and he could have breakfast at any moment that he wanted it — standing here on the quarterdeck he was finding additional pleasure in anticipation and wantonly postponing that moment.

The appearance of Captain Sir Thomas Fell on the quarterdeck took something away from the feeling of well-being. Sir Thomas was a gloomy, lantern-jawed individual who would feel it his bounden duty to come and be polite to his Admiral, and who would never have the sensitivity to be aware when his presence was undesired. "Good morning, My Lord," said the captain, touching his hat.

"Good morning, Sir Thomas," replied Hornblower, returning the salute.

"A fine fresh morning, My Lord."

"Yes, indeed."

Sir Thomas was looking over his ship with a captain's eye, along the decks, up aloft, and then turning aft to observe where, right astern, a smudgy line on the horizon marked the position of the hills of Puerto Rico. Hornblower suddenly realised that he wanted his breakfast more than anything on earth; and simultaneously he realised that he now could not gratify that desire as instantaneously as a Commander-in-Chief should be able to. There were limitations of politeness that constrained even a Commander-in-Chief — or that constrained him at least. He could not turn away and go below without exchanging a few more sentences with Fell.

"Maybe we'll catch something today, My Lord," said Fell; instinctively with the words the eyes of both men turned aloft to where a look-out sat perched up at the dizzy height of the main topgallant masthead.

"Let's hope we do," said Hornblower, and, because he had never succeeded in liking Fell, and because the last thing he wanted to do was to enter into a technical discussion before breakfast, he blundered on so as to conceal these feelings. "It's likely enough."

"The Spaniards will want to run every cargo they can before the convention's signed," said Fell.

"So we decided," agreed Hornblower. Re-hashing old decisions before breakfast was not to his taste, but it was typical of Fell to do that.

"And this is the landfall they'd make," went on Fell, remorselessly, glancing astern again at Puerto Rico on the horizon.

"Yes," said Hornblower. Another minute or two of this pointless conversation and he would be free to escape below.

Fell took the speaking-trumpet and directed it upwards.

"Masthead, there! Keep a good lookout or I'll know the reason why!"

"Aye aye, sir!" came the reply.

"Head money, My Lord," said Fell, in apologetic explanation.

"We all find it useful," answered Hornblower, politely.

Head money was paid by the British Government for slaves freed on the high seas, to the Royal Naval ships concerned in the capture of the slaves, and divided among the ship's company like any other prize money. It was a small fund compared with the gigantic sums acquired during the great wars, but at five pounds a head a big capture could bring in a substantial sum to the ship making the capture. And of that substantial sum one-quarter went to the captain. On the other hand, one-eighth went to the Admiral commanding, wherever he happened to be. Hornblower, with twenty ships at sea under his command, was entitled to one-eighth of all

their head money. It was a system of division which explained how during the great wars the Admirals commanding the Channel Fleet or in the Mediterranean became millionaires, like Lord Keith.

"No one could find it more useful than I, My Lord," said Fell.

"Maybe," said Hornblower.

Hornblower knew vaguely that Fell was in difficulties about money. He had had many years of half pay since Waterloo, and even now as captain of a fifth-rate his pay and allowances were less than twenty pounds a month — lucky though he was, in peacetime, to have command even of a fifth-rate. He had had experience himself of being a poor captain, of wearing cotton stockings instead of silk, and brass epaulettes instead of gold. But he had no desire whatever to discuss the Tables of Personal Pay before breakfast.

"Lady Fell, My Lord," went on Fell, persistently, "has a position to maintain in the world."

She was an extravagant woman, so Hornblower had heard.

"Let's hope we have some luck today, then," said Hornblower, still thinking about breakfast.

It was a melodramatic coincidence that at that very moment a hail came down from the masthead.

"Sail ho! Sail right to wind'ard!"

"Perhaps that's what we're waiting for, Sir Thomas," said Hornblower.

"As likely as not, My Lord. Masthead, there! How's the sail heading? Mr Sefton, bring the ship to the wind."

Hornblower backed away to the weather-rail. He felt he could never grow used to his situation as Admiral, and having to stand by and be no more than an interested spectator while the ship he was in was being handled at decisive moments. It was quite painful to be a spectator, but it would be more painful still to go below and remain in ignorance of what was going on — and much more painful than to postpone breakfast again.

"Deck, there! She's a two-master. Heading straight down for us. All sail to the royals. Captain, sir, she's a schooner! A big schooner, sir. Still running down for us."

Young Gerard, the flag-lieutenant, had come running on deck at the first hail from the masthead, to his place beside his Admiral.

"A tops'l schooner," he said. "A big one. She could be what we're looking for, My Lord."

"Plenty of other things she could be," said Hornblower, doing his best to conceal his absurd excitement.

Gerard had his telescope pointing to windward.

"There she is! Coming down fast, right enough. Look at the rake of those masts! Look at the cut of those tops'ls! My Lord, she's no Island schooner."

It would not be a very remarkable coincidence if she should be a slaver; he had brought *Clorinda* here to the windward of San Juan in the full expectation that slave cargoes would be hurrying here. Spain was meditating joining in the suppression of the slave trade, and every slaver would be tempted to run cargoes and take advantage of enhanced prices before the prohibition should take effect. The main slave market for the Spanish colonies was at Havana, a thousand miles to leeward, but it could be looked upon as certain that Spanish slavers, making their passage from the Slave Coast, would touch first at Puerto Rico to refill with water if not to dispose of part of their cargo. It had only been logical to station *Clorinda* to intercept them.

Hornblower took the telescope and trained it on the fast-nearing schooner. He saw what Gerard had spoken about. Hull up now, he could see how heavily sparred she was, and how built for speed. With those fine lines it would only pay for her to carry highly perishable cargo — human cargo. As he looked he saw the rectangles of her square sails narrow vertically; the small distance between her masts widened greatly. She was wheeling away from the waiting *Clorinda* — a final proof, if any was needed, that she was what she appeared to be. Laying herself on the starboard tack, she proceeded to keep at a safe distance, and to increase that distance as fast as possible.

"Mr Sefton!" shouted Fell. "Fill the main tops'!! After her, on the starboard tack! Set the royals!"

In an orderly and disciplined rush some of the hands hurried to the braces while others scurried aloft to set more sail. It was only a matter of moments before *Clorinda*, as close-hauled as she would lie, was thrashing to windward in pursuit. With everything braced up sharp, and carrying every inch of sail that the brisk trade wind would allow, she lay steeply over, plunging through the sea, each wave in turn bursting on her weather bow with the spray flying aft in sheets, and the taut weather-rigging shrieking in the wind. It was a remarkable transition from the quiet that had reigned not so long ago.

"Hoist the colours," ordered Fell. "Let's see what she says she is."

Through the telescope Hornblower watched the schooner hoist her colours in reply — the red and yellow of Spain.

"You see, My Lord?" asked Fell.

"Pardon, Cap'n," interposed Sefton, the officer of the watch, "I know who she is. I saw her twice last commission. She's the *Estrella*."

"The Australia?" exclaimed Fell, mishearing Sefton's Spanish pronunciation.

"The *Estrella*, sir. The *Estrella del Sur* — the Star of the South, sir."

"I know about her, then," said Hornblower. "Her captain's Gomez — runs four hundred slaves every passage, if he doesn't lose too many."

"Four hundred!" repeated Fell.

Hornblower saw a momentary calculating look pass over Fell's face. Five pounds a head meant two thousand pounds; a quarter of that was five hundred pounds. Two years' pay at one swoop. Fell darted glances aloft and overside.

"Keep your luff, there!" he shouted at the helmsman. "Mr Sefton! Hands to the bowlines there, for'rard."

"She's weathering on us," said Gerard, the glass to his eye.

It was really only to be expected that a well-designed schooner would work to windward more efficiently than even the best of square-rigged frigates.

"She's fore-reaching on us, too," said Hornblower, gauging the distances and angles. She was not only lying closer to the wind but travelling faster through the water. Very little faster, it was true — a knot or perhaps two knots — but enough to render her safe from *Clorinda*'s pursuit.

"I'll have her yet!" said Fell. "Mr Sefton! Call all hands! Run out the guns on the weather side. Mr James! Find Mr Noakes. Tell him to start the water. Hands to the pumps, Mr Sefton! Pump her dry."

Hands came pouring up through the hatchways. With the gun-ports opened the guns' crews flung their weight on the gun tackles, inch by inch dragging the guns on the weather side up the steep slope presented by the heeling deck. The rumble of the wooden wheels over the seams of the planking made a stirring sound; it had been the preliminary of many a desperate fight in the old days. Now the guns were merely being run out in order to keep the ship on a slightly more even keel, giving her a better grip on the water and minimising leeway. Hornblower watched the pumps being manned; the hands threw their weight on the handles with a will, the rapid clank-clank proving how hard they were at work, pumping overside the twenty tons of drinking water which might be thought of as the life-blood of a cruising ship. But the slight reduction of draught that would result might, combined with the running out of the weather guns, add a few yards to her speed.

The call for all hands had brought Mr Erasmus Spendlove on deck, Hornblower's secretary. He looked round him at the organised confusion on deck with that air of Olympian superiority which always delighted Hornblower. Spendlove cultivated a pose of unruffled calm that exasperated some and amused others. Yet he was a most efficient secretary, and Hornblower had never once regretted acting on the recommendation of Lord Exmouth and appointing him to his position.

"You see the vulgar herd all hard at work, Mr Spendlove," said Hornblower.

"Truly they appear to be, My Lord." He looked to windward at the *Estrella*. "I trust their labours will not be in vain."

Fell came bustling by, still looking up at the rigging and overside at the *Estrella*.

"Mr Sefton! Call the carpenter. I'll have the wedges of the mainmast knocked loose. More play there may give us more speed."

Hornblower caught a change of expression on Spendlove's face, and their eyes met. Spendlove was a profound student of the theory of ship design, and Hornblower was a man with a lifetime of experience, and the glance they exchanged, brief as it was, was enough for each to know that the other thought the new plan unwise. Hornblower watched the main shrouds on the weather side taking the additional strain. It was as well that *Clorinda* was newly refitted.

"Can't say we're doing any better, My Lord," said Gerard from behind his telescope.

The *Estrella* was perceptibly farther ahead and more to windward. If she wished, she would run *Clorinda* practically out of sight by noon. Hornblower observed an odd expression on Spendlove's face. He was testing the air with his nose, sniffing curiously at the wind as it blew past him. It occurred to Hornblower that once or

twice he had been aware, without drawing any conclusions from the phenomenon, that the clean trade wind had momentarily been tainted with a hint of a horrible stench. He himself tried the air again, and caught another musky whiff. He knew what it was — twenty years ago he had smelt the same stench when a Spanish galley crowded with galley slaves had passed to windward. The trade wind, blowing straight from the *Estrella* to the *Clorinda*, was bearing with it the reek from the crowded slave ship, tainting the air over the clean blue sea far to leeward of her.

"We can be sure she's carrying a full cargo," he said.

Fell was still endeavouring to improve *Clorinda*'s sailing qualities.

"Mr Sefton! Set the hands to work carrying shot up to wind'ard."

"She's altering course!" Half a dozen voices made the announcement at the same moment.

"Belay that order, Mr Sefton!"

Fell's telescope, like all the others, was trained on the *Estrella*. She had put her helm up a little, and was boldly turning to cross *Clorinda*'s bows.

"Damned insolence!" exclaimed Fell.

Everyone watched anxiously as the two ships proceeded headlong on converging courses.

"She'll pass us out of range," decided Gerard; the certainty became more apparent with every second of delay.

"Hands to the braces!" roared Fell. "Quartermaster! Starboard your helm! Handsomely! Handsomely! Steady as you go!"

"Two points off the wind," said Hornblower. "We stand more chance now."

Clorinda's bows were now pointed to intercept the *Estrella* at a far distant point, several miles ahead.

Moreover, lying a little off the wind as both ships now were, it seemed probable that *Estrella*'s fore-and-aft rig and fine lines might not convey so great an advantage.

"Take a bearing, Gerard," ordered Hornblower.

Gerard went to the binnacle and read the bearing carefully.

"My impression," said Spendlove, gazing over the blue, blue water, "is that she's still fore-reaching on us."

"If that's the case," said Hornblower, "then all we can hope for is that she carries something away."

"We can at least hope for it, My Lord," said Spendlove. The glance he directed upwards was indicative of his fear that it would be the *Clorinda* whose gear would give way. *Clorinda* now had wind and sea very nearly abeam. She was lying over very steeply under every inch of canvas she could carry, and lifting unwillingly to the seas which came rolling in upon her, swirling in through her open gun-ports. Hornblower realised that he had not a dry stitch of clothing on him, and probably no one else on board had, either.

"My Lord," said Gerard, "you've had no breakfast as yet."

Hornblower tried to conceal the discomfiture he felt at this reminder. He had forgotten all about breakfast, despite the cheerful anticipation with which he had once been looking forward to it.

"Quite right, Mr Gerard," he said, jocular, but only clumsily so, thanks to being taken by surprise. "And what of it?"

"It's my duty to remind you, My Lord," said Gerard. "Her Ladyship —"

"Her Ladyship told you to see that I took my meals regularly," replied Hornblower. "I am aware of that. But Her Ladyship, owing to her inexperience, made no allowance for encounters with fast-sailing slavers just at mealtimes."

"But can't I persuade you, My Lord?"

The thought of breakfast, now that it had been reimplanted in his mind, was more attractive than ever. But it was hard to go below with a pursuit being so hotly conducted.

"Take that bearing again before I decide," he temporised.

Gerard walked to the binnacle again.

"Bearing's opening steadily, My Lord," he reported. "She must be drawing ahead fast."

"Clearly so," said Spendlove, telescope trained out towards the *Estrella*. "And it looks — it looks as if she's hauling in on her sheets. Maybe —"

Hornblower had whipped his telescope to his eye on the instant.

"She's gibing over!" he pronounced. "See how she comes round, by George!"

Estrella must have a bold captain and a well-trained crew. They had hauled in on her sheets and had stood ready at her topsail braces. Then, with the helm hard over, she had spun round on her heel. Her whole beautiful profile was now presented to Hornblower's telescope. She was headed to cross *Clorinda*'s bows from starboard to port, and not too far ahead, either.

"Damned insolence!" said Hornblower, but full of admiration for the daring and skill displayed.

Fell was standing close by, staring at the impertinent schooner. He was rigid, even though the wind was flapping his coat-tails round him. For a few seconds it seemed as if the two vessels were heading towards a common point, where they must meet. But the impression soon passed. Even without taking a compass bearing it became apparent that *Estrella* must pass comfortably ahead of the frigate.

"Run the guns in!" bellowed Fell. "Stand by to wear ship! Clear away the bow chasers, there!"

It might be just possible that the schooner would pass within range of the bow chasers, but to take a shot at her, at long range and on that heaving sea, would be a chancy business. Should they score a hit, it might as likely take effect in the hull, among the wretched slaves, as on the spars or rigging. Hornblower was prepared to restrain Fell from firing.

The guns were run in, and after another minute's examination of the situation Fell ordered the helm to be put a-starboard and the ship laid right before the wind. Hornblower through his telescope could see the schooner lying right over with the wind abeam, so far over that she, as she heaved, presented a streak of copper to his view, pinkish against the blue of the sea. Clearly she was drawing across the frigate's bows, as Fell tacitly acknowledged when he ordered a further turn of two points to port. Thanks to her two knots superiority in speed and thanks also to her superior handiness and weatherliness the *Estrella* was literally making a circle round the *Clorinda*.

"She's built for speed, My Lord," said Spendlove from behind his telescope.

So was *Clorinda*, but with a difference. *Clorinda* was a fighting ship, built to carry seventy tons of artillery, with forty tons of powder and shot in her magazines. It was no shame to her that she should be outsailed and outmanoeuvred by such a vessel as the *Estrella*.

"I fancy she'll make for San Juan, Sir Thomas," said Hornblower.

Fell's face bore an expression of helpless fury as he turned to his Admiral; it was with an obvious effort that he restrained himself from pouring out his rage, presumably in a torrent of blasphemy.

"It's — it's —" he spluttered.

"It's enough to madden a saint," said Hornblower.

Clorinda had been ideally stationed, twenty miles to windward of San Juan; *Estrella* had run practically into her arms, so to speak, and had yet dodged neatly round her and had won for herself a clear run to the port.

"I'll see him damned, My Lord!" said Fell. "Quartermaster!"

There was now the long run ahead to San Juan, one point off the wind, in what was practically a race with an even start. Fell laid a course for San Juan; it was obvious that *Estrella*, comfortably out of range on the starboard beam, was heading for the same point. Both ships had the wind practically abeam; this long run would be a final test of the sailing qualities of the two ships, as though they were a couple of yachts completing a triangular course in a race in the Solent. Hornblower reminded himself that earlier this morning he had compared the present voyage with a yachting excursion. But the expression in Fell's face showed that his flag-captain by no means looked on it in the same light. Fell was in the deadliest earnest, and not from any philanthropic feelings about slavery, either. It was the head money he wanted.

"About that breakfast, My Lord?" said Gerard.

An officer was touching his hat to Fell with the request that it might be considered noon.

"Make it so," said Fell. The welcome cry of "Up spirits" rang through the ship.

"Breakfast, My Lord?" asked Gerard again.

"Let's wait and see how we do on this course," said Hornblower. He saw something of dismay in Gerard's face and laughed. "It's a question of your breakfast, I fancy, as well as mine. You've had nothing this morning?"

"No, My Lord."

"I starve my young men, I see," said Hornblower, looking from Gerard to Spendlove; but the latter's expression was peculiarly unchanging, and Hornblower remembered all he knew about him. "I'll wager a guinea that Spendlove hasn't spent the morning fasting."

The suggestion was answered by a wide grin.

"I am no sailor, My Lord," said Spendlove. "But I have learned one thing while I have been at sea, and that is to snatch at any meal that makes its appearance. Fairy gold vanishes no faster than the opportunity of eating food at sea."

"So, while your Admiral has been starving, you have been walking this deck with a full belly? Shame on you."

"I feel that shame as deeply as the situation merits, My Lord."

Spendlove obviously had all the tact that an Admiral's secretary needed to have.

"Hands to the mainbrace," bellowed Fell.

Clorinda was hurtling along over the blue sea with the wind abeam; it was her best point of sailing, and Fell was doing all he could to get the very best out of her. Hornblower looked over at *Estrella*.

"I fancy we're falling behind," he said.

"I think so, too, My Lord," said Gerard after a glance in the same direction. He walked over and took a bearing, and Fell glared at him with irritation before turning to Hornblower.

"I hope you will agree, My Lord," he said, "that *Clorinda* has done all a ship can do?"

"Certainly, Sir Thomas," said Hornblower. Fell real meant to say that no fault could be found with his handling the ship; and Hornblower, while convinced that he himself could have handled her better, had no doubt that in any case *Estrella* would have evaded capture.

"That schooner sails like a witch," said Fell. "Look at her now, My Lord."

Estrella's lovely lines and magnificent sail plan were obvious even at this distance.

"She's a beautiful vessel," agreed Hornblower.

"She's headreaching on us for sure," announced Gerard from the binnacle. "And I think she's weathering on us, too."

"And there goes five hundred pounds," said Fell, bitterly. Assuredly he was in need of money. "Quartermaster! Bear up a point. Hands to the braces!"

He brought *Clorinda* a little closer to the wind and studied her behaviour before turning back to Hornblower.

"I'll not give up the chase until I'm compelled, My Lord," he said.

"Quite right," agreed Hornblower.

There was something of resignation, something of despair, in Fell's expression. It was not only the thought of the lost money that troubled him, Hornblower realised. The report that Fell had tried to capture the *Estrella*, and had failed, almost ludicrously, would reach their Lordships of the Admiralty, of course. Even if Hornblower's own report minimised the failure it would still be a failure. That meant that Fell would never be employed again after his present two years' appointment had expired. For every captain with a command in the Royal Navy now there were twenty at least hungry for commands. The slightest lapse would be seized upon as reason for ending a man's career; it could not be otherwise. Fell was now looking forward apprehensively to spending the rest of his life on half pay. And Lady Fell was an expensive and ambitious woman. No wonder that Fell's usually red cheeks had a grey tinge.

The slight alteration of course Fell had ordered was really a final admission of defeat. *Clorinda* was retaining her windward position only at the cost of seeing *Estrella* draw more rapidly ahead.

"But I fear she'll beat us easily into San Juan," went on Fell with admirable stoicism. Right ahead the purple smear on the horizon that marked the hills of Puerto Rico was growing loftier and more defined. "What orders have you for me in that case, My Lord?"

"What water have you left on board?" asked Hornblower in return.

"Five tons, My Lord. Say six days at short allowance."

"Six days," repeated Hornblower, mostly to himself. It was a tiresome complication. The nearest British territory was a hundred miles to windward.

"I had to try the effect of lightening the ship, My Lord," said Fell, self-exculpatory.

"I know, I know." Hornblower always felt testy when someone tried to excuse himself. "Well, we'll follow *Estrella* in if we don't catch her first."

"It will be an official visit, My Lord?" asked Gerard quickly.

"It can hardly be anything else with my flag flying," said Hornblower. He took no pleasure in official visits. "We may as well kill two birds with one stone. It's time I called on the Spanish authorities, and we can fill up with water at the same time."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

A visit of ceremony in a foreign port meant many calls on the activity of his staff — but not as many as on him, he told himself with irritation.

"I'll have my breakfast before anything else comes to postpone it," he said. The perfect good humour of the morning had quite evaporated now. He would be in a bad temper now if he allowed himself to indulge in the weaknesses of humanity.

When he came on deck again the failure to intercept *Estrella* was painfully obvious. The schooner was a full three miles ahead, and had weathered upon *Clorinda* until the latter lay almost in her wake. The coast of Puerto Rico was very well defined now. *Estrella* was entering into territorial waters and was perfectly safe. All hands were hard at work in every part of the ship bringing everything into that condition of perfection — really no more perfect than invariably prevailed — which a British ship must display when entering a foreign port and submitting herself to the jealous inspection of strangers. The deck had been brought to a whiteness quite dazzling in the tropical sun; the metalwork was equally dazzling — painful when the eye received a direct reflection; gleaming cutlasses and pikes were ranged in decorative patterns on the bulkhead aft; white cotton lines were being rove everywhere, with elaborate Turk's heads.

"Very good, Sir Thomas," said Hornblower approvingly.

"Authority in San Juan is represented by a Captain-General, My Lord," said Spendlove.

"Yes. I shall have to call upon him," agreed Hornblower. "Sir Thomas, I shall be obliged if you will accompany me."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

"Ribbons and stars, I fear, Sir Thomas."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Fell had received his knighthood of the Bath after a desperate frigate action back in 1813. It had been a tribute to his courage if not to his professional abilities.

"Schooner's taking a pilot on board!" hailed the masthead lookout.

"Very well!"

"Our turn shortly," said Hornblower. "Time to array ourselves for our hosts. They will be grateful, I hope, that our arrival will take place after the hour of the siesta."

It was also the hour when the sea breeze was beginning to blow. The pilot they took on — a big, handsome quadroon — took the ship in without a moment's difficulty, although, naturally, Fell stood beside him consumed with anxiety. Hornblower, free from any such responsibility, was able to go forward to the gangway and examine the approaches to the city; it was a time of peace, but Spain had been an enemy before and might perhaps be an enemy again, and at least nothing would be lost if he knew as much as possible about the defences first-hand. It did not take very long to perceive why San Juan had never been attacked, not to speak of captured, by the numerous enemies of Spain during the long life of the city. It was ringed by a lofty wall, of stout masonry, with ditches and bastions, moats and drawbridges. On the lofty bluff overlooking the entrance Morro Castle covered the approaches with artillery; there was another fortress — which must be San Cristobal — and battery succeeded battery along the waterfront, with heavy guns visible in the embrasures. Nothing less than a formal siege, with powerful army and a battering train, could make any impression on San Juan as long as it was defended by an adequate garrison.

The sea breeze brought them up the entrance passage; there was the usual momentary anxiety about whether the Spaniards were prepared to salute his flag, but the anxiety was speedily allayed as the guns in the Morro began to bang out their reply. Hornblower held himself stiffly to attention as the ship glided in, the forecastle saluting carronade firing at admirably regular intervals. The hands took in the canvas with a rapidity that did them credit — Hornblower was watching unobtrusively from under the brim of his cocked hat — and then *Clorinda* rounded-to and the anchor cable rumbled through the hawse-hole. A deeply sunburned officer in a fine uniform came up the side and announced himself, in passable English, as the port medical officer, and

received Fell's declaration that *Clorinda* had experienced no infectious disease during the past twenty-one days.

Now that they were in the harbour, where the sea breeze circulated with difficulty, and the ship was stationary, they were aware of the crushing heat; Hornblower felt instantly the sweat trickling down inside his shirt under his heavy uniform coat, and he turned his head uncomfortably from side to side, feeling the constriction of his starched neckcloth. A brief gesture from Gerard beside him pointed out what he had already observed — the *Estrella del Sur* in her gleaming white paint lying at the pier close beside them. It seemed as if the reek of her still reached his nostrils from her open hatchways. A file of soldiers, in blue coats with white cross-belts, was drawn up on the pier, standing somewhat negligently under command of a sergeant. From within the hold of the schooner came a most lamentable noise — prolonged and doleful wailings. As they watched they saw a string of naked Negroes come climbing with difficulty up through the hatchway. They could hardly walk — in fact some of them could not walk at all, but fell to their hands and knees and crawled in that fashion over the deck and on to the pier.

"They're landing their cargo," said Gerard.

"Some of it at least," replied Hornblower. In nearly a year of study he had learned much about the slave trade. The demand for slaves here in Puerto Rico was small compared with that at Havana. During the Middle Passage the slaves he saw had been confined on the slave decks, packed tight 'spoon fashion', lying on their sides with their knees bent up into the bend of the knees of the next man. It was only to be expected that the captain of the *Estrella* would take this opportunity of giving his perishable cargo a thorough airing.

A hail from overside distracted them. A boat with the Spanish flag at the bow was approaching; sitting in the stern-sheets was an officer in a brilliant gold-laced uniform that reflected back the setting sun.

"Here comes Authority," said Hornblower.

The side was manned and the officer came aboard to the trilling of the pipes of the bosun's mates, very correctly raising his hand in salute. Hornblower walked over to join Fell in receiving him. He spoke in Spanish, and Hornblower was aware that Fell had none of that language.

"Major Mendez-Castillo," the officer announced himself. "First and Principal Aide-de-Camp to His Excellency the Captain-General of Puerto Rico."

He was tall and slender, with a thin moustache that might have been put on with grease paint; he looked cautiously, without committing himself, at the two officers in their red ribbons and stars, and glittering epaulettes, who were receiving him.

"Welcome, Major," said Hornblower. "I am Rear Admiral Lord Hornblower, Commander-in-Chief of His Britannic Majesty's ships and vessels in West Indian waters. May I present Captain Sir Thomas Fell, commanding His Britannic Majesty's ship *Clorinda*."

Mendez-Castillo bowed to each of them, his relief at knowing which was which faintly apparent.

"Welcome to Puerto Rico, Your Excellency," he said. "We had, of course, heard that the famous Lord Hornblower was now Commander-in-Chief here, and we had long hoped for the honour of a visit from him."

"Many thanks," said Hornblower.

"And welcome to you and to your ship, Captain," added Mendez-Castillo hastily, nervous in case it should be too apparent that he had been so engrossed in his meeting with the fabulous Hornblower that he had paid insufficient attention to a mere captain. Fell bowed awkwardly in reply — interpretation was unnecessary.

"I am instructed by His Excellency," went on Mendez-Castillo, "to enquire if there is any way in which His Excellency can be of service to Your Excellency on the notable occasion of this visit?"

In Spanish, the phrasing of the pompous sentence was even more difficult than in English. And as Mendez-Castillo spoke his glance wavered momentarily towards the *Estrella*; obviously all the details of the *Clorinda*'s attempted interception were already known — much of the unavailing pursuit must have been visible from the Morro. Something in the Major's attitude conveyed the impression that the subject of the *Estrella* was not open to discussion.

"We intend to make only a brief stay, Major. Captain Fell is anxious to renew the water supply of his ship," said Hornblower, and Mendez-Castillo's expression softened at once.

"Of course," he said, hastily. "Nothing could be easier. I will give instructions to the Captain of the Port to afford Captain Fell every facility."

"You are too kind, Major," said Hornblower. Bows were exchanged again, Fell joining in although unaware of what had been said.

"His Excellency has also instructed me," said Mendez-Castillo, "that he hopes for the honour of a visit from Your Excellency."

"I had hoped that His Excellency would be kind enough to invite me."

"His Excellency will be charmed to hear it. Perhaps Your Excellency would be kind enough to visit His Excellency this evening. His Excellency would be charmed to receive Your Excellency at eight o'clock, along with the members of Your Excellency's staff, at La Fortaleza, the Palace of Santa Catalina."

"His Excellency is too good. We shall be delighted, naturally."

"I shall inform His Excellency. Perhaps Your Excellency would find it convenient if I were to come on board at that time to escort Your Excellency and Your Excellency's party?"

"We shall be most grateful, Major."

The Major took his leave after a final reference to the Captain of the Port and the watering of the ship. Hornblower explained briefly to Fell.

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Here came another visitor, up the port side of the ship, a squat, heavily-built man in dazzling white linen, wearing a broad-brimmed hat which he took off with scrupulous politeness as he reached the quarterdeck. Hornblower watched him address himself to the midshipman of the watch, and saw the latter hesitate and look round him while trying to make up his mind as to whether he should grant the request.

"Very well, midshipman," said Hornblower. "What does the gentleman want?"

He could guess very easily what the gentleman wanted. This might be an opportunity of making contact with the shore other than through official channels — something always desirable, and peculiarly so at this moment. The visitor came forward; a pair of bright, quizzical blue eyes studied Hornblower closely as he did so.

"My Lord?" he said. He at least could recognise an Admiral's uniform when he saw it.

"Yes. I am Admiral Lord Hornblower."

"I fear to trouble you with my business, My Lord." He spoke English like an Englishman, like a Tynesider, perhaps, but obviously as if he had not spoken it for years.

"What is it?"

"I came on board to address myself to your steward, My Lord, and to the president of the wardroom mess, and to the purser. The principal ship chandler of the port. Beef cattle, My Lord, chickens, eggs, fresh bread, fruits, vegetables."

"What is your name?"

"Eduardo Stuart — Edward Stuart, My Lord. Second mate of the brig *Columbine*, out of London. Captured back in 1806, My Lord, and brought in here as a prisoner. I made friends here, and when the Dons changed sides in 1808 I set up as ship chandler, and here I've been ever since."

Hornblower studied the speaker as keenly as the speaker was studying him. He could guess at much of what was left unsaid. He could guess at a fortunate marriage, and probably at a change of religion — unless Stuart had been born a Catholic, as was possible enough.

"And I am at your service, My Lord," went on Stuart, meeting his gaze without flinching.

"In a moment I'll let you speak to the purser," said Hornblower. "But tell me first, what impression has our arrival made here?"

Stuart's face crinkled into a grin.

"The whole town was out watching your chase of the *Estrella del Sur*, My Lord."

"I guessed as much."

"They all rejoiced when they saw her escape you. And then when they saw you coming in they manned the batteries."

"Indeed?"

The Royal Navy's reputation for prompt action, both daring and high-handed, must still be very much alive, if there could be even a momentary fear that a single frigate would attempt to snatch a prize from out of the shelter of a port as well guarded as San Juan.

"In ten minutes your name was being spoken in all the streets, My Lord."

Hornblower's keen glance reassured him that he was not being paid an idle compliment.

"And what is the *Estrella* going to do now?"

"She has only come in to land a few sickly slaves and renew with water, My Lord. It's a poor market for slaves here. She sails for Havana at once, as soon as she can be sure of your movements, My Lord."

"At once?"

"She'll sail with the land breeze at dawn tomorrow, My Lord, unless you are lying outside the port."

"I don't expect I shall be," said Hornblower.

"Then she'll sail without a doubt, My Lord. She'll want to get her cargo landed and sold in Havana before Spain signs the Convention."

"I understand," said Hornblower.

Now what was this? Here were the old symptoms, as recognisable as ever, the quickened heartbeat, the feeling of warmth under the skin, the general restlessness. There was something just below the horizon of his mind, some stirring of an idea. And within a second the idea was up over the horizon, vague at present, like a hazy landfall, but as certain and as reassuring as any landfall. And beyond, still over the horizon, were other ideas, only to be guessed at. He could not help glancing over at the *Estrella*, sizing up the tactical situation, seeking further inspiration there, testing what he already had in mind.

It was all he could do to thank Stuart politely for his information, without betraying the excitement he felt, and without terminating the interview with suspicious abruptness. A word to Fell made certain that Stuart would receive the business of supplying the *Clorinda*, and Hornblower waved away Stuart's thanks. Hornblower turned away with as great an appearance of nonchalance as he could manage.

There was plenty of bustle over there by the *Estrella*, just as there was round the *Clorinda*, with preparations being made for filling the water casks. It was hard to think in the heat and the noise. It was hard to face the cluttered deck. And darkness was approaching, and then would come eight o'clock, when he would be making his call upon the Captain-General, and obviously everything must be thought out before that. And there were complications. Successive ideas were arising, one out of another, like Chinese boxes, and each one in turn had to be examined for flaws. The sun was down into the hills, leaving a flaming sky behind, when he came to his final resolution.

"Spendlove!" he snapped; excitement made him curt. "Come below with me."

Down in the big stern cabin it was oppressively hot. The red sky was reflected in the water of the harbour, shining up through the stern windows; the magnificent effect was dissipated with the lighting of the lamps. Hornblower threw himself into his chair; Spendlove stood looking at him keenly, as Hornblower was well aware. Spendlove could be in no doubt that his temperamental Commander-in-Chief had much on his mind. Yet even Spendlove was surprised at the scheme that was sketched out to him, and at the orders he received. He even ventured to protest.

"My Lord —" he said.

"Carry out your orders, Mr Spendlove. Not another word."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Spendlove left the cabin, with Hornblower sitting there alone, waiting. The minutes passed slowly — precious minutes; there were few to spare — before the knock came on the door that he expected. It was Fell, entering with every appearance of nervousness.

"My Lord, have you a few minutes to spare?"

"Always a pleasure to receive you, Sir Thomas."

"But this is unusual, I fear, My Lord. I have a suggestion to make — an unusual suggestion."

"Suggestions are always welcome too, Sir Thomas. Please sit down and tell me. We have an hour at least before we go ashore. I am most interested."

Fell sat bolt upright in his chair, his hands clutching the arms. He swallowed twice. It gave Hornblower no pleasure to see a man who had faced steel and lead and imminent death apprehensive before him; it made him uncomfortable.

"My Lord —" began Fell, and swallowed again.

"You have all my attention, Sir Thomas," said Hornblower, gently.

"It has occurred to me," said Fell, growing more fluent with each word until at last he spoke in a rush, "that we still might have a chance at the *Estrella*."

"Really, Sir Thomas? Nothing could give me greater pleasure, if it were possible. I would like to hear what you suggest."

"Well, My Lord. She'll sail tomorrow. Most likely at dawn, with the land breeze. Tonight we might — we might fix some kind of drogue to her bottom. Perhaps to her rudder. She's no more than a knot or two faster than we are. We could follow her out and catch her at sea —"

"This is brilliant, Sir Thomas. Really ingenious — but nothing more than could be expected of a seaman of your reputation, let me add."

"You are too kind, My Lord." There was a struggle only too perceptible in Fell's expression, and he hesitated before he went on at last — "It was your secretary, Spendlove, who put the idea in my mind, My Lord."

"Spendlove? I can hardly believe it."

"He was too timid to make the suggestion to you, My Lord, and so he came to me with it."

"I'm sure he did no more than set the wheels of your thought turning, Sir Thomas. In any case, since you have assumed the responsibility the credit must be yours, of course, if credit is to be awarded. Let us hope there will be a great deal."

"Thank you, My Lord."

"Now about this drogue. What do you suggest, Sir Thomas?"

"It need be no more than a large sea anchor. A bolt of No 1 canvas, sewn into a funnel, one end larger than the other."

"It would have to be reinforced even so. Not even No 1 canvas could stand the strain with *Estrella* going at twelve knots."

"Yes, My Lord, I was sure of that. Bolt-ropes sewn in in plenty. That would be easy enough, of course. We have a spare bob-stay chain on board. That could be sewn round the mouth of the drogue —"

"And could be attached to the *Estrella* to take the main strain."

"Yes, My Lord. That was what I thought."

"It would serve to keep the drogue under water out of sight as well."

"Yes, My Lord."

Fell found Hornblower's quickness in grasping the technical points vastly encouraging. His nervousness was now replaced by enthusiasm.

"And where would you propose to attach this drogue, Sir Thomas?"

"I was thinking — Spendlove suggested, My Lord — that it might be passed over one of the lower pintles of the rudder."

"It would be likely to tear the rudder clean away when exerting its full force."

"That would serve our purpose equally well, My Lord."

"Of course, I understand."

Fell walked across the cabin to where the great cabin window stood open wide.

"You can't see her from here as we lie now, My Lord," he said. "But you can hear her."

"And smell her," said Hornblower, standing beside him.

"Yes, My Lord. They're hosing her out at present. But you can hear her, as I said."

Over the water came very plainly to them, along with the miasma of her stench, the continued wailing of the wretched slaves; Hornblower fancied he could even hear the clanking of the leg irons.

"Sir Thomas," said Hornblower, "I think it would be very desirable if you would put a boat overside to row guard round the ship tonight."

"Row guard, My Lord?" Fell was not very quick in the uptake. In the peace-time Navy it was unnecessary to take elaborate precautions against desertion.

"Oh, yes, most certainly. Half these men would be overside swimming for the shore as soon as night falls.

Surely you understand that, Sir Thomas. We must restrain their passion to desert from this brutal service. And in any case a guard-boat will prevent the sale of liquor through the gun-ports."

"Er — yes, I suppose so, My Lord." But Fell clearly had not grasped the implications of the suggestion, and Hornblower had to elaborate.

"Let us set a boat-rowing guard now, before nightfall. I can explain to the authorities why it is necessary. Then when the time comes —"

"We'll have a boat ready in the water!" Enlightenment had broken in on Fell at last.

"Attracting no attention," supplemented Hornblower.

"Of course!"

The red sunset showed Fell's face lit up with animation.

"It would be best if you gave that order soon, Sir Thomas. But meanwhile there's little time to spare. We must have this drogue in the making before we go ashore."

"Shall I give the orders, My Lord?"

"Spendlove has figures at his fingertips. He can work out the measurements. Would you be kind enough to send for him, Sir Thomas?"

The cabin was soon crowded with people as the work was put in hand. Spendlove came first; after him Gerard was sent for, and then Sefton, the first-lieutenant. Next came the sail-maker, the armourer, the carpenter, and the boatswain. The sail-maker was an elderly Swede who had been forced into the British Navy twenty years ago in some conscienceless action of the press gang, and who had remained in the service ever since. His wrinkled face broke into a grin, like a shattered window, as the beauties of the scheme dawned upon him when he was told about it. He just managed to restrain himself from slapping his thigh with glee when he remembered he was in the august presence of his Admiral and his captain. Spendlove was busy sketching out with pencil and paper a drawing of the drogue, with Gerard looking over his shoulder.

"Perhaps even I might make a contribution to this scheme," said Hornblower, and everyone turned to look at him; he met Spendlove's eye with a glassy stare that forbade Spendlove to breathe a word to the effect that the whole scheme was his original idea.

"Yes, My Lord?" said Fell.

"A length of spun yarn," said Hornblower, "made fast to the tail of the drogue and led for'rard and the other end secured to the chain. Just a single strand, to keep it tail end forward while *Estrella* gets under way. Then when she sets all sail and the strain comes —"

"The yarn will part!" said Spendlove. "You're right, My Lord. Then the drogue will take the water —"

"And she'll be ours, let's hope," concluded Hornblower.

"Excellent, My Lord," said Fell.

Was there perhaps a mild condescension, a tiny hint of patronage, in what he said? Hornblower felt that there was, and was momentarily nettled at it. Already Fell was quite convinced that the whole scheme was his own — despite his handsome earlier admission that Spendlove had contributed — and he was generously allowing Hornblower to add a trifling suggestion. Hornblower allayed his irritation with cynical amusement at the weaknesses of human nature.

"In this stimulating atmosphere of ideas," he said, modestly, "one can hardly help but be infected."

"Y-yes, My Lord," said Gerard, eyeing him curiously. Gerard was too sharp altogether, and knew him too well. He had caught the echo of mock-modesty in Hornblower's tone, and was on the verge of guessing the truth.

"No need for you to put your oar in, Mr Gerard," snapped Hornblower. "Do I have to recall you to your duty? Where's my dinner, Mr Gerard? Do I always have to starve while I'm under your care? What will Lady Barbara say when she hears you allow me to go hungry?"

"I beg pardon, My Lord," spluttered Gerard, entirely taken aback. "I'd quite forgotten — you've been so busy, My Lord —"

His embarrassment was intense; he turned this way and that in the crowded cabin as if looking about him for the missing dinner.

"No time now, Mr Gerard," said Hornblower. Until the need for distracting Gerard's attention had arisen he had been equally forgetful of the need for dinner. "Let's hope His Excellency will offer us some small collation."

"I really must beg your pardon, My Lord," said Fell, equally embarrassed.

"Oh, no matter, Sir Thomas," said Hornblower, waving the apologies aside testily. "You and I are in the same condition. Let me see that drawing, Mr Spendlove."

He was continually being led into playing the part of a peppery old gentleman, when he knew himself to be nothing of the sort. He was able to mellow again as they went once more through the details of the construction of the drogue, and he gave his approval.

"I believe, Sir Thomas," he said, "that you have decided to entrust the work to Mr Sefton during our absence ashore?" Fell bowed his agreement.

"Mr Spendlove will remain under your orders, Mr Sefton. Mr Gerard will accompany Sir Thomas and me. I don't know what you have decided, Sir Thomas, but I would suggest that you bring a lieutenant and a midshipman with you to His Excellency's reception."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

"Mr Sefton, I am sure I can trust you to have this work completed by the time of our return, early in the middle watch, I fancy?"

"Yes, My Lord."

So there it was all settled, except for the dreary interval of waiting. This was just like war-time, standing by with a crisis looming in the near future.

"Dinner, My Lord?" suggested Gerard, eagerly. He wanted no dinner. He was weary now that all was settled and the tension easing.

"I'll call for Giles if I want some," he said, looking round the crowded cabin. He wanted to dismiss the horde of people, and sought words to do so politely.

"Then I'll attend to my other duties, My Lord," said Fell, suddenly and surprisingly tactful.

"Very well, Sir Thomas, thank you."

The cabin emptied itself rapidly; Hornblower was able by a mere look to put an end to Gerard's tendency to linger. Then he could sink back into his chair and relax, sturdily ignoring Giles when he came in with another lighted lamp for the darkening cabin. The ship was full of the sound of the business of watering, sheaves squealing in blocks, pumps clanking, hoarse orders; the noise was sufficiently distracting to prevent his thoughts maintaining any regular course. He was in half a doze when a knock on the door preceded the arrival of a midshipman.

"Cap'n's respects, My Lord, and the shore boat is approaching."

"My compliments to the captain, and I'll be on deck at once."

The shore boat was bright with a lantern hanging over the stern-sheets in the midst of the darkness of the harbour. It lit up Mendez-Castillo's resplendent uniform. Down the side they went, midshipman, lieutenants, captain, Admiral, in the reversed order of naval precedence, and powerful strokes of the oars carried them over the black water towards the city, where a few lights gleamed. They passed close by the *Estrella*; there was a light hanging in her rigging, but apparently she had completed her watering, for there was no activity about her.

Nevertheless, there came a continuous faint wailing from up her open hatchways. Perhaps the slaves there were mourning the departure of those of them who had been taken from them; perhaps they were voicing their apprehension at what the future held in store for them. It occurred to Hornblower that these unfortunate people, snatched from their homes, packed into a ship whose like they had never seen before, guarded by white men (and white faces must be as extraordinary to them as emerald green ones would be to a European) could have no idea at all of what lay in store for them, any more than he himself would have if he were to be abducted to another planet.

"His Excellency," said Mendez-Castillo beside him, "has had pleasure in deciding to receive Your Excellency with full ceremonial."

"That is most kind of His Excellency," replied Hornblower, recalling himself to his present duties with an effort, and expressing himself in Spanish with even more effort.

The tiller was put over and the boat turned abruptly round a corner, revealing a brightly-lit jetty, with a massive gateway beyond. The boat ran alongside and half a dozen uniformed figures stood to attention as the party climbed on shore.

"This way, Your Excellency," murmured Mendez-Castillo.

They passed through the gateway into a courtyard lit by scores of lanterns, which shone on ranks of soldiers drawn up in two treble lines. As Hornblower emerged into the courtyard a shouted order brought the muskets

to the present, and at the same moment a band burst into music. Hornblower's tone-deaf ear heard the jerky braying, and he halted at attention with his hand to the brim of his cocked hat, his fellow officers beside him, until the deafening noise — echoed and multiplied by the surrounding walls — came to an end.

"A fine military appearance, Major," said Hornblower, looking down the rigid lines of white cross-belts.

"Your Excellency is too kind. Would Your Excellency please proceed to the door in front?"

An imposing flight of steps, lined on either side with more uniforms; beyond that an open doorway and a vast room. A prolonged whispered conference between Mendez-Castillo and an official beside the door, and then their names blared out in resounding Spanish — Hornblower had long given up hope of ever hearing his name pronounced intelligibly by a foreign tongue.

The central figure in the room rose from his chair — which was almost a throne — to receive the British Commander-in-Chief standing. He was a much younger man than Hornblower had expected, in his thirties, dark complexioned, with a thin, mobile face and a humorous expression at odds with his arrogant hooked nose. His uniform gleamed with gold lace, with the Order of the Golden Fleece on his breast.

Mendez-Castillo made the presentations; the Englishmen bowed deeply to the representative of His Most Catholic Majesty and each received a polite inclination in return. Mendez-Castillo ventured so far as to murmur their host's titles — probably a breach of etiquette, thought Hornblower, for it should be assumed that visitors were fully aware of them.

"His Excellency the Marques de Ayora, Captain-General of His Most Catholic Majesty's dominion of Puerto Rico."

Ayora smiled in welcome.

"I know you speak Spanish, Your Excellency," he said. "I have already had the pleasure of hearing you do so."

"Indeed, Your Excellency?"

"I was a major of migueletes under Claros at the time of the attack on Rosas. I had the honour of serving beside Your Excellency — I remember Your Excellency well. Your Excellency would naturally not remember me."

It would have been too flagrant to pretend he did, and Hornblower was for once at a loss for a word, and could only bow again.

"Your Excellency," went on Ayora, "has changed very little since that day, if I may venture to say so. It is eleven years ago."

"Your Excellency is too kind." That was one of the most useful phrases in polite language.

Ayora had a word for Fell — a compliment on the appearance of his ship — and a supplementary smile for the junior officers. Then, as if it were a moment for which he had been waiting, Mendez-Castillo turned to them.

"Perhaps you gentlemen would care to be presented to the ladies of the company?" he said; his glance passed over Hornblower and Fell and took in only the lieutenants and the midshipmen. Hornblower translated, and saw them depart a little nervously under Mendez-Castillo's escort.

Ayora, etiquette and Spanish training notwithstanding, wasted no time in coming to the point the moment he found himself alone with Hornblower and Fell.

"I watched your pursuit of the *Estrella del Sur* today through my telescope," he said, and Hornblower once more found himself at a loss for a word; a bow and a smile also seemed out of place in this connection. He could only look blank.

"It is an anomalous situation," said Ayora. "Under the preliminary convention between our governments the British Navy has the right to capture on the high seas Spanish ships laden with slaves. But once within Spanish territorial waters those ships are safe. When the new convention for the suppression of the slave trade is signed then those ships will be forfeit to His Most Catholic Majesty's government, but until that time it is my duty to give them every protection in my power."

"Your Excellency is perfectly correct, of course," said Hornblower. Fell was looking perfectly blank, not understanding a word of what was said, but Hornblower felt that the effort of translating was beyond him.

"And I fully intend to carry out my duty," said Ayora, firmly.

"Naturally," said Hornblower.

"So perhaps it would be best to come to a clear understanding regarding future events."

"There is nothing I would like better, Your Excellency."

"It is clearly understood, then, that I will tolerate no interference with the *Estrella del Sur* while she is in waters under my jurisdiction?"

"Of course I understand that, Your Excellency," said Hornblower.

"The *Estrella* wishes to sail at the first light of morning tomorrow."

"That is what I expected, Your Excellency."

"And for the sake of the amity between our governments it would be best if your ship were to remain in this harbour until after she sails."

Ayora's eyes met Hornblower's in a steady stare. His face was perfectly expressionless; there was no hint of a threat in that glance. But a threat was implied, the ultimate hint of superior strength was there. At Ayora's command a hundred thirty-two-pounders could sweep the waters of the harbour. Hornblower was reminded of the Roman who agreed with his Emperor because it was ill arguing with the master of thirty legions. He adopted the same pose as far as his acting ability allowed. He smiled the smile of a good loser.

"We have had our chance and lost it, Your Excellency," he said. "We can hardly complain."

If Ayora felt any relief at his acquiescence it showed no more plainly than his previous hint of force.

"Your Excellency is most understanding," he said.

"Naturally we are desirous of taking advantage of the land breeze to leave tomorrow morning," said Hornblower, deferentially. "Now that we have refilled with water — for the opportunity of doing so I have to thank Your Excellency — we would not like to trespass too far upon Your Excellency's hospitality."

Hornblower did his best to maintain an appearance of innocence under Ayora's searching stare.

"Perhaps we might hear what Captain Gomez has to say," said Ayora, turning aside to summon someone close at hand. He was a young man, strikingly handsome, dressed in plain but elegant blue clothes with a silver-hiked sword at his side.

"May I present," said Ayora, "Don Miguel Gomez y Gonzalez, Captain of the *Estrella del Sur*?"

Bows were exchanged.

"May I felicitate you on the sailing qualities of your ship, Captain?" said Hornblower.

"Many thanks, señor."

"*Clorinda* is a fast frigate, but your ship is superior at all points of sailing." Hornblower was not too sure about how to render that technical expression into Spanish, but apparently he contrived to make himself understood.

"Many thanks again, señor."

"And I could even venture" — Hornblower spread his hands deprecatingly — "to congratulate her captain on the brilliance with which he managed her."

Captain Gomez bowed, and Hornblower suddenly checked himself. These high-flown Spanish compliments were all very well, but they could be overdone. He did not want to give the impression of a man too anxious to please. But he was reassured by a glance at the expression on Gomez's face. He was actually simpering; that was the only word for it. Hornblower mentally classified him as a young man of great ability and well pleased with himself. Another compliment would not be one too many.

"I shall suggest to my government," he went on, "that they request permission to take off the lines of the *Star of the South*, and study the plan of her sails, in order to build a similar vessel. She would be ideal for the work of the Navy in these waters. But, of course, it would be hard to find a suitable captain."

Gomez bowed once more. It was hard not to be self-satisfied when complimented by a seaman with the legendary reputation of Hornblower.

"His Excellency," put in Ayora, "is desirous of leaving the harbour tomorrow morning."

"So we understood," said Gomez.

Even Ayora looked a trifle disconcerted at the admission. Hornblower could see it plainly. Stuart, so helpful with his information, had not hesitated to help both sides, as Hornblower had expected he would. He had gone straight to the Spanish authorities with the intelligence Hornblower had supplied him with. But Hornblower had no desire to allow a jarring note to creep into the present conversation.

"You can understand, Captain," he said, "that I would be glad to leave on the same tide and with the same land breeze that takes you out. After our experiences today I fear you need be under no apprehension."

"None at all," said Gomez. There was something of condescension in his smile. That agreement was all that Hornblower wanted. He was at pains to conceal his relief.

"It will be my duty to pursue you if you are still in sight when I leave," he said, apologetically; by his glance he made it clear that the remark was addressed to the Captain-General as well as to Gomez, but it was Gomez who answered.

"I have no fear," he said.

"In that case, Your Excellency," said Hornblower, clinching the matter, "I can inform Your Excellency officially that His Majesty's Ship in which my flag is being flown will leave harbour tomorrow morning as early as suits Captain Gomez's convenience."

"That is understood," agreed Ayora. "I regret greatly that Your Excellency's visit should be so brief."

"In the life of a sailor," said Hornblower, "duty seems invariably to interfere with inclination. But at least during this brief visit I have had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Your Excellency, and of Captain Gomez.

"There are numerous other gentlemen here also desirous of making Your Excellency's acquaintance," said Ayora. "May I be permitted to present them to Your Excellency?"

The real business of the evening had been transacted, and now it was only necessary to go through the other formalities. The rest of the reception was as dreary as Hornblower had expected and feared; the Puerto Rican magnates who were led up in turn to meet him were as dull. At midnight Hornblower caught the eye of Gerard and gathered his flock together. Ayora noted the gesture and gave, in courteous terms, the leave to depart which, as His Catholic Majesty's representative, he had to give unless his guests were to be guilty of discourtesy.

"Your Excellency has doubtless need to rest in readiness for your early start tomorrow," he said. "I will not attempt to detain Your Excellency in consequence, much as Your Excellency's presence here has been appreciated."

The goodbyes were said, and Mendez-Castillo undertook to escort the party back to the *Clorinda*. It was something of a shock to Hornblower to find that the band and the guard of honour were still in the courtyard to offer the official compliments on his departure. He stood at the salute while the band played some jerky tune or other; then they went down into the waiting boat.

The harbour was pitch dark as they rowed out into it, the few lights visible doing almost nothing to alleviate the blackness. They rounded the corner and passed astern of the *Estrella* again. There was a single lantern hanging in her main rigging, and she was quiet by now — no; in the still night, at one moment, Hornblower heard the faint rattle of leg-irons as some one of the slaves in her hold indicated that he was still awake and restless. That was good. Farther along, a quiet challenge came over the inky water, issuing from a nucleus of darkness even more solid than the darkness surrounding it.

"Flag," answered the midshipman. "*Clorinda*."

The two brief words were all that were needed to inform the guardboat that an Admiral and a captain were approaching.

"You see, Major," said Hornblower, "that Captain Fell deemed it necessary to row guard round the ship during the night."

"I understood that to be the case, Your Excellency," answered Mendez-Castillo.

"Our seamen will go to great lengths to indulge themselves in the pleasures of the shore."

"Naturally, Your Excellency," said Mendez-Castillo.

The boat ran alongside the *Clorinda*; standing awkwardly in the stern-sheets Hornblower said his last goodbyes, and uttered his last words of thanks, to the representative of his host before going up the side. From the entry port he watched the boat shove off again and disappear into the darkness.

"Now," he said, "we can make better use of our time."

On the maindeck, just visible in the light from the lantern hanging from the mainstay, was a Thing; that was the only way to describe it, something of canvas and cordage, with a length of chain attached to it. Sefton was standing beside it.

"I see you've finished it, Mr Sefton."

"Yes, My Lord. A full hour ago. The sail-maker and his mates worked admirably."

Hornblower turned to Fell.

"I fancy, Sir Thomas," he said, "that you have in mind the necessary orders to give. Perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me about them before you issue them?"

"Aye aye, My Lord."

That eternal Navy answer was the only one Fell could make in the circumstances, even if Fell had not yet given full thought to the next problems. Down in the cabin alone with his Admiral, Fell's unreadiness was a little apparent.

"I suppose," prompted Hornblower, "that you will tell off the necessary personnel for the expedition. Which officer can you trust fully to exercise discretion?"

Little by little the details were settled. Powerful swimmers who could work under water; an armourer's mate who could be relied upon to put the final shackle in the chain in the darkness; the boat's crew was decided upon, summoned, and instructed in all the details of the plan. When the guard-boat came in for the relief of its crew there was another crew standing by all ready, who went down overside rapidly and quietly although encumbered with the Thing and the necessary gear.

It pushed off again into the darkness, and Hornblower stood on the quarterdeck to watch it go. There might be an international incident arising out of this, or he might be made to appear a fool in the eyes of the world, which would be just as bad. He strained his ears for any sounds in the darkness which would tell him how the work was progressing, but he could hear nothing. The land breeze had just begun to blow, gently, but strongly enough to swing *Clorinda* to her anchor; it would carry any sounds away from him, he realised — but it would also serve to obscure any suspicious noises if anyone in the *Estrella* was awake enough to hear them. She had a full counter, with, as was only to be expected, plenty of rake. A swimmer who reached her stern unobserved would be able to work at her rudder unobserved, certainly.

"My Lord," said Gerard's voice quietly beside him. "Would not this be a suitable time to rest?"

"You are quite right, Mr Gerard. A most suitable time," answered Hornblower, continuing to lean against the rail.

"Well, then, My Lord — ?"

"I have agreed with you, Mr Gerard. Surely you can be content with that?"

But Gerard's voice went on, remorseless as the voice of conscience.

"There is cold beef laid out in the cabin, My Lord. Fresh bread and a bottle of Bordeaux."

That was a different story. Hornblower suddenly realised how hungry he was; during the past thirty hours he had eaten one meagre meal, because the cold collation he had expected at the reception had failed to materialise. And he could still pretend to be superior to the weaknesses of the flesh.

"You would have made an excellent wet-nurse, Mr Gerard," he said, "if nature had treated you more generously. But I suppose my life will be unbearable until I yield to your importunity."

On the way to the companion they passed Fell; he was striding up and down the quarterdeck in the darkness, and they could hear his hard breathing. It pleased Hornblower to know that even these muscular heroes could feel anxiety. It might be polite, even kind, to invite Fell to join them at this cold supper, but Hornblower dismissed the idea. He had had as much of Fell's company already as he could bear.

Down below, Spendlove was waiting in the lighted cabin.

"The vultures are gathered together," said Hornblower. It was amusing to see Spendlove was pale and tense too. "I hope you gentlemen will join me."

The younger men were silent as they ate. Hornblower put his nose to his glass of wine and sipped thoughtfully.

"Six months in the tropics has done this Bordeaux no good," he commented; it was inevitable that as host, and Admiral, and older man, his opinion should be received with deference. Spendlove broke the next silence.

"That length of spun yarn, My Lord," he said. "The breaking strain —"

"Mr Spendlove," said Hornblower. "All the discussion in the world won't change it now. We shall know in good time. Meanwhile, let's not spoil our dinner with technical discussions."

"Your pardon, My Lord," said Spendlove, abashed. Was it by mere coincidence or through telepathy that Hornblower had been thinking at that very moment about the breaking strain of that length of spun yarn in the drogue; but he would not dream of admitting that he had been thinking about it. The dinner continued.

"Well," said Hornblower, raising his glass, "we can admit the existence of mundane affairs long enough to allow of a toast. Here's to head money."

As they drank they heard unmistakable sounds on deck and overside. The guard-boat had returned from its mission. Spendlove and Gerard exchanged glances, and poised themselves ready to stand up. Hornblower forced himself to lean back and shake his head sadly, his glass still in his hand.

"Too bad about this Bordeaux, gentlemen," he said.

Then came the knock on the door and the expected message.

"Cap'n's respects, My Lord, and the boat has returned."

"My compliments to the captain, and I'll be glad to see him and the lieutenant here as soon as is convenient."

One glance at Fell as he entered the cabin was sufficient to indicate that the expedition had been successful, so far, at least.

"All well, My Lord," he said, his florid face suffused with excitement.

"Excellent." The lieutenant was a grizzled veteran older than Hornblower; and Hornblower could not help but think to himself that had he not enjoyed great good fortune on several occasions he would be only a lieutenant, too. "Will you sit down, gentlemen? A glass of wine? Mr Gerard, order fresh glasses, if you please. Sir Thomas, would you mind if I hear Mr Field's story from his own lips?"

Field had no fluency of speech. His story had to be drawn from him by questions. Everything had gone well. Two strong swimmers, their faces blackened, had slipped overside from the guard-boat and had swum unseen to the *Estrella*. Working with their knives, they had been able to prise off the copper from the second rudder-brace below the waterline. With an auger they had made a space large enough to pass a line through. The most ticklish part of the work had been approaching near enough in the guard-boat and putting the drogue overside after it had been attached to the line, but Field reported that no hail had come from the *Estrella*. The chain had followed the line and had been securely shackled. Now the drogue hung at *Estrella's* stern, safely out of sight below the surface, ready to exert its full force on her rudder when — and if — the spun yarn which held the drogue reversed should part.

"Excellent," said Hornblower again, when Field's last halting sentence was uttered. "You've done very well, Mr Field, thank you."

"Thank you, My Lord."

When Field had left, Hornblower could address himself to Fell.

"Your plan has worked out admirably, Sir Thomas. Now it only remains to catch the *Estrella*. I would strongly recommend you to make all preparations for getting under way at daylight. The sooner we leave after the *Estrella* has sailed the better, don't you think?"

"Aye aye, My Lord."

The ship's bell overhead anticipated the next question Hornblower was about to ask.

"Three hours to daylight," he said. "I'll say goodnight to you gentlemen, then."

It had been a busy day, of ceaseless activity, mental if not physical, since dawn. After a long, hot evening it seemed to Hornblower that his feet had swollen to twice their ordinary size and that his gold-buckled shoes had made no allowance for this expansion — he could hardly pry them off. He took off ribbon and star and gold-laced coat, and reluctantly reminded himself that he would have to put them on again for his ceremonial departure in three hours' time. He sponged himself down with water from his washbasin, and sank down sighing with relief on his cot in the night cabin.

He woke automatically when the watch was called; the cabin was still quite dark and he was at a loss, for a couple of seconds, about why there should be this feeling of urgency within him. Then he remembered, and was wide awake at once, shouting to the sentry at the door to pass the word for Giles. He shaved by lamplight in feverish haste, and then, once more in the hated full-dress uniform, he sped up the ladder to the quarterdeck. It was still pitch dark; no, perhaps there was the slightest glimmering of daylight. Perhaps the sky was the smallest trifle brighter over the Morro. Perhaps. The quarterdeck was crowded with shadowy figures, more even than would be found there with the ship's company at stations for getting under way. At sight of them he nearly turned back, having no wish to reveal that he shared the same weaknesses as the rest of them, but Fell had caught sight of him.

"Good morning, My Lord."

"Morning, Sir Thomas."

"Land breeze blowing full, My Lord."

No doubt about that; Hornblower could feel it breathing round him, delightful after the sweltering stuffiness of the cabin. In these midsummer tropics it would be of short duration; it would be cut off short as soon as the sun, lifting over the horizon, should get to work in its brassy strength upon the land.

"*Estrella's* making ready for sea, My Lord."

There was no doubt about that either; the sounds of it made their way over the water through the twilight.

"I don't have to ask if you are ready, Sir Thomas."

"All ready, My Lord. Hands standing by at the capstan."

"Very well."

Undoubtedly it was lighter already; the figures on the quarterdeck — now much more clearly defined — had all moved over to the starboard side, lining the rail. Half a dozen telescopes were being extended and pointed towards the *Estrella*.

"Sir Thomas, put an end to that, if you please. Send that crowd below."

"They're anxious to see —"

"I know what they want to see. Send them below immediately."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Everyone, of course, was desperately anxious to see if anything was visible at the *Estrella's* waterline aft, which might reveal what had been done at night. But there could be no surer way of calling the attention of the *Estrella's* captain to something suspicious under his stern than by pointing telescopes at it.

"Officer of the watch!"

"My Lord?"

"See to it that no one points a telescope for one moment towards the *Estrella*."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

"When there's enough light to see clearly, you can sweep round the harbour as you might be expected to do. Not more than five seconds for the *Estrella*, but make sure you see all there is to see."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

The eastern sky was now displaying faint greens and yellows, against which the Morro silhouetted itself magnificently though faintly, but in its shadow all was still dark. Even before breakfast it was a romantic moment. It occurred to Hornblower that the presence of an Admiral in full dress on the quarterdeck so early might itself be a suspicious circumstance.

"I'm going below, Sir Thomas. Please keep me informed."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

In the day cabin Gerard and Spendlove sprang to their feet as he entered; presumably they had been among those driven below by Fell's order.

"Mr Spendlove, I am profiting by your admirable example of yesterday. I shall make sure of my breakfast while I may. Would you please order breakfast, Mr Gerard? I presume you gentlemen will favour me with your company."

He threw himself negligently into a chair and watched the preparations. Half way through them a knock at the door brought in Fell himself.

"*Estrella's* clearly in sight now, My Lord. And there's nothing visible under her stern."

"Thank you, Sir Thomas."

A cup of coffee was welcome at this time in the morning. Hornblower did not have to pretend eagerness to drink it. Daylight was creeping in through the cabin windows, making the lamplight garish and unnecessary. Another knock brought in a midshipman.

"Cap'n's respects, My Lord, and *Estrella's* casting off."

"Very well."

Soon she would be under way, and their device would be put to the test. Hornblower made himself bite and masticate another mouthful of toast.

"Can't you young men sit still for even a moment?" he snapped. "Pour me some more coffee, Gerard."

"*Estrella's* warping out into the channel, My Lord," reported the midshipman again.

"Very well," said Hornblower, sipping fastidiously at his coffee, and hoping that no one could guess how much his pulse rate had accelerated. The minutes dragged by.

"*Estrella*'s preparing to make sail, My Lord."

"Very well." Hornblower put down his coffee cup, slowly, and as slowly as he could manage it rose from his chair, the eyes of the two young men never leaving him.

"I think," he said, dragging out his words, "we might now go on deck."

Pacing as slowly as when he had been a mourner at Nelson's funeral he walked out past the sentry and up the ladder; behind him the young men had to curb their impatience. It was dazzling bright on deck; the sun was just over the Morro. In the centre of the fairway at less than a cable's length distance lay the *Estrella*, gleaming in her white paint. As Hornblower's eyes rested on her her jib extended itself upwards, to catch the wind and swing her round. Next moment her mainsail took the wind, and she steadied herself, gathering way; in a few seconds she was moving forward past the *Clorinda*. This was the moment. Fell was standing staring at her and muttering to himself; he was blaspheming in his excitement. *Estrella* dipped her colours; on her deck Hornblower was able to recognise the figure of Gomez, standing directing the handling of the schooner. Gomez caught sight of him at the same moment, and bowed, holding his hat across his chest, and Hornblower returned the compliment.

"She's not making two knots through the water," said Hornblower.

"Thank God for that," said Fell.

Estrella glided on towards the entrance, preparatory to making the dog-legged turn out to sea; Gomez was handling her beautifully under her very easy sail.

"Shall I follow her now, My Lord?"

"I think it's time, Sir Thomas."

"Hands to the capstan, there! Headsail sheets, Mr Field!"

Even at two knots there would be some strain on that length of spun yarn. It must not part — it must not — before *Estrella* was well out to sea. Lusty arms and sturdy backs were heaving *Clorinda*'s cable short.

"Clear away the saluting carronade, there!"

Estrella had made the turn; the last of her mainsail was vanishing round the corner. Fell was giving his orders to get *Clorinda* under way steadily and clearly, despite his excitement. Hornblower was watching him narrowly; this was not a bad test of how he would behave in action, of how he would take his ship down into the smoke and fury of a battle.

"Main tops'l braces!"

Fell was bringing the big frigate round in as neat a fashion as Gomez had handled *Estrella*. *Clorinda* steadied herself and gathered way, moving down the channel.

"Man the rail!"

Whatever was going on round the corner, whatever was happening to the *Estrella* out of sight, the compliments must be paid. Nine-tenths of *Clorinda*'s crew on deck could be spared for the purpose; with the ship creeping forward before the land breeze the other one-tenth sufficed to keep her under control. Hornblower drew himself up and faced the Spanish flag flying over the Morro, his hand to his hat brim, Fell beside him, the other officers in rank behind, while the salute banged out and was returned, the flags dipping respectfully.

"Carry on!"

They were approaching the turn. It was possible that at any moment one of those grinning cannons up there would pitch a warning shot at them — a shot warning them that a hundred other guns were ready to pound them into a wreck; that would be if the drogue had begun to take obvious effect on the *Estrella*.

"Main tops'l braces!" came Fell's order again.

Already the big Atlantic rollers were making their effect felt; Hornblower could feel *Clorinda*'s bows lift momentarily to a dying surge.

"Hard a-starboard!" *Clorinda* turned steadily. "Meet her! Steady as you go."

She had hardly settled on her new course when *Estrella* came in sight again a mile farther out to sea, her bows pointed in almost the opposite direction; she was still under very easy canvas, thank God, steadying herself for the final turn from the channel out into the ocean. *Clorinda*'s main topsail shivered briefly as the Morro height intercepted the land breeze, but drew again instantly. *Estrella* was turning again now. She was hardly within cannon shot of the Morro.

"Port!" came Fell's order. "Steady!"

The land breeze was right aft now, but dying away, partly with their increased distance from land and partly with the growing heat of the sun.

"Set the mains'l."

Fell was quite right; there was need to hasten, lest the ship be delayed in the belt of doldrums between the land breeze and the trade wind. The enormous sail area of the main course carried *Clorinda* forward boldly, and once more the sound of the ship's way through the water became audible. *Estrella* was clear of the channel now; Hornblower, watching anxiously, saw her set foresail and staysails and jibs, all her fore and aft canvas in fact. She was holding her course northward, close-hauled, directly away from the land; she must have caught the trade wind and was making nothing, very sensibly, because she would have to weather Haiti before next morning on her course to the Old Bahama Channel and Havana. They were far enough from the Morro now, and from *Estrella*, to incur no suspicion by staring through telescopes at her. Hornblower looked long and carefully. He could detect nothing unusual about her appearance. It suddenly occurred to him that perhaps Gomez had detected the drogue under his stern and had removed it. He might even now be exploding with laughter, along with his officers, looking back at the British frigate hopefully following them.

"Port!" came Fell's order again, and *Clorinda* took the final turn.

"Leading marks in line, sir!" reported the master, looking aft at the land with his telescope to his eye.

"Very well. Steady as you go."

Now the waves they were encountering were true Atlantic rollers, heaving up *Clorinda's* starboard bow, and passing aft as the bows dipped to heave up the port quarter. *Estrella* right ahead was still close-hauled on a northerly course under fore and aft canvas.

"She'll be making six knots," estimated Gerard, standing with Spendlove a yard from Hornblower.

"That spun yarn should hold at six knots," said Spendlove, meditatively.

"No bottom with this line!" reported the leadsman in the chains.

"All hands make sail!"

The order was being piped through the ship. Topgallants and royals were being spread; it was not long before *Clorinda* had every stitch of canvas set.

Yet the land breeze was dying fast. *Clorinda* was hardly making steerage way. Once, twice, the sails flapped like thunder, but she still held her course, creeping forward over the blue and white sea, with the sun blazing down upon her from a blue sky with hardly a fleck of cloud.

"Can't keep her on her course, sir," reported the quartermaster.

Clorinda was yawing sluggishly as the rollers came at her. Far ahead the *Estrella* was almost hull down. Now came a breath of a different air, the tiniest breath; Hornblower felt it, nearly imperceptible, on his sweating face long before *Clorinda* made response. It was a different air indeed, not the heated air of the land breeze, but the fresher air of the trade wind, clean with its passage over three thousand miles of ocean. The sails flapped and shivered; *Clorinda* swung more meaningfully.

"Here it comes!" exclaimed Fell. "Full and by!"

A stronger puff came, so that the rudder could bite. A lull, another puff, another lull, another puff, yet each puff was stronger yet. The next puff did not die away. It endured, heeling *Clorinda* over. A roller burst against her starboard bow in a dazzling rainbow. Now they had caught the trade wind; now they could thrust their way northwards close-hauled in the trail of the *Estrella*. With the clean, fresh wind blowing, and the sensation of successful striving with it, a new animation came over the ship. There were smiles to be seen.

"She hasn't set her tops'ls yet, My Lord," said Gerard, his telescope still to his eye.

"I doubt if she will while she makes her nothing," replied Hornblower.

"On a wind she can weather and headreach on us," said Spendlove. "Just as she did yesterday."

Yesterday? Was it only yesterday? It could have been a month ago, so much had happened since yesterday's chase.

"Do you think that drogue ought to have any effect?" asked Fell, approaching them.

"None, sir, practically speaking," answered Spendlove. "Not while that spun yarn keeps it tail forward."

Fell had one huge hand clasped in the other, grinding his knuckles into his palm.

"For me," said Hornblower, and every eye turned to him, "I am going to say farewell to gold lace. A cooler coat and a looser neckcloth."

Let Fell display worry and nervousness; he himself was going below as if he had no interest whatever in the outcome of the affair. Down in the hot cabin it was a relief to throw off his full-dress uniform — ten pounds of broadcloth and gold — and to have Giles get out a clean shirt and white duck trousers.

"I'll take my bath," said Hornblower, meditatively.

He knew perfectly well that Fell thought it undignified and dangerous to discipline that an Admiral should disport himself under the washdeck pump, hosed down by grinning seamen, and he neither agreed nor cared. No miserable sponging down could take the place of his bath. The seamen pumped vigorously, and Hornblower pranced with middle-aged abandon under the stinging impact of the water. Now the clean shirt and trousers were doubly delightful; he felt a new man as he came on deck again, and his unconcern was not all pretence when Fell nervously approached him.

"She's running clean away from us again, My Lord," he said.

"We know she can, Sir Thomas. We can only wait until she puts her helm up and sets her tops'ls."

"As long as we can keep her in sight —" said Fell.

Clorinda was lying right over, fighting her way to the northward.

"I can see that we're doing all we can, Sir Thomas," said Hornblower, soothingly.

The morning was wearing on. "Up spirits!" was piped, and Fell agreed with the sailing master that it was noon, and the hands were sent to dinner. Now it was only when *Clorinda* lifted to a wave that a telescope, trained over the starboard bow from the quarterdeck, could detect the gleam of *Estrella's* sails over the horizon. She still had no topsails set; Gomez was acting on the knowledge that close-hauled his schooner behaved better without her square sails — unless he was merely playing with his pursuers. The hills of Puerto Rico had sunk out of sight below the horizon far, far astern. And the roast beef at dinner, roast fresh beef, had been most disappointing, tough and stringy and without any taste whatever.

"Stuart said he'd send me the best sirloin the island could produce, My Lord," said Gerard, in answer to Hornblower's expostulations.

"I wish I had him here," said Hornblower. "I'd make him eat it, every bit, without salt. Sir Thomas, please accept my apologies."

"Er — yes, My Lord," said Fell, who had been invited to his Admiral's table and who had been recalled from his own private thoughts by Hornblower's apologies. "That drogue —"

Having said those words — that special word, rather — he was unable to say more. He looked across the table at Hornblower. His lantern-jawed face — the brick-red cheeks always looked odd in that conformation — showed his anxiety, which was accentuated by the look in his eyes.

"If we don't know all about it today," said Hornblower, "we'll hear all about it at some later date."

It was the truth, even though it was not the kindest thing to say.

"We'll be the laughing-stock of the Islands," said Fell.

No one in the world could look more miserable than he did at that moment. Hornblower himself was inclined to give up hope, but the sight of that despair roused his contrary nature.

"There's all the difference in the world between six knots, which she's making now close-hauled, and twelve knots, which she'll make when she puts up her helm," he said. "Mr Spendlove here will tell you that the water resistance is a function of the square of the speed. Isn't that so, Mr Spendlove?"

"Perhaps a function of the cube or even one of the higher powers, My Lord."

"So we can still hope, Sir Thomas. That spun yarn will have eight times the pull upon it when she alters course."

"It'll be chafing now, as well, My Lord," added Spendlove.

"If they didn't see the thing last night and cast it off," said Fell, still gloomy.

When they reached the deck again the sun was inclining towards the west.

"Masthead, there!" hailed Fell. "Is the chase still in sight?"

"Yes, sir. Hull down from here, sir, but plain in sight. Two points or thereabouts on the weather bow."

"She's made all the northing she needs," grumbled Fell. "Why doesn't she alter course?"

There was nothing to do except wait, to try and extract some pleasure from the clean wind and the blue and white sea; but the pleasure was only faint now, the sea did not seem so blue. Nothing to do except wait, with the minutes dragging like hours. Then it happened.

"Deck, there! Chase is altering course to port. She's running right before the wind."

"Very well."

Fell looked round at all the faces of the crowd on the quarterdeck. His own was as tense as anyone else's.

"Mr Sefton, alter course four points to port."

He was going to play the game out to the bitter end, even though yesterday's experience, closely parallel to the present, had shown that *Clorinda* stood no chance in normal circumstances of intercepting.

"Deck, there! She's settin' her tops'ls. T'garns'ls, too, sir!"

"Very well."

"We'll soon know now," said Spendlove. "With the drogue in action she *must* lose speed. She *must*."

"Deck, there! Cap'n, sir!" The lookout's voice had risen to a scream of excitement. "She's flown up into the wind! She's all aback! Fore topmast's gone, sir!"

"So have her rudder pintles," said Hornblower, grimly.

Fell was leaping on the deck, actually dancing with joy, his face radiant. But he re-collected himself with all speed.

"Come two points to starboard," he ordered. "Mr James, get aloft with you and tell me how she bears."

"She's taking in her mains'l!" shouted the lookout.

"Trying to get before the wind again," commented Gerard.

"Cap'n, sir!" This was James's voice from the masthead. "You're heading a point to loo'ard of her."

"Very well."

"She's coming before the wind — no, she's all aback again, sir!"

The Thing still had her by the tail, then; her struggles would be as unavailing as those of a deer in the claws of a lion.

"Steer small, you —" said Fell, using a horrible word to the helmsman.

Everyone was excited, everyone seemed to be obsessed with the fear that *Estrella* would clear away the wreck and make her escape after all.

"With her rudder gone she'll never be able to hold a course," said Hornblower. "And she's lost her fore-topmast, too."

Another wait, but of a very different nature now. *Clorinda*, thrashing along, seemed to have caught the excitement and to have put on a spurt as she hurled herself at her quarry, racing forward to triumph.

"There she is!" said Gerard, telescope trained forward. "All aback still."

As the next wave lifted *Clorinda* they all caught sight of her; they were approaching her fast. A sorry, pitiful sight she looked, her fore-topmast broken off clean at the cap, her sails shivering in the wind.

"Clear away the bow chaser," ordered Fell. "Fire a shot across her bow."

The shot was fired. Something rose to the schooner's main peak, and broke out into the red and gold of Spain. It hung there for a moment and then came slowly down again.

"Congratulations on the success of your plans, Sir Thomas," said Hornblower.

"Thank you, My Lord," answered Fell. He was beaming with pleasure. "I could have done nothing without Your Lordship's acceptance of my suggestions."

"That is very good of you, Sir Thomas," said Hornblower, turning back to look at the prize.

The *Estrella* was a pitiful sight, the more pitiful as they approached her, and could see more clearly the raffle of wreckage dangling forward, and the rudder torn loose aft. The sudden tug of the drogue when it took effect, using enormous force and leverage, had broken or pulled straight the stout bronze pintles on which the rudder had hung suspended. The drogue itself, weighted by its chain, still hung out of sight below the dangling rudder. Gomez, brought triumphantly aboard, had still no idea of the cause of the disaster, and had not guessed at the reason for the loss of his rudder. He had been young and handsome and dignified in the face of undeserved misfortune when he arrived on *Clorinda*'s deck. There was no pleasure in observing the change in him when he was told the truth. No pleasure at all. The sight even took away the feeling of pleasure over a professional

triumph, to see him wilting under the eyes of his captors. But still, more than three hundred slaves had been set free.

Hornblower was dictating his despatch to Their Lordships, and Spendlove, who numbered this newfangled shorthand among his surprising accomplishments, was slashing down the letter at a speed that made light of Hornblower's stumbling sentences — Hornblower had not yet acquired the art of dictation.

"In conclusion," said Hornblower, "it gives me particular pleasure to call Their Lordships' attention to the ingenuity and activity of Captain Sir Thomas Fell, which made this exemplary capture possible."

Spendlove looked up from his pad and stared at him. Spendlove knew the truth; but the unblinking stare which answered him defied him to utter a word.

"Add the usual official ending," said Hornblower.

It was not for him to explain his motives to his secretary. Nor could he have explained them if he had tried. He liked Fell no better now than before.

"Now a letter to my agent," said Hornblower.

"Aye aye, My Lord," said Spendlove, turning a page.

Hornblower began to assemble in his mind the sentences composing this next letter. He wanted to say that because the capture was due to Sir Thomas's suggestions he did not wish to apply for his share of head money for himself. It was his desire that the share of the Flag should be allocated to Sir Thomas.

"No," said Hornblower. "Belay that. I won't write after all."

"Aye aye, My Lord," said Spendlove.

It was possible to pass on to another man distinction and honour, but one could not pass on money. There was something obvious, something suspicious, about that. Sir Thomas might guess, and Sir Thomas's feelings might be hurt, and he would not risk it. But he wished he liked Sir Thomas better, all the same.

THE BEWILDERED PIRATES

*Oh, the dames of France are fo-ond a-and free
And Flemish li-ips a-are willing.*

That was young Spendlove singing lustily only two rooms away from Hornblower's at Admiralty House, and he might as well be in the same room, as all the windows were open to let in the Jamaican sea breeze.

And sweet the maids of I-Ita-aly —

That was Gerard joining in.

"My compliments to Mr Gerard and Mr Spendlove," growled Hornblower to Giles, who was helping him dress, and that caterwauling is to stop. Repeat that to make sure you have the words right."

"His Lordship's compliments, gentlemen, and that caterwauling is to stop," repeated Giles, dutifully.

"Very well, run and say it."

Giles ran, and Hornblower was gratified to hear the noise cease abruptly. The fact that those two young men were singing — and still more the fact that they had forgotten he was within earshot — was proof that they were feeling lighthearted, as might be expected, seeing they were dressing for a ball. Yet it was no excuse, for they knew well enough that their tone-deaf Commander-in-Chief detested music, and they should also have realised that he would be more testy than usual, on account of that very ball, because it meant that he would be forced to spend a long evening listening to those dreary sounds, cloying and irritating at the same moment. There would certainly be a table or two of whist — Mr Hough would be aware of his principal guest's tastes —

but it was too much to hope for that all sound of music would be excluded from the card-room. The prospect of a ball was by no means as exhilarating to Hornblower as to his flag-lieutenant and to his secretary. Hornblower tied his white neckcloth and painfully adjusted it to geometrical symmetry, and Giles helped him into his black dresscoat. Hornblower regarded the result in the mirror, by the light of the candles round its frame. At least tolerable, he said to himself. The growing peacetime convention whereby naval and military men appeared in civilian clothes had a good deal to recommend it; so had the other increasing fad for men to wear black dresscoats. Barbara had helped him select this one, and had supervised its fitting by the tailor. The cut was excellent, Hornblower decided, turning back and forth before the mirror, and black and white suited him. "Only gentlemen can wear black and white," Barbara had said, and that was very gratifying. Giles handed him his tall hat and he studied the additional effect. Then he took up his white gloves, remembered to remove his hat again, and stepped out through the door which Giles opened for him and entered the corridor where Gerard and Spendlove, in their best uniforms, were waiting for him. "I must apologise on behalf of Spendlove and myself for the singing, My Lord," said Gerard. The softening effect of the black dresscoat was evident when Hornblower refrained from a rasping reprimand. "What would Miss Lucy say, Spendlove, if she heard you singing about the dames of France?" he asked. Spendlove's answering grin was very attractive. "I must ask Your Lordship's further indulgence not to tell her about it," he said. "I'll make that conditional upon your further good behaviour," said Hornblower. The open carriage was waiting outside the front door of Admiralty House; four seamen stood by with lanterns to add to the light thrown by the lamps on the porch. Hornblower climbed in and seated himself. Etiquette was different here on land; Hornblower missed the shrilling of the pipes that he felt should accompany this ceremonial, as it would if it were a boat he was entering, and in a carriage the senior officer entered first, so that after he was seated Spendlove and Gerard had to run round and enter by the other door. Gerard sat beside him and Spendlove sat opposite, his back to the horses. As the door shut the carriage moved forward, between the lanterns at the gate, and out to the pitch dark Jamaican night. Hornblower breathed the warm, tropical air and grudgingly admitted to himself that after all it was no great hardship to attend a ball. "Perhaps you have a rich marriage in mind, Spendlove?" he asked. "I understand Miss Lucy will inherit it all. But I advise you to make certain before committing yourself that there are no nephews on the father's side." "A rich marriage might be desirable, My Lord," replied Spendlove's voice out of the darkness, "but I must remind you that in affairs of the heart I have been handicapped from birth — or at least from my baptism." "From your baptism?" repeated Hornblower, puzzled. "Yes, My Lord. You remember my name, perhaps?" "Erasmus," said Hornblower. "Exactly, My Lord. It is not adapted to endearments. Could any woman fall in love with an Erasmus? Could any woman bring herself to breathe the words 'Razzy, darling'?" "I fancy it could happen," said Hornblower. "May I live long enough to hear it," said Spendlove. It was remarkably agreeable to be driving thus through the Jamaican night behind two good horses and with two pleasant young men; especially, as he told himself smugly, because he had done work satisfactory enough to justify relaxation. His command was in good order, the policing of the Caribbean was proceeding satisfactorily, and smuggling and piracy were being reduced to small proportions. Tonight he had no responsibilities. He was in no danger at all, not any. Danger was far away, over the horizons both of time and space. He could lean back, relaxed, against the leather cushions of the carriage, taking only moderate care not to crease his black dresscoat or crumple the careful pleats of his shirt. Naturally, his reception at the Houghs's house was somewhat overpowering. There was a good deal of 'My Lord' and 'His Lordship'. Hough was a substantial planter, a man of considerable wealth, with enough of dislike for English winters not to be the usual West Indian absentee landlord. Yet for all his wealth he was greatly impressed by the fact that he was entertaining, in one and the same person, a Peer and an Admiral and a Commander-in-Chief — and someone whose influence might at any moment be of great importance to him. The warmth of his greeting, and of Mrs Hough's, was so great that it even overflowed round Gerard and

Spendlove as well. Perhaps the Houghs felt that if they wished to be sure of standing well with the Commander-in-Chief it might be as well to cultivate good relations with his flag-lieutenant and secretary, too. Lucy Hough was a pretty enough girl of some seventeen or eighteen years of age whom Hornblower had already met on a few occasions. Hornblower told himself he could feel no interest in a child straight from the schoolroom — almost straight from the nursery — however pretty. He smiled at her and she dropped her eyes, looked up at him again, and once more looked away. It was interesting that she was not nearly so timid when she met the glances and acknowledged the bows of the young men who were far more likely to be of interest to her.

"Your Lordship does not dance, I understand?" said Hough.

"It is painful to be reminded of what I am missing in the presence of so much beauty," replied Hornblower with another smile at Mrs Hough and at Lucy.

"Perhaps a rubber of whist, then, My Lord?" suggested Hough.

"The Goddess of Chance instead of the Muse of Music," said Hornblower — he always tried to talk about music as if it meant something to him — "I will woo the one instead of the other."

"From what I know about Your Lordship's skill at whist," said Hough, "I would say that as regards Your Lordship the Goddess of Chance has but small need for wooing."

The ball had been in progress, apparently, for some time before Hornblower's arrival. There were two score young people on the floor of the great room, a dozen dowagers on chairs round the wall, an orchestra in the corner. Hough led the way to another room; Hornblower dismissed his two young men with a nod, and settled down to whist with Hough and a couple of formidable old ladies. The closing of the heavy door shut out, luckily, nearly all the exasperating din of the orchestra; the old ladies played a sound game, and a pleasant hour enough went by. It was terminated by the entrance of Mrs Hough.

"It is time for the Polonaise before supper," she announced. "I really must beg you to leave your cards and come and witness it."

"Would Your Lordship — ?" asked Hough apologetically.

"Mrs Hough's wish is my command," said Hornblower.

The ballroom was, of course, stifling hot. Faces were flushed and shiny, but there was no lack of energy apparent as the double line formed up for the Polonaise while the orchestra grated out its mysterious noises to encourage the young people. Spendlove was leading Lucy by the hand and they were exchanging happy glances. Hornblower, from the weary age of forty-six, could look with condescension at these young men and women in their immature teens and twenties, tolerant of their youth and enthusiasm. The noises the orchestra made became more jerky and confusing, but the young people could find some sense in them. They capered round the room, skirts swaying and coattails flapping, everyone smiling and light-hearted; the double lines became rings, melted into lines again, turned and re-formed, until in the end with a final hideous crash from the orchestra the women sank low in curtsies and the men bent themselves double before them — a pretty sight once the music had ceased. There was a burst of laughter and applause before the lines broke up. The women, with sidelong looks at each other, gathered into groups which edged out of the room. They were retiring to repair the damages sustained in the heat of action.

Hornblower met Lucy's eyes again, and once more she looked away and then back at him. Shy? Eager? It was hard to tell with these mere children; but it was not the sort of glance she had bestowed on Spendlove.

"Ten minutes at least before the supper march, My Lord," said Hough. "Your Lordship will be kind enough to take in Mrs Hough?"

"Delighted, of course," replied Hornblower.

Spendlove approached. He was mopping his face with his handkerchief.

"I would enjoy a breath of cooler air, My Lord," he said. "Perhaps —"

"I'll come with you," said Hornblower, not sorry to have an excuse to be rid of Hough's ponderous company. They stepped out into the dark garden; so bright had been the candles in the ballroom that they had to tread cautiously at first.

"I trust you are enjoying yourself," said Hornblower.

"Very much indeed, thank you, My Lord."

"And your suit is making progress?"

"Of that I am not so sure, My Lord."

"You have my best wishes in any case."

"Thank you, My Lord."

Hornblower's eyes were more accustomed now to the darkness. He could see the stars now when he looked up. Sirius was visible, resuming once more his eternal chase of Orion across the night sky. The air was warm and still with the cessation of the sea breeze.

Then it happened. Hornblower heard a movement behind him, a rustling of foliage, but before he could pay attention to it hands gripped his arms, a hand came over his mouth. He began to struggle. A sharp, burning pain under his right shoulder-blade made him jump.

"Quiet," said a voice, a thick, heavy voice. "Or this."

He felt the pain again. It was a knife point in his back, and he held himself still. The unseen hands began to hustle him away; there were at least three men round him. His nose told him they were sweating — with excitement, perhaps.

"Spendlove?" he said.

"Quiet," said the voice again.

He was being hustled down the long garden. A momentary sharp cry, instantly stifled, presumably came from Spendlove behind him. Hornblower had difficulty in preserving his balance as he was hurried along, but the arms that held him sustained him; when he stumbled he could feel the pressure of the knife point against his back sharpen into pain as it pierced his clothes. At the far end of the garden they emerged into a narrow path where a darkness loomed up in the night. Hornblower bumped into something that snorted and moved — a mule, apparently.

"Get on," said the voice beside him.

Hornblower hesitated, and felt the knife against his ribs.

"Get on," said the voice; someone else was wheeling the mule round again for him to mount.

There were neither stirrups nor saddle. Hornblower put his hands on the withers and hauled himself up astride the mule. He could find no reins, although he heard the chink of a bit. He buried his fingers in the scanty mane. All round him he could hear a bustle as the other mules were mounted. His own mule started with something of a jerk that made him cling wildly to the mane. Someone had mounted the mule ahead and was riding forward with a leading rein attached to his mule. There seemed to be four mules altogether, and some eight men. The mules began to trot, and Hornblower felt himself tossed about precariously on the slippery back of the mule, but there was a man running on each side of him helping to keep him on his perch. A second or two later they slowed down again as the leading mule turned a difficult corner.

"Who are you?" demanded Hornblower, with the first breath that the motion had not shaken out of his body. The man by his right knee waved something at him, something bright enough to shine in the starlight. It was a cutlass — the machete of the West Indies.

"Quiet," he said, "or I cut off your leg."

The next moment the mule broke into a trot again, and Hornblower could have said no more even if he were inclined to do so. Mules and men hurried along a path between great fields of cane, with Hornblower bounding about on the mule's back. He tried to look up at the stars to see which way they were going, but it was difficult, and they altered course repeatedly, winding about over the countryside. They left the cane behind, and seemed to emerge into open savannah. Then there were trees; then they slowed down for a sharp ascent, broke into a trot again down the other side — the men on foot running tirelessly beside the mules — and climbed again, the mules slipping and plunging on what appeared to be an insecure surface. Twice Hornblower nearly fell off, to be heaved back again by the man beside him. Soon he was atrociously saddle-sore — if the word could be considered appropriate when he was riding bareback — and the ridge of the mule's spine caused him agony. He was drenched with sweat, his mouth was parched, and he was desperately weary. He grew stupefied with misery, despite the pain he suffered. More than once they splashed across small streams roaring down from the mountains; again they made their way through a belt of trees. Several times they seemed to be threading narrow passes.

Hornblower had no idea how long they had been travelling when they found themselves beside a small river, seemingly placid as it reflected the stars. On the far side faint in the darkness towered a lofty cliff. Here the

party halted, and the man beside him tugged at his knee in an obvious invitation to dismount. Hornblower slid down the mule's side — he had to lean against the animal for a moment when his legs refused to hold him up. When he was able to stand upright and look about him he saw a white face among the dark ones that surrounded him. He could just make out Spendlove, his knees sagging and his head lolling as he stood supported on either side.

"Spendlove!" he said.

There was an agonising moment of waiting before the drooping figure said, "My Lord?" The voice was thick and unnatural.

"Spendlove! Are you wounded?"

"I'm — well — My Lord."

Someone pushed Hornblower in the back.

"Come. Swim," said a voice.

"Spendlove!"

Several hands turned Hornblower away and thrust him stumbling down to the water's edge. It was hopeless to resist; Hornblower could only guess that Spendlove had been stunned by a blow and was only now recovering, his unconscious body having been carried so far by mule.

"Swim," said the voice, and a hand pressed him forward to the water.

"No!" croaked Hornblower.

The water seemed immeasurably wide and dark. Even while Hornblower struggled at the water's edge he had a horrible realisation of the indignity he was undergoing, as a Commander-in-Chief, acting like a child in the hands of these people. Somebody led a mule slowly down into the water beside him.

"Hold his tail," said the voice, and there was the knife in his back again.

He took hold of the mule's tail and despairingly let himself flop into the water, spreadeagled. For a moment the mule floundered and then struck out; the water, as it closed round Hornblower, seemed hardly colder than the warm air. It was no more than a moment, it seemed, before the mule was plunging up the other bank, and Hornblower found the bottom under his feet and waded out after him, the water streaming from his clothes, the rest of the gang and the animals splashing after him. The hand was back on his shoulder, turning him to one side and urging him along. He heard an odd creaking in front of him and a swaying object struck him on the chest. His hands felt smooth bamboo and some sort of creeper, liana, knotted to it — it was a makeshift rope ladder dangling in front of him.

"Up!" said the voice. "Up!"

He could not — he would not — and there was the knife point at his back again. He stretched his arms up and grasped a rung, feeling desperately with his feet for another.

"Up!"

He began the climb, with the ladder writhing under his feet in the animal fashion rope ladders always display. It was horrible in the darkness, feeling with his feet for each elusive rung in turn, clutching desperately with his hands. His sodden shoes tended to slip on the smooth bamboo. Nor did his hands feel secure on the creeper. Someone else was climbing close after him, and the ladder twined about unpredictably. He knew himself to be swaying pendulum-fashion in the darkness. Up he went, one rung at a time, his hands gripping so convulsively that it was only by a conscious effort that he was able to make each one unclasp in turn and seek a fresh hold. Then the gyrations and swinging grew less. His upward-stretching hand touched earth, or rock. The next moment was not easy; he was unsure of his handhold and he hesitated. He knew himself to be a prodigious height up in the air. Just below him on the ladder he heard a sharp command issued by the man following him, and then a hand above him grasped his wrist and pulled. His feet found the next rung, and there he was, lying gasping on his belly on solid earth. The hand dragged at him again and he crawled on all fours forward to make room for the man behind him. He was almost sobbing; there was no trace left now of the haughty and self-satisfied human who had admired himself in the mirror not so many hours ago.

Other people trod past him.

"My Lord! My Lord!"

That was Spendlove asking for him.

"Spendlove!" he answered, sitting up.

"Are you all right, My Lord?" asked Spendlove, stooping over him.

Was it sense of humour or sense of the ridiculous, was it natural pride or force of habit, which made him take a grip on himself?

"As right as I might expect to be, thank you, after these rather remarkable experiences," he said. "But you — what happened to you?"

"They hit me on the head," replied Spendlove, simply.

"Don't stand there. Sit down," said Hornblower, and Spendlove collapsed beside him.

"Do you know where we are, My Lord?" he asked.

"Somewhere at the top of a cliff, as far as I can estimate," said Hornblower.

"But where, My Lord?"

"Somewhere in His Majesty's loyal colony of Jamaica. More than that I can't say."

"It will be dawn soon, I suppose," said Spendlove, weakly.

"Soon enough."

Nobody about them was paying them any attention. There was a great deal of chatter going on, in marked contrast with the silence — the almost disciplined silence — which had been preserved during their dash across country. The chatter mingled with the sound of a small waterfall, which he realised he had been hearing ever since his climb. The conversations were in a thick English which Hornblower could hardly understand, but he could be sure that their captors were expressing exultation. He could hear women's voices, too, while figures paced about, too excited to sit down despite the fatigues of the night.

"I doubt if we're at the top of the cliff, My Lord, if you'll pardon me," said Spendlove.

He pointed upwards. The sky was growing pale, and the stars were fading; vertically over their heads they could see the cliff above them, overhanging them. Looking up, Hornblower could see foliage silhouetted against the sky.

"Strange," he said. "We must be on some sort of shelf."

On his right hand the sky was showing a hint of light, of the palest pink, even while on his left it was still dark.

"Facing north-nor'west," said Spendlove.

The light increased perceptibly; when Hornblower looked to the east again the pink had turned to orange, and there was a hint of green. They seemed immeasurably high up; almost at their feet, it seemed, as they sat, the shelf ended abruptly, and far down below them the shadowy world was taking form, concealed at the moment by a light mist. Hornblower was suddenly conscious of his wet clothes, and shivered.

"That might be the sea," said Spendlove, pointing.

The sea it was, blue and lovely in the far distance; a broad belt of land, some miles across, extended between the cliff on which they were perched and the edge of the sea; the mist still obscured it. Hornblower rose to his feet, took a step forward, leaning over a low, crude parapet of piled rock; he shrank back before nerving himself to look again. Under his feet there was nothing. They were indeed on a shelf in the face of the cliff. About the height of a frigate's mainyard, sixty feet or so; vertically below them he could see the small stream he had crossed holding the mule's tail; the rope ladder still hung down from where he stood to the water's edge; when, with an effort of will, he forced himself to lean out and look over he could see the mules standing dispiritedly below him in the narrow area between the river and the foot of the cliff; the overhang must be considerable. They were on a shelf in a cliff, undercut through the ages by the river below when in spate. Nothing could reach them from above, and nothing from below if the ladder were to be drawn up. The shelf was perhaps ten yards wide at its widest, and perhaps a hundred yards long. At one end the waterfall he had heard tumbled down the cliff face in a groove it had cut for itself; it splashed against a cluster of gleaming rocks and then leaped out again. The sight of it told him how thirsty he was, and he walked along to it. It was a giddy thing to do, to stand there with the cliff face at one elbow and a vertical drop under the other, with the spray bursting round him, but he could fill his cupped hands with water and drink, and drink again, before splashing his face and head refreshingly. He drew back to find Spendlove waiting for him to finish. Matted in Spendlove's thick hair and behind his left ear and down his neck was a black clot of blood. Spendlove knelt to drink and to wash, and rose again touching his scalp cautiously.

"They spared me nothing," he said.

His uniform was spattered with blood, too. At his waist dangled an empty scabbard; his sword was missing, and as they turned back from the waterfall they could see it — it was in the hand of one of their captors, who was standing waiting for them. He was short and square and heavily built, not entirely Negro, possibly as much as half white. He wore a dirty white shirt and loose, ragged blue trousers, with dilapidated buckled shoes on his splay feet.

"Now, Lord," he said.

He spoke with the Island intonation, with a thickening of the vowels and a slurring of the consonants.

"What do you want?" demanded Hornblower, putting all the rasp into his voice that he could manage.

"Write us a letter," said the man with the sword.

"A letter? To whom?"

"To the Governor."

"Asking him to come and hang you?" asked Hornblower.

The man shook his big head.

"No. I want a paper, a paper with a seal on it. A pardon. For us all. With a seal on it."

"Who are you?"

"Ned Johnson." The name meant nothing to Hornblower, nor, as a glance showed, did it mean anything to the omniscient Spendlove.

"I sailed with Harkness," said Johnson.

"Ah!"

That meant something to both the British officers. Harkness was one of the last of the petty pirates. Hardly more than a week ago his sloop, *Blossom*, had been cut off by the *Clorinda* off Savannalamar, and her escape to leeward intercepted. Under long-range fire from the frigate she had despairingly run herself aground at the mouth of the Sweet River, and her crew had escaped into the marshes and mangrove swamps of that section of coast, all except her captain, whose body had been found on her deck almost cut in two by a round shot from *Clorinda*. This was her crew, left leaderless — unless Johnson could be called their leader — and to hunt them down the Governor had called out two battalions of troops as soon as *Clorinda* beat back to Kingston with the news. It was to cut off their escape by sea that the Governor, at Hornblower's suggestion, had posted guards at every fishing beach in the whole big island — otherwise the cycle they had already probably followed would be renewed, with the theft of a fishing boat, the capture of a larger craft, and so on until they were a pest again.

"There's no pardon for pirates," said Hornblower.

"Yes," said Johnson. "Write us a letter, and the Governor will give us one."

He turned aside and from the foot of the cliff at the back of the shelf he picked up something. It was a leatherbound book — the second volume of *Waverley*, Hornblower saw when it was put in his hands — and Johnson produced a stub of pencil and gave him that as well.

"Write to the Governor," he said; he opened the book at the beginning and indicated the flyleaf as the place to write on.

"What do you think I would write?" asked Hornblower.

"Ask him for a pardon for us. With his seal on it."

Apparently Johnson must have heard somewhere, in talk with fellow pirates, of 'a pardon under the Great Seal', and the memory had lingered.

"The Governor would never do that."

"Then I send him your ears. Then I send him your nose," said Johnson.

That was a horrible thing to hear. Hornblower glanced at Spendlove who had turned white at the words.

"You, the Admiral," continued Johnson. "You, the Lord, The Governor will do that."

"I doubt if he would," said Hornblower.

He conjured up in his mind the picture of fussy old General Sir Augustus Hooper, and tried to imagine the reaction produced by Johnson's demand. His Excellency would come near to bursting a blood vessel at the thought of granting pardons to two dozen pirates. The home government, when it heard the news, would be intensely annoyed, and without doubt most of the annoyance would be directed at the man whose idiocy in allowing himself to be kidnapped had put everyone in this absurd position. That suggested a question.

"How did you come to be in the garden?" he asked.

"We was waiting for you to go home, but you came out first."

If they had been intending —

"Stand back!" yelled Johnson.

He leaped backwards with astonishing agility for his bulk, bracing himself, knees bent, body tense, on guard with the sword. Hornblower looked round in astonishment, in time to see Spendlove relax; he had been poising himself for a spring. With that sword in his hand and its point against Johnson's throat, the position would have been reversed. Some of the others came running up at the cry; one of them had a staff in his hand — a headless pike stave apparently — and thrust it cruelly into Spendlove's face. Spendlove staggered back, and the staff was whirled up to strike him down. Hornblower leaped in front of him.

"No!" he yelled, and they all stood looking at each other, the drama of the situation ebbing away. Then one of the men came sidling towards Hornblower, cutlass in hand.

"Cut off his ear?" he asked over his shoulder to Johnson.

"No. Not yet. Sit down, you two." When they hesitated Johnson's voice rose to a roar. "Sit down!"

Under the menace of the cutlass there was nothing to do but sit down, and they were helpless.

"You write that letter?" asked Johnson.

"Wait a little," said Hornblower wearily; he could think of nothing else to say in that situation. He was playing for time, hopelessly, like a child at bedtime confronted by stern guardians.

"Let's have some breakfast," said Spendlove.

At the far end of the shelf a small fire had been lighted, its smoke clinging in the still dawn in a thin thread to the sloping overhang of the cliff. An iron pot hung from a chain attached to a tripod over the fire, and two women were crouching over it attending to it. Packed against the back wall of the shelf were chests and kegs and barrels. Muskets were ranged in a rack. It occurred to Hornblower that he was in the situation common in popular romances; he was in the pirates' lair. Perhaps those chests contained untold treasures of pearls and gold. Pirates, like any other seafarers, needed a land base, and these pirates had established one here instead of on some lonely cay. His brig *Clement* had cleaned out one of those last year.

"You write that letter, Lord," said Johnson. He poked at Hornblower's breast with the sword, and the point pierced the thin shirtfront to prick him over the breastbone.

"What is it you want?" asked Hornblower.

"A pardon. With a seal."

Hornblower studied the swarthy features in front of him. The jig was up for piracy in the Caribbean, he knew. American ships-of-war in the north, French ships-of-war working from the Lesser Antilles, and his own busy squadron based on Jamaica had made the business both unprofitable and dangerous. And this particular band of pirates, the remains of the Harkness gang, were in a more precarious position than any, with the loss of their ship, and with their escape to sea cut off by his precautions. It had been a bold plan, and well executed, to save their necks by kidnapping him. Presumably the plan had been made and executed by this rather stupid-seeming fellow, almost bewildered in appearance, before him. Appearances might be deceitful, or else the desperate need of the situation had stimulated that dull mind into unusual activity.

"You hear me?" said Johnson, offering another prick with the sword, and breaking in upon Hornblower's train of thought.

"Say you will, My Lord," muttered Spendlove close to Hornblower's ear. "Gain time."

Johnson turned on him, sword pointed at his face.

"Shut that mouth," he said. Another idea occurred to him, and he glanced round at Hornblower. "You write. Or I prick his eye."

"I'll write," said Hornblower.

Now he sat with the volume of *Waverley* open at the flyleaf, and the stub of pencil in his hand, while Johnson withdrew for a couple of paces, presumably to allow free play for inspiration. What was he to write? 'Dear Sir Augustus'? 'Your Excellency'? That was better. 'I am held to ransom here along with Spendlove by the survivors of the Harkness gang. Perhaps the bearer of this will explain the conditions. They demand a free pardon in exchange for —' Hornblower held the pencil poised over the paper debating the next words 'Our lives'? He shook his head to himself and wrote 'our freedom.' He wanted no melodrama. 'Your Excellency will, of course,

be a better judge of the situation than I am. Your ob'd't servant.' Hornblower hesitated again, and then he dashed off the 'Hornblower' of his signature.

"There you are," he said, holding out the volume to Johnson, who took it and looked at it curiously, and turned back to the group of a dozen or so of his followers who had been squatting on the ground behind him silently watching the proceedings.

They peered at the writing over Johnson's shoulder; others came to look as well, and they fell into a chattering debate.

"Not one of them can read, My Lord," commented Spendlove.

"So it appears."

The pirates were looking from the writing over to their prisoners and back again; the argument grew more intense. Johnson seemed to be expostulating, or exhorting, and some of the men he addressed drew back shaking their heads.

"It's a question of who shall carry that note to Kingston," said Hornblower. "Who shall beard the lion."

"That fellow has no command over his men," commented Spendlove. "Harkness would have shot a couple of them by now."

Johnson returned to them, pointing a dark, stubby finger at the writing.

"What you say here?" he asked.

Hornblower read the note aloud; it did not matter whether he spoke the truth or not, seeing they had no way of knowing. Johnson stared at him, studying his face; Johnson's own face betrayed more of the bewilderment Hornblower had noticed before. The pirate was facing a situation too complex for him; he was trying to carry out a plan which he had not thought out in all its details beforehand. No one of the pirates was willing to venture into the grip of justice bearing a message of unknown content. Nor, for that matter, would the pirates trust one of their number to go off on such a mission; he might well desert, throwing away the precious message, to try and make his escape on his own. The poor, ragged, shiftless devils and their slatternly women were in a quandary, with no master mind to find a way out for them. Hornblower could have laughed at their predicament, and almost did, until he thought of what this unstable mob could do in a fit of passion to the prisoners in their power. The debate went on furiously, with a solution apparently no nearer.

"Do you think we could get to the ladder, My Lord?" asked Spendlove, and then answered his own question.

"No. They'd catch us before we could get away. A pity."

"We can bear the possibility in mind," said Hornblower.

One of the women cooking over the fire called out at this moment in a loud, raucous voice, interrupting the debate. Food was being ladled out into wooden bowls. A young mulatto woman, hardly more than a child, in a ragged gown that had once been magnificent, brought a bowl over to them — one bowl, no spoon or fork. They stared at each other, unable to keep from smiling. Then Spendlove produced a penknife from his breeches pocket, and tendered it to his superior after opening it.

"Perhaps it may serve, My Lord," he said, apologetically, adding, after a glance at the contents of the bowl, "not such a good meal as the supper we missed at the Houghs's, My Lord."

Boiled yams and a trifle of boiled salt pork, the former presumably stolen from some slave garden and the latter from one of the hogsheads stored here on the cliff. They ate with difficulty, Hornblower insisting on their using the penknife turn about, juggling with the hot food for which both of them discovered a raging appetite. The pirates and the women were mostly squatting on their heels as they ate. After their first mouthfuls they were beginning to argue again over the use to be made of their prisoners.

Hornblower looked out again from the shelf at the view extended before them.

"That must be the Cockpit Country," he said.

"No doubt of it, My Lord."

The Cockpit Country was territory unknown to any white man, an independent republic in the northwest of Jamaica. At the conquest of the island from the Spaniards, a century and a half earlier, the British had found this area already populated by runaway slaves and the survivors of the Indian population. Several attempts to subdue the area had failed disastrously — yellow fever and the appalling difficulty of the country allying themselves with the desperate valour of the defenders — and a treaty had finally been concluded granting independence to the Cockpit Country on the sole condition that the inhabitants should not harbour runaway

slaves in future. That treaty had already endured fifty years and seemed likely to endure far longer. The pirates' lair was on the edge of this area, with the mountains at the back of it.

"And that's Montego Bay, My Lord," said Spendlove, pointing.

Hornblower had visited the place in *Clorinda* last year — a lonely roadstead providing fair anchorage, and shelter for a few fishing boats. He gazed over to the distant blue water with longing. He tried to think of ways of escape, of some method of coming to honourable terms with the pirates, but a night entirely without sleep made his brain sluggish, and now that he had eaten it was more sluggish still. He caught himself nodding and pulled himself up with a jerk. Now that he was in his middle forties the loss of a night's sleep was a serious matter, especially when the night had been filled with violent and unaccustomed exertion. Spendlove had seen him nod.

"I think you could sleep, My Lord," he said, gently.

"Perhaps I could."

He let his body sink to the hard ground. He was pillowless and uncomfortable.

"Here, My Lord," said Spendlove.

Two hands on his shoulders eased him round, and now he was pillowed on Spendlove's thigh. The world whirled round him for a moment. There was the whisper of a breeze; the loud debate of the pirates and their women was monotonous in pitch; the waterfall was splashing and gurgling; then he was asleep.

He awoke some time later, with Spendlove touching his shoulder.

"My Lord, My Lord."

He lifted his head, a little surprised to find where it had been resting; it took him several seconds to recall where he was and how he had come there. Johnson and one or two other pirates were standing before him; in the background one of the women was looking on, in an attitude that conveyed the impression that she had contributed to the conclusion that had evidently been reached.

"We send you to the Governor, Lord," said Johnson.

Hornblower blinked up at him; although the sun had moved round behind the cliff the sky above was dazzling.

"You," said Johnson. "*You go. We keep him.*"

Johnson indicated Spendlove by a gesture.

"What do you mean?" asked Hornblower.

"*You go to the Governor and get our pardon,*" said Johnson. "*You can ask him, and he will give it. He stays here. We can cut off his nose, we can dig out his eyes.*"

"Good God Almighty," said Hornblower.

Johnson, or his advisers — perhaps that woman over there were people of considerable insight after all. They had some conception of honour, of gentlemanly obligations. They had perceived something of the relationship between Hornblower and Spendlove — they may have been guided by the sight of Hornblower sleeping with his head pillowed on Spendlove's thigh. They knew that Hornblower could never abandon Spendlove to the mercy of his captors, that he would do everything possible to obtain his freedom. Even perhaps — Hornblower's imagination surged in a great wave over the barrier of his sleepiness — even perhaps to the extent of coming back to share Spendlove's captivity and fate in the event of not being able to obtain the necessary pardons.

"We send you, Lord," said Johnson.

The woman in the background said something in a loud voice.

"We send you now," said Johnson. "Get up."

Hornblower rose slowly; he would have taken his time in any case in an effort to preserve what dignity was left to him, but he could not have risen swiftly if he had wanted to. His joints were stiff — he could almost hear them crack as he moved. His body ached horribly.

"These two men take you," said Johnson.

Spendlove had risen to his feet too.

"Are you all right, My Lord?" he asked, anxiously.

"Only stiff and rheumaticy," replied Hornblower. "But what about you?"

"Oh, I'm all right, My Lord. Please don't give another thought to me, My Lord."

That was a very straight glance that Spendlove gave him, a glance that tried to convey a message.

"Not another thought, My Lord," repeated Spendlove.

He was trying to tell his chief that he should be abandoned, that nothing should be done to ransom him, that he was willing to suffer whatever tortures might be inflicted on him so long as his chief came well out of the business.

"I'll be thinking about you all the time," said Hornblower, giving back glance for glance.

"Hurry," said Johnson.

The rope ladder still dangled down from the lip of the shelf. It was a tricky business to lower himself with his creaking joints over the edge and to find foothold on the slippery bamboo rungs. The ladder swung away under the thrust of his feet as if it was a live thing determined to cast him down; he clung with frantic hands, back downward, forcing himself, against his instincts, to straighten up and allow the ladder to swing back again. Gingerly his feet found foothold again, and he continued his descent. Just as he grew accustomed to the motion of the ladder his rhythm was disturbed by the first of his escort lowering himself upon the ladder above him; he had to cling and wait again before he resumed his downward progress. His feet had hardly gratefully touched ground than first one and then the other of his escorts dropped beside him.

"Goodbye, My Lord. Good luck!"

That was Spendlove calling from above. Hornblower, standing on the very edge of the river, his face towards the cliff, had to bend far backwards to see Spendlove's head over the parapet and his waving hand, sixty feet above. He waved back as his escorts led the mules to the water's edge.

Once more it was necessary to swim the river. It was no more than thirty feet across; he could have swum it last night without assistance had he been sure about that in the darkness. Now he let himself flop into the water, clothes and all — alas for that beautiful black dresscoat — and, turning on his back, kicked out with his legs. But his clothes were already wet and were a ponderous burden to him, and he knew a moment of worry before his already weary limbs carried him to the rocky bank. He crawled out, the water streaming from his clothes, unwilling to move even while the mules came plunging up out of the water beside him. Spendlove up above, still leaning over the parapet, waved to him again.

Now it was a question of mounting a mule again. His wet clothes weighed upon him like lead. He had to struggle up — the animal's wet hide was slippery — and as soon as he settled himself astride he realised that he was horribly saddlesore from the night before, and the raw surfaces caused him agony. He had to brace himself to endure it; it was dreadfully painful as his mount plunged about making his way over the irregular surface. From the river they made an abrupt ascent into the mountains. They were retracing the path they had taken the night before; hardly a path, hardly a track. They picked their way up a steep gully, down the other side, up again. They splashed across little torrents, and wound their way among trees. Hornblower was numb both in body and mind by now; his mule was weary and by no means as sure of foot as a mule should be; stumbling more than once so that only by frantic efforts could he retain his seat. The sun was sinking towards the west as they jolted on, downhill at last. Passage through a final belt of trees brought them into open country upon which the sun blazed in tropical glory. This was savannah country, hardly rocky at all; there were cattle to be seen in the distance, and, beyond, a great sea of green — the vast sugar-cane fields of Jamaica stretching as far as the eye could see. Half a mile farther they reached a well-defined track, and there his escorts checked their mounts.

"Now you can go on," said one of them, pointing along the path winding towards the distant cane.

It was a second or two before Hornblower's stupefied brain could grasp the fact that they were turning him loose.

"That way?" he asked, unnecessarily.

"Yes," said his escort.

The two men turned their mules; Hornblower had to struggle with his, who disliked the separation. One of the escorts struck the brute on the rump, sending him down the path in a jerky trot acutely painful to Hornblower as he sought to retain his seat. Soon the mule eased to a leg-weary walk, and Hornblower was content to sit idly as it crawled along down the path; the sun was now clouded over and it was not long before, heralded by a brisk wind, a blinding rain began to fall, blotting out the landscape and slowing the mule even more on the slippery surface. Hornblower sat exhausted on the sharp spine of the animal; so heavy was the rain that he found it difficult to breathe as it poured upon his face.

Gradually the roaring rain ceased; the sky, while it remained overcast above him, opened to the west and admitted a gleam of the setting sun, so that the landscape on his left was made glorious with a rainbow which Hornblower hardly noted. Here was the first cane-field; the track he was following became here a rough and narrow roadway through the cane, deeply rutted by cartwheels. The mule plodded on, eternally, through the cane. Now the road crossed another, and the mule pulled up at the crossroads. Before Hornblower could rouse himself to urge the mule onwards he heard a shout to his right. Far down the road he saw a group of horsemen illuminated against the sunset. With an urgent drumming of hoofs they came galloping towards him, and reined up at his side — a white man followed by two coloured men.

"It's Lord Hornblower, isn't it?" asked the white man — a young fellow; Hornblower noticed dully that, although mounted, he was still in full-dress clothes with his ruffled neckcloth all awry and bedraggled.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"Thank God you're safe, sir," said the young man. "Are you hurt? Are you wounded, My Lord?"

"No," said Hornblower, swaying with fatigue on the back of the mule.

The young man turned to one of his coloured companions and issued rapid orders, and the coloured man wheeled his horse round and went galloping full pelt down the road.

"The whole island has been turned out to seek for you, My Lord," said the young man. "What happened to you? We have searched for you all day."

It would never do for an Admiral, a Commander-in-Chief, to betray unmanly weakness. Hornblower made himself stiffen his spine.

"I was kidnapped by pirates," he said. He tried to speak nonchalantly, as if that was something that could happen to anyone any day, but it was difficult. His voice was only a hoarse croak. "I must go at once to the Governor. Where is His Excellency?"

"He must be at Government House, I fancy," said the young man. "No more than thirty miles away."

Thirty miles! Hornblower felt as if he could not ride another thirty yards.

"Very well," he said, stiffly. "I must go there."

"The Hough house is only two miles down the road here, My Lord," said the young man. "Your carriage is still there, I believe. I have already sent a messenger."

"We'll go there first, then," said Hornblower, as indifferently as he could manage.

A word from the white man brought the other coloured man from his horse, and Hornblower slid ungracefully from the mule. It was an enormous effort to get his foot up into the stirrup; the coloured man had to help him heave his right leg over. He had hardly gathered the reins in his hands — he had not yet discovered which was which — when the white man put his horse into a trot and Hornblower's mount followed him. It was torture to bump about in the saddle.

"My name is Colston," said the white man, checking his horse so that Hornblower came up alongside him. "I had the honour of being presented to Your Lordship at the ball last night."

"Of course," said Hornblower. "Tell me what happened there."

"You were missed, My Lord, after the supper march had been kept waiting for you to head it with Mrs Hough. You and your secretary, Mr — Mr —"

"Spendlove," said Hornblower.

"Yes, My Lord. At first it was thought that some urgent business was demanding your attention. It was not for an hour or two, I suppose, that your flag-lieutenant and Mr Hough could agree that you had been spirited away. There was great distress among the company, My Lord."

"Yes?"

"Then the alarm was given. All the gentlemen present rode out in search for you. The militia was called out at dawn. The whole countryside is being patrolled. I expect the Highland regiment is in full march for here at this moment."

"Indeed?" said Hornblower. A thousand infantrymen were making a forced march of thirty miles on his account; a thousand horsemen were scouring the island.

Hoofbeats sounded in front of them. Two horsemen approached in the gathering darkness; Hornblower could just recognise Hough and the messenger.

"Thank God, My Lord," said Hough. "What happened?"

Hornblower was tempted to answer, 'Mr Colston will tell you', but he made himself make a more sensible reply. Hough uttered the expected platitudes.

"I must go on to the Governor at once," said Hornblower. "There is Spendlove to think of."

"Spendlove, My Lord? Oh, yes, of course, your secretary."

"He is still in the hands of the pirates," said Hornblower.

"Indeed, My Lord?" replied Hough.

No one seemed to have a care about Spendlove, except Lucy Hough, presumably.

Here was the house and the courtyard; lights were gleaming in every window.

"Please come in, My Lord," said Hough. "Your Lordship must be in need of refreshment."

He had eaten yams and salt pork some time that morning; he felt no hunger now.

"I must go on to Government House," he said. "I can waste no time."

"If Your Lordship insists —"

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"I will go and have the horses put to, then, My Lord."

Hornblower found himself alone in the brightly-lit sitting-room. He felt that if he threw himself into one of the vast chairs there he would never get up again.

"My Lord! My Lord!"

It was Lucy Hough fluttering into the room, her skirts flying with her haste. He would have to tell her about Spendlove.

"Oh, you're safe! You're safe!"

What was this? The girl had flung herself on her knees before him. She had one of his hands in both hers, and was kissing it frantically. He drew back, he tried to snatch his hand away, but she clung on to it, and followed him on her knees, still kissing it.

"Miss Lucy!"

"I care for nothing as long as you're safe!" she said, looking up at him and still clasping his hand; tears were streaming down her cheeks. "I've been through torment today. You're not hurt? Tell me! Speak to me!"

This was horrible. She was pressing her lips, her cheek, against his hand again.

"Miss Lucy! Please! Compose yourself!"

How could a girl of seventeen act like this towards a man of forty-five? Was she not enamoured of Spendlove? But perhaps that was the person she was thinking about.

"I will see that Mr Spendlove is safe," he said.

"Mr Spendlove? I hope he's safe. But it's you — you — you —"

"Miss Lucy! You must not say these things! Stand up, please, I beg you!"

Somehow he got her to her feet.

"I couldn't bear it!" she said. "I've loved you since the moment I saw you!"

"There, there!" said Hornblower, as soothingly as he knew how.

"The carriage will be ready in two minutes, My Lord," said Hough's voice from the door. "A glass of wine and a bite before you start?"

Hough came in with a smile.

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower, struggling with embarrassment.

"This child has been in a rare way since this morning," said Hough, indulgently. "These young people — She was the only person in the island, I fancy, who gave a thought to the secretary as well as to the Commander-in-Chief."

"Er — yes. These young people," said Hornblower.

The butler entered with a tray at that moment.

"Pour His Lordship a glass of wine, Lucy, my dear," said Hough, and then to Hornblower, "Mrs Hough has been considerably prostrated, but she will be down in a moment."

"Please do not discommode her, I beg of you," said Hornblower. His hand was shaking as he reached for the glass. Hough took up carving knife and fork and set about carving the cold chicken.

"Excuse me, please," said Lucy.

She turned and ran from the room as quickly as she had entered it, sobbing wildly.

"I had no idea the attachment was so strong," said Hough.

"Nor had I," said Hornblower. He had gulped down the whole glass of wine in his agitation. He addressed himself to the cold chicken with all the calm he could muster.

"The carriage is at the door, sir," announced the butler.

"I'll take these with me," said Hornblower, a slice of bread in one hand and a chicken wing in the other.

"Would it be troubling you too much to ask you to send a messenger ahead of me to warn His Excellency of my coming?"

"That has already been done, My Lord," answered Hough. "And I have sent out messengers to inform the patrols that you are safe."

Hornblower sank into the cushioned ease of the carriage. The incident with Lucy had at least had the effect of temporarily driving all thought of fatigue from his mind. Now he could lean back and relax; it was five minutes before he remembered the bread and chicken in his hands and set himself wearily to eat them. The long drive was not particularly restful, for there were continual interruptions. Patrols who had not heard that he was safe stopped the carriage. Ten miles down the road they encountered the Highland battalion encamped at the roadside and the colonel insisted on coming and paying his respects to the Naval Commander-in-Chief and congratulating him. Farther on a galloping horse reined up beside the carriage; it was Gerard. The light of the carriage lamp revealed that he had ridden his horse into a lather. Hornblower had to listen to him say "Thank God, you are safe, My Lord" — everyone used those same words — and explain to him what had happened. Gerard abandoned his horse at the first opportunity and got into the carriage beside Hornblower. He was full of self-reproach at having allowed this to happen to his Chief — Hornblower rather resented the implication that he was incapable of looking after himself even though the event seemed to prove it — and at not having rescued him.

"We tried to use the bloodhounds they track runaway slaves with, My Lord, but they were of no use."

"Naturally, since I was on muleback," said Hornblower. "In any case, the scent must have been several hours old. Now forget the past and let me think about the future."

"We'll have those pirates dangling on ropes before two days are up, My Lord."

"Indeed? And what about Spendlove?"

"Oh — er. Yes, of course, My Lord."

Spendlove was very much of an afterthought with everyone, even with Gerard who was his friend. But to Gerard must be given the credit at least for appreciating Hornblower's difficulty the moment it was pointed out to him.

"We can't let anything happen to him, of course, My Lord."

"And how do we prevent it? Do we grant those pardons — do we persuade His Excellency to grant them?"

"Well, My Lord —"

"There's nothing I would not do to set Spendlove free," said Hornblower. "Do you understand that? Nothing!" Hornblower caught himself setting his jaw in grim determination; his ineradicable tendency to self-analysis revealed him to himself. He was cynically surprised at his own flow of emotion. Ferocity and tenderness intermingled; let those pirates touch one hair of Spendlove's head and — but how was he to prevent it? How to free Spendlove from men who knew that their lives, their actual lives and not merely their fortunes, depended on keeping him prisoner? How could he ever live with himself if anything were to happen to Spendlove? If the worst came to the worst he would have to go back to the pirates and yield himself up to them, as that Roman — Regulus — returned to death at the hands of the Carthaginians; and the worst seemed likely to come to the worst.

"Government House, My Lord," said Gerard, breaking in upon this train of nightmare thoughts.

Sentries at the gates, sentries at the door. A brightly-lit entrance-hall, where aides-de-camp looked at him curiously, curse them. So did Gerard. He was ushered through into an inner room, where after only a moment another door opened to admit His Excellency, and the escorting aide-de-camp discreetly retired. His Excellency was an angry man, angry as a man can only be who had been badly scared.

"Now, what is all this, My Lord?"

There was none of the usual deference displayed towards the man who had attained a peerage, the man of legendary fame. Hooper was a full General, far above a mere Rear-Admiral; moreover, as Governor he was

absolute ruler throughout this island. His red face and bulging blue eyes — as well as the rage he was displaying — seemed to confirm the rumour that he was a grandson of the royal blood. Hornblower explained briefly and quietly what had happened; his fatigue — if not his common sense — prevented an angry reply.

"Do you realise the cost of all this, My Lord?" blared Hooper. "Every white man who can sit a horse is out. My last reserve — the Highlanders — are bivouacked at the roadside. What that will mean in malaria and yellow fever I do not dare guess. For two weeks every man of the garrison except for them has been out guarding fishing boats and watching beaches at your request. The sick-lists are enormous. And now this!"

"My instructions, and I believe Your Excellency's as well, laid the greatest stress on the suppression of piracy, sir."

"I don't need any whipper-snapper jumped up Rear-Admiral to interpret my instructions," roared Hooper.

"What sort of bargain did you make with these pirates of yours?"

There it was. It was not an easy thing to explain to a man in this mood.

"I made no actual bargain, Your Excellency."

"Hard to believe you had that much sense."

"But my honour is pledged."

"Your honour pledged? To whom? The pirates?"

"No, Your Excellency. To my secretary, Spendlove."

"What was the pledge?"

"He was retained as a hostage when I was set free."

"What did you promise him?"

What? He had said something about thinking about him.

"I made no verbal promise, Your Excellency. But one was implied, undoubtedly."

"What was implied?"

"That I should set him free."

"And how did you think you could do that?"

Nothing for it but to take the bull by the horns.

"I was released in order that I might solicit from Your Excellency pardons under seal for the pirates."

"Pardons! Par —" Hooper could not even finish the word a second time. He could only gobble like a turkey for several seconds before with a gulp he was able to continue. "Are you insane, My Lord?"

"That was why I was released. And that is why Spendlove is still retained."

"Then this Spendlove must take his chance."

"Your Excellency!"

"Do you think I could grant pardons to a gang of pirates? What d'ye mean? So that they can live like lords on their booty? Rolling in coaches round the island? A fine way that would be of suppressing piracy! D'ye want the whole West Indies in a turmoil? Have you lost your senses?"

The effect of this speech was in no way modified by the fact that Hornblower had guessed long before, that Hooper would argue exactly along this line.

"I fully see the difficulty of the situation, Your Excellency."

"I'm glad you do. You know the hiding-place of these pirates?"

"Yes, Your Excellency. It is a very secure place."

"No matter. It can be reduced, of course. A few hangings will quiet this island down again."

What in the world was there that he could do or could say? The sentence he framed in his mind was patently absurd to him even before he uttered it.

"I shall have to go back there before you take any steps, Your Excellency."

"Go back there?" Hooper's eyes almost came out of their sockets as the implications of what Hornblower was saying dawned upon him. "What new foolery do you have in mind?"

"I must go back and join Spendlove if Your Excellency does not see fit to grant the pardons."

"Rubbish! I can grant no pardons. I cannot. I will not."

"Then I have no alternative, Your Excellency."

"Rubbish, I said. Rubbish! You made no promise. You said yourself that you gave no pledge."

"I am the judge of that, Your Excellency."

"You're in no condition to judge anything at present, if ever you were. Can you imagine for one moment I'll let you tie my hands like this?"

"No one regrets the necessity more than I do, Your Excellency."

"Necessity? Are you dictating to me? I'll have you know that I'm your superior officer as well as Governor of this island. One more word and you'll be under arrest, My Lord. Let's hear no more of this nonsense."

"Your Excellency —"

"Not one more word, I said. This Spendlove is one of the King's servants. He must run the risks of his position, even though he is only a secretary."

"But —"

"I order you to keep silence, My Lord. You have fair warning. Tomorrow when you're rested we can plan to smoke out this wasps' nest."

Hornblower himself checked the protest that still rose to his lips. Hooper meant what he said when he threatened arrest. The massive discipline that permeated the armed forces of the Crown had Hornblower in its grip as surely as if he were the least seaman. To disobey an order was hopeless from the start. The irresistible force of his own conscience might be driving him forward, but here he was up against the immovable barrier of discipline. Tomorrow? Tomorrow was another day.

"Very well, Your Excellency."

"A night's rest will do you all the good in the world, My Lord. Perhaps it would be best if you slept here. I will give the necessary orders. If you instruct your flag-lieutenant as to the fresh clothes you will need I will send to Admiralty House for them to be ready for you in the morning."

Clothes? Hornblower looked down at himself. He had forgotten entirely that he was wearing his black full-dress. One glance was enough to tell him that never again could he wear that suit. Now he could guess about the rest of his appearance. He knew that his haggard cheeks must be sprouting a bristly beard, his neckcloth in wild disorder. No wonder that people had looked at him curiously in the anteroom.

"Your Excellency is very kind," he said.

There was no harm in being formally polite in the face of the temporarily inevitable. There had been that in Hooper's tone which told him that the invitation might as well have been an order, that he was as much a prisoner in Government House as if Hooper had actually carried out his threat of putting him under arrest. It was best to yield gracefully since he had to yield for the moment at least. Tomorrow was another day.

"Allow me to conduct you to your room, My Lord," said Hooper.

The mirror in the bedroom confirmed his worst fears regarding his appearance. The bed, with its enormous mosquito net, was wide and inviting. His aching joints clamoured that he should allow himself to fall across that bed and repose himself; his weary brain demanded that he should sink into oblivion, forget his troubles in sleep as a drunkard might forget them in liquor. It was a relaxation to soap himself in a tepid bath, despite the smarting protests of the raw places on his body. And yet, bathed and relaxed, with one of His Excellency's nightshirts flapping round his knees, he could not give way to his weaknesses. His innermost ego refused to recognise them. He found himself hobbling barefooted about the room. He had no quarterdeck to pace; the candle-heated tropical air of the bedroom was not as conducive to inspiration as was a fresh sea breeze; mosquitoes buzzed about him, stinging his neck and his bare legs and distracting him. It was one of those dreadful nights; sometimes he relaxed so far as to sit on a chair, but within a few seconds a new train of thought brought him to his feet again, to limp up and down.

It was maddening that he could not keep his thoughts concentrated on the problem of Spendlove. He felt a contempt for himself that he should find his mind deserting his devoted secretary; there was a rival train of thought which was frequently successful in holding his attention. He knew, before the night was over, just how he would deal with the pirates' lair if his hands were free; he even knew satisfaction in recapitulating his plans, only to find the satisfaction replaced by sick despair at the thought of Spendlove in the pirates' hands. There were moments when his stomach turned over as he remembered Johnson's threat to dig out Spendlove's eyes.

Weariness took him by surprise in the end; he had sat down and rested his head on his hand, and then awakened with a start as he fell forward in his chair. The awakening was not complete enough; unconscious of what he was doing he settled himself back in his chair and slept in that fashion, the vast, comfortable bed

untenanted, until a knocking at his door roused him to blink about him wondering where he was before bracing himself to make it seem as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world to sleep in a chair when a bed was available.

It was Giles who came in, bearing clean linen and a uniform and razors; the business of shaving and of dressing carefully served to steady him and kept him from thinking too furiously about the problem he would have to solve in the next few minutes.

"His Excellency would be glad if His Lordship would take breakfast with him."

That was a message conveyed through the door to Giles; the invitation must be accepted, of course, as it was the equivalent of a royal command. Hooper, apparently, was partial to a steak for breakfast; a silver dish of steak and onions was brought in almost as soon as Hornblower had uttered his formal good morning. Hooper looked at Hornblower oddly when he answered the butler's enquiry with a request for papaya and a boiled egg — that was a bad start, for it confirmed Hooper in his opinions of Hornblower's eccentricity that he should have these outlandish Frenchified notions about breakfast. Years of living on shore had not yet dulled the appetite for fresh eggs in their shells which Hornblower had acquired during decades at sea. Hooper daubed mustard on his steak and set about it with appetite.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough, thank you, Your Excellency."

Hooper's abandonment of the formal 'My Lord' was a not too subtle indication that he was willing to forget last night's discussion and to act magnanimously as if Hornblower was a normal person with only a temporary lapse on his record.

"We'll leave business until we've eaten."

"As you wish, Your Excellency."

But not even a Governor can be sure of his future. There was a bustle at the door, and a whole group of people came hurrying in, not merely the butler but two aides-de-camp and Gerard and — and — who was that? Pale and ragged and weary, almost unable to stand on tottering legs.

"Spendlove!" said Hornblower, his spoon clattering to the floor as he rose and hurried to him.

Hornblower clasped his hand, grinning with delight. Perhaps there had never been a moment in his life which had held so much sheer pleasure for him.

"Spendlove!" He could only repeat the name at first.

"Is this the return of the prodigal?" asked Hooper from the table.

Hornblower remembered his manners.

"Your Excellency," he said, "may I take it upon myself to present my secretary, Mr Erasmus Spendlove?"

"Glad to see you, young man. Take a seat at the table. Bring Mr Spendlove some food! He looks as if a glass of wine would not come amiss. Bring the decanter and a glass."

"You're not wounded?" asked Hornblower. "You're not hurt?"

"No, My Lord," said Spendlove, extending his legs cautiously under the table. "It is only that seventy miles on horseback have stiffened my unaccustomed limbs."

"Seventy miles?" asked Hooper. "From where?"

"Montego Bay, Your Excellency."

"Then you must have escaped in the night?"

"At nightfall, Your Excellency."

"But what did you do, man?" demanded Hornblower. "How did you get away?"

"I jumped, My Lord. Into the water."

"Into the water?"

"Yes, My Lord. There was eight feet of water in the river at the foot of the cliff; enough to break my fall from any height."

"So there was. But — but — in the dark?"

"That was easy, My Lord. I looked over the parapet during the day. I did when I said goodbye to Your Lordship. I marked the spot and I measured the distance with my eye."

"And then?"

"And then I jumped when it was fully dark, and raining hard."

"What were the pirates doing?" asked Hooper.

"They were taking shelter, Your Excellency. They were paying no attention to me, thinking I was safe enough there, with the ladder pulled up."

"And so — ?"

"So I took a run, Your Excellency, and jumped the parapet, as I said, and came down feet first into the water."

"Unhurt?"

"Unhurt, Your Excellency."

Hornblower's vivid imagination conjured up everything about the feat, the half-dozen strides through the dark and the roaring rain, the leap, the endless fall. He felt the hair at the back of his neck lifting.

"A most commendable deed," commented Hooper.

"Nothing for a desperate man, Your Excellency."

"Perhaps not. And then? After you were in the water? Were you pursued?"

"As far as I can tell, Your Excellency, I was not. Perhaps it was some time before they noticed my absence. Even then they would have to let down the ladder and climb down it. I heard nothing as I made off."

"Which way did you go?" asked Hornblower.

"I kept to the river, My Lord, making my way downstream. It reaches the sea at Montego Bay, as we decided, if you remember, My Lord, when we were making our first observations."

"Was it an easy journey?" asked Hornblower. Something was stirring in his mind, demanding his attention despite the strong emotions he was experiencing.

"Not easy in the dark, My Lord. There were rapids in places, and the boulders were slippery. I fancy the main pass is narrow, although I could not see it."

"And at Montego Bay?" asked Hooper.

"There was the guard over the fishing boats, a half-company of the West Indian Regiment, Your Excellency. I had their officer awakened, and he found me a horse, and I took the road through Cambridge and Ipswich."

"You got yourself remounts on the way?"

"I claimed I was on a mission of the greatest importance, Your Excellency."

"You made good time, even then."

"The patrol at Mandeville told me His Lordship was on his way to Your Excellency, and so I rode straight to Government House."

"Very sensible."

To the picture in Hornblower's mind of the leap in the darkness were now added others, of a nightmare journey down the river, falling over slippery boulders, rumbling into unexpected pools, struggling along invisible banks; then the endless, weary ride.

"I shall represent your conduct to the Lords Commissioners, Mr Spendlove," he said, formally.

"I must thank Your Lordship."

"And I shall represent it to the Secretary of State," added Hooper.

"Your Excellency is too kind."

To Hornblower it was not the least of Spendlove's achievements (guessed at from a glance at his plate) that Spendlove had contrived somehow to gulp down a whole plateful of steak and onions while making his report. The man must have learned to dispense with chewing.

"Enough of compliments," said Hooper, mopping up his gravy with a piece of bread. "Now we have to destroy these pirates. This lair of theirs — you say it is strong?"

Hornblower let Spendlove answer.

"Impregnable to direct assault, Your Excellency."

"M'm. D'ye think they'll make a stand there?"

For the past several minutes Hornblower had been debating this point with himself. Those leaderless men, dazed now by the complete failure of their scheme — what would they do?

"They could scatter all over the island, Your Excellency," said Spendlove.

"So they could. Then I'll have to hunt them down. Patrols on every road, movable columns in the mountains. And the sick-list is high already."

Troops exposed to the weather and the night air for long in the West Indies died like flies, and it might well take weeks to run the outlaws down.

"Maybe they'll scatter," said Hornblower, and then he committed himself, "but in my opinion, Your Excellency, they will not."

Hooper looked at him sharply.

"You think not?"

"I think not, Your Excellency."

That gang had been despairing as well as desperate when he had been among them. There was something childlike about them, leaderless as they were. On the cliff they had shelter, food — they had a home, if the expression could be tolerated. They would not readily leave it.

"And you say this place is impregnable? It would mean a long siege?"

"I might reduce them quickly with a naval force, Your Excellency, if Your Excellency would give me leave to try."

"Your Lordship is welcome to try anything that will save lives."

Hooper was looking at him curiously.

"Then I'll make my arrangements," said Hornblower.

"You'll go round to Montego Bay by sea?"

"Yes."

Hornblower restrained himself from saying 'of course'.

Soldiers always found it hard to realise the convenience of the sea for rapid and secret movements.

"I'll maintain my patrols in case they bolt while you smoke out the nest," said Hooper.

"I think Your Excellency would be taking a wise precaution in doing so. I trust my plan will not take long in execution. With Your Excellency's leave —"

Hornblower rose from the table.

"You're going now?"

"Every hour is of importance, Your Excellency."

Hooper was looking at him more inquisitively than ever.

"The Navy displays its notorious reserve," he said. "Oh, very well then. Order His Lordship's carriage. You have my leave to try, My Lord. Report to me by courier."

There they were, in the warm morning air, sitting, the three of them, Hornblower, Spendlove, and Gerard, in the carriage.

"The dockyard," ordered Hornblower briefly. He turned to Spendlove. "From the dockyard you will go on board *Clorinda* and convey my order to Captain Fell to make ready for sea. I shall be hoisting my flag within an hour. Then it is my order to you that you get yourself some rest."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

At the dockyard the Captain-Superintendent did his best not to appear surprised at an unheralded visit from his Admiral who by the last news had been kidnapped.

"I want a boat mortar, Holmes," said Hornblower, brushing aside the expressions of pleased surprise.

"A boat mortar, My Lord? Y-yes, My Lord. There's one in store, I know."

"It's to go on board *Clorinda* at once. Now, there are shells for it?"

"Yes, My Lord. Uncharged, of course."

"I'll have *Clorinda's* gunner charge 'em while we're under way. Twenty pounds apiece, I believe. Send two hundred, with the fuses."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

"And I want a punt. Two punts. I've seen your hands using 'em for caulking and breaming. Twenty foot, are they?"

"Twenty-two foot, My Lord," answered Holmes; he was glad that he could answer this question while his Admiral had not insisted on an answer regarding so obscure a matter as the weight of boat-mortar shells.

"I'll have two, as I said. Send them round to be hove on deck."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Captain Sir Thomas Fell had his best uniform on to greet his Admiral.

"I received your order, My Lord," he said, as the twittering of the pipes died away in a last wail.

"Very well, Sir Thomas. I want to be under way the moment the stores I have ordered are on board. You can warp your ship out. We are going to Montego Bay to deal with pirates."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Fell did his best not to look askance at the two filthy punts that he was expected to heave on to his spotless deck — they were only the floating stages used in the dockyard for work on ships' sides — and the two tons of greasy mortar shells for which he had to find space were no better. He was not too pleased when he was ordered to tell off the greater part of his ship's company — two hundred and forty men — and all his marine detachment for a landing party. The hands were naturally delighted with the prospect of a change of routine and the possibility of action. The fact that the gunner was weighing out gunpowder and putting two pounds apiece in the shells, a glimpse of the armourer going round with the Admiral on an inspection of the boarding-pikes, the sight of the boat mortar, squat and ugly, crouching on its bed at the break, of the forecastle, all excited them. It was a pleasure to thrash along to the westward, under every stitch of canvas, leaving Portland Point abeam, rounding Negril Point at sunset, catching some fortunate puffs of the sea breeze which enabled them to cheat the trade wind, ghosting along in the tropical darkness with the lead at work in the chains, and anchoring with the dawn among the shoals of Montego Bay, the green mountains of Jamaica all fiery with the rising sun.

Hornblower was on deck to see it; he had been awake since midnight, having slept since sunset — two almost sleepless nights had disordered his habits — and he was already pacing the quarterdeck as the excited men were formed up in the waist. He kept a sharp eye on the preparations. That boat mortar weighed no more than four hundred pounds, a mere trifle for the yard-arm tackle to lower down into the punt alongside. The musketmen were put through an inspection of their equipment; it was puzzling to the crew that there were pikemen, axemen, and even malletmen and crowbarmen as well. As the sun climbed higher and blazed down hotter the men began to file down into the boats.

"Gig's alongside, My Lord," said Gerard.

"Very well."

On shore Hornblower returned the salute of the astonished subaltern commanding the detachment of the West Indian Regiment on guard over the boats — he had turned out his men apparently expecting nothing less than a French invasion — and dismissed him. Then he ran a final glance over the rigid lines of the marine detachment, scarlet tunics and white cross-belts and all. They would not be nearly as tidy by the end of the day.

"You can make a start, captain," he said. "Keep me informed, Mr Spendlove, if you please."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

With Spendlove as guide the marines marched forward; they were the advanced guard to secure the main body from surprise. It was time to give orders to *Clorinda's* first-lieutenant.

"Now, Mr Sefton, we can move."

The little river had a little bar at its mouth, but the two punts carrying the mortar and the ammunition had been floated in round it. For a mile there was even a track beside the water, and progress was rapid as they dragged the punts along, while the vegetation closed in round them. The shade was gratifying when they first entered into it, but they found it breathless, damp, stifling, as they progressed farther in. Mosquitoes stung with venomous determination. Men slipped and fell on the treacherous mud-banks, splashing prodigiously. Then they reached the first stretch of shallows, where the river came bubbling down a long perceptible slope between steep banks under the light filtering in through the trees.

At least they had saved a mile and more by water carriage even this far. Hornblower studied the grounded punts, the soil and the trees. This was what he had been thinking about; it was worth making the experiment before putting the men to the toil of carrying the mortar up by brute force.

"We'll try a dam here, Mr Sefton, if you please."

"Aye aye, My Lord. Axemen! Pikemen! Malletmen!"

The men were still in high spirits; it called for exertion on the part of the petty officers to restrain their exuberance. A line of pikes driven head downward where the soil was soft enough to receive them formed the first framework of the dam. Axemen felled small trees with a childish delight in destruction. Crowbarmen

levered at stumps and rocks. A small avalanche came tumbling down into the river bed. The water swirled about the trash; already there was sufficient obstruction to hold it. Hornblower saw the level rise before his very eyes.

"More rocks here!" roared Sefton.

"Keep your eye on those punts, Mr Sefton," said Hornblower — the clumsy craft were already afloat again. Felled trees and rocks extended, heightened, and strengthened the dam. There was water spouting through the interstices, but not as much as was being held back.

"Get the punts upstream," ordered Hornblower.

Four hundred willing hands had achieved much; the water was banked up sufficient to float the punts two-thirds of the way up the shallows.

"Another dam, I think, Mr Sefton, if you please."

Already they had learned much about the construction of temporary dams. The stream bed was choked in a twinkling, it seemed. Splashing knee-deep in water the men dragged the punts higher still. They grounded momentarily, but a final heave ran them over the last of the shallows into a reach where they floated with ease.

"Excellent, Mr Sefton."

That was a clear gain of a quarter of a mile before the next shallows.

As they were preparing to work on the next dam the flat report of a musket shot came echoing back to them in the heated air, followed by half a dozen more; it was several minutes before they heard the explanation, brought back by a breathless messenger.

"Captain Seymour reports, sir. We was fired on by someone up there, sir. Saw 'im in the trees, sir, but 'e got away."

"Very well."

So the pirates had posted a lookout downstream. Now they knew that a force was advancing against them. Only time would show what they would do next; meanwhile the punts were afloat again and it was time to push on. The river curved back and forth, washing at the foot of vertical banks, preserving, for a time, miraculously, enough depth of water to float the punts at the expense of occasionally dragging them up slight rapids. Now it began to seem to Hornblower as if he had spent days on this labour, in the blinding patches of sunlight and the dark stretches of shade, with the river swirling round his knees, and his feet slipping on the rocks. At the next dam he was tempted to sit and allow the sweat to stream down him. He had hardly done so when another messenger arrived from the advanced guard.

"Captain Seymour reporting, sir. 'E says to say the pirates 'ave gorn to ground, sir. They're in a cave, sir, right up in the cliff."

"How far ahead of here?"

"Oh, not so very fur, sir."

Hornblower could have expected no better answer, he realised.

"They was shooting at us, sir," supplemented the messenger.

That defined the distance better, for they had heard no firing for a long time; the pirates' lair must be farther than the sound could carry.

"Very well. Mr Sefton, carry on, if you please. I'm going ahead. Come along, Gerard."

He set himself to climb and scramble along the river bank. On his left hand as he progressed he noticed the bank was growing steeper and loftier. Now it was really a cliff. Another stretch of rapids at a corner, and then he opened up a fresh vista. There it was, just as he remembered it, the lofty, overhanging cliff with the waterfall tumbling down it to join the river at its foot, and the long horizontal seam half way up the cliff; open grassland with a few trees on his right, and even the little group of mules on the narrow stretch of grass between, the cliff and the river. Red-coated marines were strung out over the grassland, in a wide semicircle whose centre was the cave.

Hornblower forgot his sweating fatigue and strode hastily, forward to where he could see Seymour standing among men gazing up at the cliff, Spendlove at his side. They came to meet him and saluted.

"There they are, My Lord," said Seymour. "They took a few shots at us when we arrived."

"Thank you, captain. How do you like the look of the place now, Spendlove?"

"As much as before, My Lord, but no more."

"Spendlove's Leap," said Hornblower.

He was pressing forward along the river bank towards the cave, staring upwards.

"Have a care, My Lord," said Spendlove, urgently.

A moment after he had spoken something whistled sharply just above Hornblower's head; a puff of smoke appeared over the parapet of the cave, and a sharp ringing report came echoing from the cliff face. Then, made tiny by the distance, doll-like figures appeared over the parapet, waving their arms in defiance, and the yells they were uttering came faintly to their ears.

"Someone has a rifle up there, My Lord," said Seymour.

"Indeed? Perhaps then it would be best to withdraw out of range before he can reload."

The incident had made little impression on Hornblower until that moment. Now he suddenly realised that the almost legendary career of the great Lord Hornblower might have been terminated then and there, that his future biographer might have had to deplore the ironic chance which, after so many pitched battles, brought him death at the hands of an obscure criminal in an unknown corner of a West Indian island. He turned and walked away, the others at his side. He found he was holding his neck rigid, his muscles tense; it had been a long time since his life was last in danger. He strove to appear natural.

"Sefton will be up with the mortar before long," he said, after casting about in his mind for something natural to say; and he hoped it did not sound as unnatural to the others as it did to him.

"Yes, My Lord."

"Where shall we site it?" He swung round and looked about him, measuring ranges with his eye. "It had better be out of range of that rifle."

His interest in what he was doing immediately erased the memory of his danger. Another puff of smoke from the parapet; another echoing report.

"Did anyone hear that bullet? No? Then we can assume we're out of rifle shot here."

"If you please, My Lord," asked Spendlove. "What range can you expect with a boat mortar?"

"The encyclopedic Spendlove displaying ignorance! Seven hundred yards with a one-pound charge of powder, and a time of flight of fifteen seconds. But here we have to burst the shell sixty feet above the firing-point. A nice problem in ballistics." Hornblower spoke with perfect indifference, confident that no one knew that at one o'clock that morning he had been studying those figures in the manual. "Those trees there will be useful when we come to sway the mortar up. And there's level ground within twenty feet of them. Excellent."

"Here they come, My Lord."

The first of the main body appeared round the distant corner of the cliff, hurrying along the river bank. As they took in the situation they broke into a yell and a run, leaping and scrambling over the broken ground; Hornblower was reminded of hounds rushing up clamouring at sight of their quarry at bay.

"Silence, there!" he roared. "You midshipman, there, can't you keep your men under control? Mark their names for punishment, and I'll mention yours to Mr Sefton."

Abashed, the seamen formed up quietly. Here came the punts, gliding like fate along the silent pool, towed by working parties scrambling along the bank.

"Orders, My Lord?" asked Sefton.

Hornblower glanced finally round the terrain before issuing them. The sun was long past its zenith as eager men clambered up the trees to fix the tackles; soon the mortar hung dangling from a stout limb while the mortar bed was hoisted out and settled in a smooth spot, the gunner fussing over it with a spirit level to make sure it was horizontal. Then, with violent manual labour, the mortar was swung over and finally heaved up into position, and the gunner drove the keys through the eye-bolts.

"Shall I open fire, My Lord?" asked Sefton.

Hornblower looked over at the distant seam in the face of the cliff across the river. The pirates there would be watching them. Had they recognised this squat object, inconsiderable in size, undistinguished in shape, which meant death to them? They might well not know what it was; they were probably peering over the parapet trying to make out what it was that had occupied the attention of so considerable a body of men.

"What's your elevation, gunner?"

"Sixty degrees, sir — My Lord."

"Try a shot with a fifteen-second fuse."

The gunner went carefully through the processes of loading, measuring the powder charge and wadding it down into the chamber, clearing the touch-hole with the priming iron and, then filling it with fine-grain powder from the horn. He took his bradawl and drove it carefully into the wooden stem of the fuse at the selected point — these were very new-fangled fuses, graduated with ink lines to mark the time of burning — and screwed it into the shell. He lowered the shell down upon the wad.

"Linstocks," he said.

Someone had been chipping away with flint and steel to catch a spark upon the slow match. He transferred the glow to a second linstock which he handed to the gunner. The gunner, stooping, checked the pointing of the weapon.

"Fuse!" he said. His assistant touched his linstock down, and the fuse spluttered. Then the gunner thrust his glowing match upon the touch-hole. A roar and a billow of powder smoke.

Standing far back from the mortar Hornblower already had his face turned to the sky to track the shell in its flight. Against that light blue there was nothing to be seen — no, there at the height of the trajectory there was a brief black streak, instantly invisible again. A further wait; an inevitable thought that the fuse had failed, and then a distant explosion and a fountain of smoke, down at the base of the cliff somewhat to the right of the cave. There was a groan from the watching seamen.

"Silence, there!" bellowed Sefton.

"Try again, gunner," said Hornblower.

The mortar was trained round a trifle on its bed. Its bore was sponged out and when the charge had been put in the gunner took a gill measure from his pocket and added a measure of powder to the charge. He pierced the fuse again, lowered the shell into the bore, gave his final order, and fired. A wait; and then a bold puff of smoke hung in the air, seemingly right in line with the seam in the cliff. The wretched people there were watching their fate creeping up on them.

"Fuse a little short," said Hornblower.

"Range short, I fancy, My Lord," said the gunner.

At the next shot there was a cloud of dust and a small avalanche from the cliff face high above the seam, and instantly afterwards the burst of the shell on the ground at the near edge of the river where it had fallen.

"Better," said Hornblower. He had seen the principles of ranging with a mortar — a huge thirteen-inch one — at the siege of Riga nearly twenty years before.

Two more shots, both wasted — the shells exploded at the top of their trajectory, high, high up. Apparently those newfangled fuses were not quite reliable. Fountains spouted momentarily from the river surface as fragments rained into it. But the pirates must by now be fully aware of what the mortar implied.

"Give me that telescope, Gerard."

He trained the instrument on the seam in the face of the cliff. He could see every detail now, the rough stone parapet, the waterfall at one end, but he could see no sign of the garrison. They were at the back of the cave or crouching behind the parapet.

"Fire another shot."

Fifteen long seconds after the report. Then he saw fragments flying from under the overhang.

"Good shot!" he called, still watching. The shell must have fallen right into the cave. But as he uttered the words a dark figure appeared at the parapet, the arms swinging together. He saw the tiny black disc of the shell against the background of rock curving downwards and then a burst of smoke. Someone had seized the hot shell in his two hands and slung it over the parapet in the nick of time. A desperate deed.

"Pitch another shell there with a second's less fuse and it will be all over," he said, and then — "Wait."

Surely those helpless people must surrender, and not stay to be massacred. What must he do to persuade them? He knew perfectly well.

"Send a white flag forward, My Lord?" asked Spendlove, voicing his thoughts.

"I was thinking about it," said Hornblower.

It would be a dangerous mission. If the pirates were determined not to surrender they would not respect a flag of truce, and would fire on the bearer of it. There were a score of muskets and at least one rifle up there. Hornblower wanted neither to order someone forward nor to ask for a volunteer.

"I'll do it, My Lord," said Spendlove. "They know me."

This was the price he had to pay, thought Hornblower, for his lofty position, for being an Admiral. He had to order his friends to their death. Yet on the other hand —

"Very well," said Hornblower.

"Let's have your shirt and your pike, my man," said Spendlove.

A white shirt tied by the sleeves to a pikestaff made a fair white flag. As Spendlove went forward with it, through the cordon of red-coated marines, Hornblower was tempted to call him back. It was only unconditional surrender that could be offered, after all. He went as far as to open his mouth, but closed it again without saying the words he had in mind. Spendlove walked towards the river bank, stopping every few seconds to wave the flag. Through the telescope Hornblower could see nothing up in the cave. Then he saw a flash of metal, and a line of heads and shoulders over the parapet. A dozen muskets were taking aim at Spendlove. But Spendlove saw them too, and halted, with a wave of his flag. There were long seconds of tension, and then Spendlove turned his back upon the muskets and began to retrace his steps. As he did so there was a puff of smoke from the parapet; the rifleman had fired as soon as he had seen there was no chance of luring Spendlove within musket shot. Spendlove came walking back, trailing the pike and the shirt.

"He missed me, My Lord," he said.

"Thank God," said Hornblower. "Gunner, fire."

The wind may have shifted a little, or the powder was not consistent. The shell burst in the air just below the level of the cave — so that the fuse must have been efficient — but some considerable distance from the cliff.

"Fire again," said Hornblower.

There it was. A burst of smoke, a fountain of fragments, right in the cave. Horrible to think of what was happening there.

"Fire again."

Another burst right in the cave.

"Fire again — No! Wait."

Figures were appearing on the parapet — there had been some survivors, then, from those two bursts. Two figures — tiny dolls in the field of the telescope — seemed to hang in the air as they leaped. The telescope followed them down. One struck water in a fountain of spray. The other fell on the rocky shore, broken and horrible. He raised the telescope again. There was the ladder being thrown over from the parapet. There was a figure — and another figure — climbing down. Hornblower shut the telescope with a snap.

"Captain Seymour! Send a party forward to secure the prisoners."

He did not have to see the horrors of the cave, the mutilated dead and the screaming wounded. He could see them in his mind's eye when Seymour made his report of what he found when he ascended the ladder. It was done, finished. The wounded could be bandaged and carried down to the beach on litters to the death that awaited them, the unwounded driven along with them with their wrists bound. A courier could be sent off to the Governor to say that the pirate horde had been wiped out, so that the patrols could be called in and the militia sent home. He did not have to set eyes on the wretched people he had conquered. The excitement of the hunt was over. He had set himself a task to do, a problem to solve, just as he might work out a longitude from lunar observations, and he had achieved success. But the measure of that success could be expressed in hangings, in dead and in wounded, in that shattered, broken-backed figure lying on the rocks, and he had undertaken the task merely on a point of pride, to re-establish his self-esteem after the indignity of being kidnapped. It was no comfort to argue with himself — as he did — that what he had done would otherwise have been done by others, at great cost in disease and in economic disturbance. That only made him sneer at himself as a hair-splitting casuist. There were few occasions when Hornblower could do what was right in Hornblower's eyes.

Yet there was some cynical pleasure to be derived from his lofty rank, to be able to leave all this after curt orders to Sefton and Seymour to bring the landing party back to the shore with the least delay and the shortest exposure to the night air, to go back on board and eat a comfortable dinner — even if it meant Fell's rather boring company — and to sleep in a comfortable bed. And it was pleasant to find that Fell had already dined, so that he could eat his dinner merely in the company of his flag-lieutenant and his secretary.

Nevertheless, there was one more unexpected crumpled petal in his roseleaf bed, and he discovered it, contrariwise, as a result of what he intended to be a kindly action.

"I shall have to add a further line to my remarks about you to Their Lordships, Spendlove," he said. "It was a brave deed to go forward with that flag of truce."

"Thank you, My Lord," said Spendlove, who bent his gaze down on the tablecloth and drummed with his fingers before continuing, eyes still lowered in unusual nervousness. "Then perhaps Your Lordship will not be averse to putting in a word for me in another quarter?"

"Of course I will," replied Hornblower in all innocence. "Where?"

"Thank you, My Lord. It was with this in mind that I did the little you have been kind enough to approve of. I would be deeply grateful if Your Lordship would go to the trouble of speaking well of me to Miss Lucy."

Lucy! Hornblower had forgotten all about the girl. He quite failed to conceal his surprise, which was clearly apparent to Spendlove when he lifted his glance from the tablecloth.

"We jested about a wealthy marriage, My Lord," said Spendlove. The elaborate care with which he was choosing his words proved how deep were his emotions. "I would not care if Miss Lucy had not a penny. My Lord, my affections are deeply engaged."

"She is a very charming young woman," said Hornblower, temporising desperately.

"My Lord, I love her," burst out Spendlove, casting aside all restraint. "I love her dearly. At the ball I tried to interest her in myself, and I failed."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Hornblower.

"I could not but be aware of her admiration for you, My Lord. She spoke of Your Lordship repeatedly. I realised even then that one word from you would carry more weight than a long speech from me. If you would say that word, My Lord —"

"I'm sure you over-estimate my influence," said Hornblower, choosing his words as carefully as Spendlove had done, but, he hoped, not as obviously. "But of course I will do all I can."

"There is no need for me to reiterate my gratitude, My Lord," said Spendlove.

This pleading creature, this poor love-lorn fellow, was the Spendlove whose cool daring had risked a leap in the darkness down a sixty-foot precipice. Hornblower remembered Lucy's lips on his hands, remembered how she had followed him on her knees across the floor. The less he had to do with any of this the better, he decided. But the passion of a child hardly out of the schoolroom for a man of mature years was likely to be fleeting, transient, and the memory of her lost dignity would later be as painful to her as it was to him. She would find need to assert herself, to show him that he was not the only man in the world — and how could she demonstrate that more plainly than by marrying someone else? To use a vulgar phrase, there was quite a chance that Spendlove might catch her on the rebound.

"If good wishes can help," he said, "you have all mine, Spendlove."

Even an Admiral had to choose his words with care. Two days later he was announcing his immediate departure to the Governor.

"I'm taking my squadron to sea in the morning, Your Excellency," he said.

"Aren't you going to stay for the hangings?" asked Hooper in surprise.

"I fear not," answered Hornblower, and added an unnecessary explanation. "Hangings don't agree with me, Your Excellency."

It was not merely an unnecessary explanation; it was a foolish one, as he knew as soon as he saw the open astonishment in Hooper's face. Hooper could hardly have been more surprised at hearing that hangings did not agree with Hornblower than he would have been if he had heard that Hornblower did not agree with hangings — and that was very nearly as correct.

THE GUNS OF CARABOBO

She was exactly like a British ship of war; naturally, perhaps, since she had been one most of her life until she was sold out of the service. Now, as she came up into the harbour, she could pass without question for a man-o'-war brig except that she flew the Royal Yacht Squadron burgee instead of a commission pendant. Hornblower put down the telescope through which he had been watching, curiously, her progress into Kingston harbour, and referred again to Barbara's letter, two months old now, which had arrived a fortnight ago.

My dearest husband (wrote Barbara. She sometimes misused her superlatives; that 'dearest', strictly, implied that she had at least three husbands, even though it also implied that Hornblower rated highest of the three).

You are shortly going to have a visitor, a Mr Charles Ramsbottom, a millionaire, who has purchased an old ship of the Navy to use as a yacht, which he has named the *Bride of Abydos*, and in which he proposes to visit the West Indies. He has only lately made his appearance in society, having inherited his father's fortune — Bradford wool and army clothing contracts! Yet despite this obscure origin he has succeeded in entering into society, perhaps because he is very young, very charming, unmarried, mildly eccentric, and, as I said, a millionaire. I have met him frequently of late, in very good houses, and I recommend him to you, dearest, if for no other reason than that he has won some small portion of my heart by a delightful mixture of deference and interest which I might have found irresistible were I not married to the most irresistible man in the world. He has, indeed, won golden opinions in society, both on the Government side and with the opposition, and he might become an important factor in politics should he decide to enter into them. I have no doubt that he will bring you introductions from personages even more influential than your loving wife. . . .

Hornblower had to read the letter through to the end, although it contained no further reference to Mr Charles Ramsbottom, but he returned again to the opening paragraph. It was the first time he had ever seen this new word 'millionaire', which occurred twice. He disliked it on sight. It was inconceivable that a man should have a million pounds, and presumably not in broad estates but in factories and in stocks and shares, probably with a huge holding in Consols and an immense balance at the bank as well. The existence of millionaires, whether in Society or not, was something as distasteful as the word itself now called into existence. And this one had been charming to Barbara — he was not too sure if that really constituted a recommendation. He picked up the telescope again and watched the brig come to an anchor. The rapidity with which she took in sail showed that she carried a large crew. Hornblower, as a Commander-in-Chief of a squadron and accountable to the niggardly Lords of the Admiralty for every penny expended, knew perfectly well what this sort of thing cost. This Mr Ramsbottom, to indulge himself in his naval toy, was expending enough money to maintain a thousand families in bread and beer and bacon.

The brig rounded-to and anchored very neatly indeed; if she had been a vessel included in his command he would have grunted with grudging satisfaction. As it was he grunted with a mixture of envy and derision and turned away to await the inevitable call in the seclusion of Admiralty House.

When it came he fingered the visiting card with its plain 'Mr Charles Ramsbottom' and found some small satisfaction in deciding that he had at last come across a name more unlovely than his own. But the owner of the name, when he was ushered in, made a better impression. In his very early twenties, he was small and slight and — for what it was worth — strikingly handsome, with black hair and eyes and what could only be described as 'chiselled features' deeply tanned after weeks at sea; not at all what might be expected of a Bradford wool manufacturer, while his dark-green coat and formal white breeches were in quiet good taste. "My wife wrote to me about you, Mr Ramsbottom," said Hornblower.

"That was very kind of Lady Hornblower. But of course she is kindness personified. May I present my letters of introduction from Lord Liverpool and Bishop Wilberforce, My Lord?"

Barbara was perfectly right, then, in predicting that Ramsbottom would win favour with both political parties — here were letters from the Prime Minister himself and a prominent member of the Opposition. Hornblower glanced through them, and was conscious of an undernote of cordiality despite their formal wording.

"Excellent, Mr Ramsbottom," said Hornblower. He tried to adopt the tone which he presumed would be adopted by a man who had just read a letter of introduction from the Prime Minister. "Is there any way in which I can be of service to you?"

"None that I am aware of at present, My Lord. I must complete with water and stores, naturally, but my purser is a capable man. I intend to continue my voyage through these charming islands."

"Of course," said Hornblower, soothingly. He could not imagine why anyone should voluntarily spend any time in these waters where piracy was still smouldering, nor why anyone should wish to visit countries where malaria and yellow fever were endemic, and where civil war, revolution, and massacre claimed even heavier toll.

"You find the *Bride of Abydos* a comfortable ship?" asked Hornblower.

Those eighteen-gun brigs of the Royal Navy were notoriously unpleasant craft, crowded and crank.

"Comfortable enough, My Lord, thank you," answered Ramsbottom. "I lightened her by changing the armament; she mounts only twelve guns now — two long sixes and ten carronades, twenty-four-pounders instead of thirty-two-pounders."

"So you could still deal with a pirate?"

"Oh, yes indeed, My Lord. And with the reduction in weight on deck — a full ten tons — and modifications in her sail plan I have made a seaworthy craft of her, I believe and hope."

"I'm sure you have, Mr Ramsbottom," said Hornblower. It was likely enough; the brigs-of-war were naturally crammed with guns and warlike stores to the limit of stability and human endurance, so that a moderate reduction in dead weight might bring profound results in comfort and handiness.

"It would give me the greatest pleasure," went on Mr Ramsbottom, "if I could induce Your Lordship to visit me on board. It would indeed be an honour, and would gratify my crew. Perhaps I could even persuade Your Lordship to dine on board?"

"We can discuss that after you have dined with me, Mr Ramsbottom," replied Hornblower, remembering his manners and his obligation to invite to dinner any bearer of a reasonable introduction.

"You are most kind, My Lord," said Mr Ramsbottom. "I must, of course, present my introductions to His Excellency at the earliest opportunity."

There was something quite winning about Mr Ramsbottom's smile as he said this, an awareness and a tolerance of the rules of social etiquette. A visitor to Jamaica would normally be bound to pay his respects first to the Governor, but Ramsbottom was no ordinary visitor; as captain of a ship his first call was due to the Naval authorities, to Hornblower, in fact. A trivial point, as his smile implied, but, etiquette being etiquette, trivial points demanded strict attention.

By the time Ramsbottom took his leave he had made a very good impression on the reluctant Hornblower. He had talked sensibly about ships and the sea, he was easy and natural in his manner, and not in the least like Lord Byron, who was probably more responsible than anyone else for the growing fad for yachting among the wealthy. Hornblower was even prepared to forgive him for having 'won some small portion' of Barbara's heart. And in the course of his several days' stay in Jamaica Hornblower really came to like the young man, especially after having lost two pounds to him in a desperate tussle at whist and then winning ten pounds back in another tussle where admittedly Ramsbottom encountered a run of bad luck. Jamaican society gave Ramsbottom a warm welcome; even the Governor looked on him with approval, and the Governor's wife, Lady Hooper, was loud in her praises of his excellent manners and considerate ways.

"I wouldn't have expected it of a Bradford manufacturer's son," said Hooper, grudgingly.

"Are you dining on board the *Bride of Abydos*, sir?" asked Hornblower.

"I am going there to dinner," answered Hooper, who enjoyed food, "but seeing that it is only a yacht I have little hope of dining."

Hornblower arrived on board early, at Ramsbottom's suggestion, so as to have time to inspect the vessel. He was received in Navy fashion with sideboys attending the side and a long flourish on boatswain's pipes as he stepped on board. He looked keenly about him even while he shook Ramsbottom's hand. He could not have said he was not in a King's ship, as his eye took in the gleaming white deck, the ropes coiled in perfect symmetry, the gleaming trophy of pikes and cutlasses against the bulkhead, the brass winking in the sunshine, the disciplined orderly crew in blue jumpers and white trousers.

"May I present my officers, My Lord?" asked Ramsbottom.

They were two half-pay lieutenants, hardbitten men; as Hornblower shook their hands he told himself that if it had not been for a dozen strokes of luck he himself might still be a lieutenant, perhaps eking out his half-pay by serving in a rich man's yacht. As Ramsbottom led him forward he recognised one of the hands standing at attention by a gun.

"You were with me in the *Renown*, out here in 1800," he said.

"Yes, sir. My Lord, so I was, sir." The man grinned with uneasy pleasure as he shyly took Hornblower's outstretched hand. "And Charlie Kemp, sir, My Lord, over there, sir, 'e was with you in the Baltic. And Bill Cummings, up on the fo'c'sle, 'e was foretopman in the *Lydia* round the Horn with you sir, My Lord."

"Glad to see you again," said Hornblower. That was true, but he was equally glad that he had not been under the necessity of remembering names. He moved on.

"You seem to have a Navy crew, Mr Ramsbottom," he remarked.

"Yes, My Lord. They are nearly all man-o'-wars men."

In these years of peace and depression it would be easy enough to recruit a crew, thought Hornblower. Ramsbottom might be considered to be doing a public service in providing easy employment for these men who had deserved well of their country. Listening to the sharp orders given as the crew was put through their paces Hornblower could not suppress a smile. It was a harmless enough fad, he supposed, for Ramsbottom to indulge himself in playing at commanding a ship of war.

"You have a most efficient ship and a well-trained crew, Mr Ramsbottom," he said.

"It is a pleasure to hear Your Lordship say so."

"You have seen no service yourself?"

"None, My Lord."

There was a certain degree of surprise still to be found in the fact that in this year of 1821 there were to be found grown men, even heads of families, who nevertheless had been too young to see service in the wars that had devastated the world for a whole generation. It made Hornblower feel like a centenarian.

"Here come further guests, My Lord, if you will pardon me."

Two planters — Hough and Doggart — and then the Chief Justice of the island. So the arrival of the Governor would make a dinner party of six, three officials and three men in private life. They gathered under the awning, which, stretched across the main boom, shaded the quarterdeck, and watched the reception of His Excellency.

"Do you think the dinner will come up to the ceremonial?" asked Doggart.

"Ramsbottom's purser bought two tons of ice yesterday," said Hough.

"At sixpence a pound that bids fair," commented Doggart.

Jamaica was the centre of a small trade in ice, brought down from New England in fast schooners. Cut and stored away in deep places during the winter, it was hurried to the Caribbean insulated in a packing of sawdust. At the height of summer it commanded fantastic prices. Hornblower was interested; he was more interested still in the sight of a seaman down in the waist steadily turning a crank. It did not seem a very hard labour, although unremitting. He could not for the life of him think of what function that crank could play in the life of the ship. The guests made their bows to His Excellency, and at his suggestion seated themselves in the comfortable chairs. A steward appeared at once passing round glasses of sherry.

"Excellent, by George!" exclaimed the Governor after his first cautious sip. "None of your Olorosos, none of your sweet sticky dark sherries."

The Governor by virtue of his reputed royal blood as well as in consequence of his position could make remarks that well might appear rude in another man. But the sherry was indeed delightful; pale, dry, infinitely delicate in flavour and bouquet, cool but not chilled. A new sound struck on Hornblower's ear, and he turned and looked forward. At the foot of the mainmast a small orchestra had struck up, of various stringed instruments whose names he had never bothered to learn except for the fiddle. If it were not for the intrusion of this horrible music there could be nothing more delightful than to sit under an awning on the deck of a well-found ship with the sea breeze just beginning to come in, drinking this excellent sherry. The Governor made a small gesture which brought a fresh glass promptly to him.

"Ah!" said the Governor. "You keep a good orchestra, Mr Ramsbottom."

It was well known that the royal family inherited a taste for music.

"I must thank Your Excellency," said Ramsbottom, and the glasses went round again before he turned an ear to the murmured words of the steward. "Your Excellency, My Lord, gentlemen, dinner is served."

They filed down the companion; apparently every bulkhead had been taken down in the after part of the ship to make a cabin spacious though, low. The carronades on either side struck a subdued warlike note in a scene of luxury, for there were flowers everywhere; the dining table stood in the centre concealed under a glittering linen cloth. Wind scoops at the scuttles helped to deflect the trade wind into the cabin, which, under the double shade of the awning and the deck, was pleasantly cool, but Hornblower's eye at once caught sight of a couple of strange objects, like small wheels, set in two scuttles and ceaselessly whirling round. Then he knew why the seaman was turning that crank in the waist; he was driving these two wheels, which by some ingenious mechanism propelled currents of air from outside into the cabin, acting like windmill vanes but in the opposite sense.

Seated at the table in accordance with the courteous indications of their host, the guests awaited the serving of the dinner. The first course made its appearance — two ample dishes set in dishes even more ample filled with cracked ice. The inner dishes held a grey granular substance.

"Caviare!" exclaimed His Excellency, helping himself liberally after his first astonished stare.

"I hope it is to your taste, sir," said Ramsbottom. "And I hope you will accompany it with some of the vodka here. It is the same as is served at the Russian Imperial table."

Conversation regarding caviare and vodka occupied the attention of all during the first course. The last time Hornblower had tasted the combination was during the defence of Riga in 1812; the experience enabled him to add his quota to the conversation. The next course made its appearance.

"You gentlemen are accustomed to this dish," said Ramsbottom, "but I need not apologise for it. It is, I believe, one of the delicacies of the Islands."

It was flying fish.

"Certainly no need to apologise when it is served like this," commented His Excellency. "Your *chef de cuisine* must be a man of genius."

The sauce that came with it had the merest hint of mustard.

"Ock or Champagne, My Lord?" murmured a voice in Hornblower's ear. Hornblower had already heard the Governor answer the same question with 'I'll try the hock first'. The champagne was dry and insidiously delicate, an ideal companion for the food. The great eaters of antiquity, Nero or Vitellius or Lucullus, had never known what it was like to partake of champagne and flying fish.

"You'll be living differently from this soon, Hornblower," said His Excellency.

"No doubt about that, sir."

Ramsbottom, between them, looked a polite inquiry.

"Your Lordship's going to sea?"

"Next week," replied Hornblower. "I take my squadron to sea for exercises before the coming of the hurricane season."

"Of course that would be necessary to maintain efficiency," agreed Ramsbottom. "The exercises will last for long?"

"A couple of weeks or more," said Hornblower. "I have to keep my men accustomed to hard tack and salt pork and water from the cask."

"And yourself too," chuckled the Governor.

"Myself too," agreed Hornblower ruefully.

"And you take your whole squadron, My Lord?" asked Ramsbottom.

"All I can. I work 'em hard and try to make no exceptions."

"A good rule, I should think," said Ramsbottom.

The soup that followed the flying fish was a fiery mulligatawny, well adapted to West Indian palates.

"Good!" was the Governor's brief comment after his first spoonful. The champagne went round again and conversation became livelier and livelier, and Ramsbottom deftly kept it going.

"What news from the mainland, sir?" he asked the Governor. "This fellow Bolivar — is he making any progress?"

"He fights on," answered the Governor. "But Spain hurries out reinforcements whenever her own troubles permit. The government at Caracas is looking for the arrival of more at this moment, I believe. Then they may be able to conquer the plains and drive him out again. You know he was a refugee here in this very island a few years ago?"

"Indeed, sir?"

All the guests at the table were interested in the desperate civil war that was being fought on the mainland. Massacre and murder, blind heroism and devoted self-sacrifice, loyalty to the King and thirst for independence — all these were to be found in Venezuela; war and pestilence were laying waste the fertile plains and depopulating the crowded cities.

"How will the Spaniards stand now that Maracaibo has revolted, Hornblower?" asked the Governor.

"It's not a serious loss, sir. As long as they have the use of La Guaira their sea communications remain open — the roads are so bad that Caracas has always made use of La Guaira to preserve contact with the outside world; it's only an open roadstead but it provides good anchorage."

"Has Maracaibo revolted, Your Excellency?" asked Ramsbottom mildly.

"The news came this morning. A feather in Bolivar's cap after his recent defeats. His army must have been growing disheartened."

"His army, sir?" This was the Chief Justice speaking. "Half his men are British infantry."

Hornblower knew that to be true. British veterans formed the backbone of Bolivar's army. The llaneros — the men of the Venezuelan plains — supplied him with a brilliant cavalry, but not with the material for permanent conquest.

"Even British infantry could grow disheartened in a hopeless cause," said the Governor, solemnly. "The Spaniards control most of the coast — ask the Admiral here."

"That's so," agreed Hornblower. "They've made it hard for Bolivar's privateers."

"I hope you're not going to venture into that turmoil, Mr Ramsbottom," said the Governor.

"They'll make short work of you if you do," added the Chief Justice. "The Dons will tolerate no interference. They'll snatch you up and you'll languish in a Spanish prison for years before we can extricate you from King Ferdinand's clutches. Unless jail fever carries you off first. Or they hang you as a pirate."

"I have certainly no intention of venturing near the mainland," said Ramsbottom. "At least not while this war continues. It is a pity, because Venezuela was my mother's country, and it would give me pleasure to visit it."

"Your mother's country, Mr Ramsbottom?" asked the Governor.

"Yes, sir. My mother was a Venezuelan lady. There I would be Carlos Ramsbottom y Santona."

"Most interesting," remarked the Governor.

And more grotesque than Horatio Hornblower. It was significant of the worldwide interests of British commerce that a Bradford woollen manufacturer should have a Venezuelan mother. At any rate it accounted for Ramsbottom's dark, almost swarthy, good looks.

"I can very well wait until peace is settled one way or the other," said Ramsbottom off-handedly. "There will be other voyages to make. Meanwhile, sir, let me call your attention to this dish here."

The main course had now arrived on the table, roast chickens and a leg of pork as well as the dish that Ramsbottom indicated. What lay in it was concealed by poached eggs covering the surface.

"A made dish?" asked the Governor, doubtfully. His tone indicated that at this stage of the dinner he looked rather for a substantial roast.

"Please try it, sir," said Ramsbottom coaxingly.

The Governor helped himself and tasted cautiously.

"Pleasant enough," he decided. "What is it?"

"A ragout of preserved beef," answered Ramsbottom. "Can I persuade you gentlemen to try it? My Lord?"

At least it was something new; it was like nothing Hornblower had ever tasted before — certainly not in the least like the beef preserved in brine which he had eaten for twenty years.

"Extremely good," said Hornblower. "How is it preserved?"

Ramsbottom made a gesture to the waiting steward, who laid a square box, apparently of iron, upon the table. It weighed heavy in Hornblower's hand.

"Glass serves equally well," explained Ramsbottom, "but it is not as convenient on shipboard."

The steward was now at work upon the iron box with a stout knife. He cut it open and prized back the top and offered it for inspection.

"A tinned box," went on Ramsbottom, "sealed at a high temperature. I venture to suggest that this new method will make a noticeable difference to the food supply on shipboard. This beef can be eaten cold on removal from the box, or it can be hashed as you have it here."

"And the poached egg?" asked the Governor.

"That was the inspiration of my cook, sir."

Discussion of this new invention — and of the excellent Burgundy served with this course — distracted attention from the troubles of Venezuela, and even from Ramsbottom's Venezuelan mother. Conversation became general, and somewhat disjointed, as the wine flowed. Hornblower had drunk as much as he desired, and, with his habitual dislike of excess, contrived to avoid drinking more. It was noticeable that Ramsbottom remained sober as well, cool and quiet-voiced, while the other faces grew redder and redder, and the cabin echoed to the roaring toasts and the bursts of inconsequential song. Hornblower guessed that his host was now finding the evening as tedious as he himself found it. He was glad when at last His Excellency rose, supporting himself by the table, to take his leave.

"A damned good dinner," he said. "And you're a damned good host, Ramsbottom. Wish there were more like you."

Hornblower shook hands.

"It was very good of you to come, My Lord," said Ramsbottom. "I regret that I must take this opportunity to say goodbye to Your Lordship."

"You are sailing soon?"

"In a couple of days, I expect, My Lord. I trust you will find your squadron exercises satisfactory."

"Thank you very much. Where will you head for now?"

"I shall beat back through the Windward channel, My Lord. Perhaps I shall see something of the Bahamas."

"Be careful of your navigation there. I must wish you good luck and a pleasant voyage. I shall write to my wife and tell her of your visit."

"Please give Lady Hornblower my best wishes and respects, My Lord."

Ramsbottom's good manners persisted to the end; he remembered to send round his cards '*Pour prendre congé*' before he left, and mothers of unmarried daughters much regretted his leaving. Hornblower saw the *Bride of Abydos* in the early dawn reaching to the eastward to round Morant Point with the land breezes, and then forgot about her in the bustle of taking his squadron to sea for exercises.

It never failed to raise a wry smile on his face when he looked about him at 'His Majesty's ships and vessels in the West Indies' under his command. In wartime he would have had a powerful fleet; now he had three small frigates and a motley collection of brigs and schooners. But they would serve his purpose; in his scheme the frigates became three-deckers and the brigs seventy-fours and the schooners frigates. He had a van, a centre, and a rear; he cruised in formation ready to meet the enemy, with rasping reprimands soaring up his signal halliards when any ship failed to keep station; he cleared for action and he turned by divisions into fighting line ahead; he tacked to double on the imaginary enemy's line. In pitch darkness he would burn blue lights with the signal 'Enemy in sight', so that a score of captains and a thousand seamen came tumbling from their beds to deal with the non-existent foe.

Without warning he would hang out a signal putting the most junior lieutenants in command of their respective ships, and then he would plunge into intricate manoeuvres calculated to turn the anxious substantive captains, looking helplessly on, grey with anxiety — but those junior lieutenants might some day be commanding ships of the line in a battle on which the destiny of England might depend, and it was necessary to steel their nerves and accustom them to handle ships in dangerous situations. In the middle of sail drill he would signal 'Flagship on fire. All boats away.' He called for landing parties to storm non-existent batteries on some harmless, uninhabited cay, and he inspected those landing parties once they were on shore, to the last flint in the last pistol, with a rigid disregard for excuses that made men grind their teeth in exasperation. He set his captains to plan and execute cutting-out expeditions, and he commented mordantly on the arrangements for defence and the methods of attack. He paired off his ships to fight single-ship duels, sighting each other on the horizon and approaching ready to fire the vital opening broadside; he took

advantage of calms to set his men to work towing and sweeping in desperate attempts to overtake the ship ahead. He worked his crews until they were ready to drop, and then he devised further tasks for them to prove to them that they still had one more effort left in them, so that it was doubtful whether 'Old Horny' was mentioned more often with curses or with admiration.

It was a toughened squadron that Hornblower led back to Kingston; but while *Clorinda* was still working up into the harbour a shore boat came pulling out to her, with on board an aide-de-camp of the Governor's with a note for Hornblower.

"Sir Thomas, would you have the kindness to call away my barge?" asked Hornblower.

There was much apparent need for haste, for the note from Government House said, briefly:

My Lord,

It is necessary that Your Lordship should attend here at the earliest possible moment to offer an explanation regarding the situation in Venezuela. Your Lordship is therefore requested and required to report to me immediately.

Augustus Hooper, Governor.

Hornblower naturally had no idea of what had happened in Venezuela for the last two weeks and more. He made no guess while the carriage took him up to Government House at its best pace, and in any case if he had tried he would never have succeeded in coming near to the truth.

"What is all this, Hornblower?" were the Governor's opening words to him. "What authority have you for blockading the Venezuelan coast? Why was I not informed?"

"I've done nothing of the sort," replied Hornblower, indignantly.

"But — Damn it, man, I've the proof here. I've Dutchmen and Spaniards and half the nations of the earth here all protesting about it."

"I assure you, sir, I have taken no action on the Venezuelan coast. I have not been within five hundred miles of it."

"Then what does this mean?" shouted the Governor. "Look here at this!"

He held some papers up with one hand and slapped wildly at them with the other, so that Hornblower had some difficulty in taking them from him. Hornblower was bewildered already; he was more bewildered still as he read. One paper was an official dispatch in French, from the Dutch Governor of Curaçao; the other was larger and clearer, and he read it first. It was a big sheet of paper with bold writing.

Whereas — it began — notice has been received by the Lords Commissioners for executing the office of the Lord High Admiral from the Right Honourable Viscount Castlereagh, one of His Britannic Majesty's Principal Secretaries of State, concerning the need to establish a Blockade of the Coast of His Most Catholic Majesty's Dominion of Venezuela, and of the Islands pertaining to the Dominion of His Majesty the King of the Netherlands, namely and to wit Curaçao, Aruba, and Bonaire.

Therefore I, Horatio Lord Hornblower, Knight Grand Cross of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, Rear-Admiral of the White Squadron, Commanding His Britannic Majesty's Ships and Vessels in West Indian Waters, Hereby Proclaim that

The Coast of the Continent of South America from Cartagena to the Dragon's Mouth and

The Dutch Islands aforesaid of Curaçao, Aruba, and Bonaire

Are now in a state of blockade, and that

Any vessel of whatever description, whether carrying materials of war or not, found attempting to enter any port harbour or roadstead within the Territory so defined, or

Hovering with the intent to enter any such port harbour or roadstead

Will be boarded and sent in for adjudication under His Britannic Majesty's High Court of Admiralty and

Will be condemned and seized without compensation to owners, freight owners, charterers, captain, or crew.

Given under my hand this First Day of June 1821,

Hornblower, Rear-Admiral

Having read this document Hornblower was able to spare a second glance at the other. It was a vigorous protest from the Dutch Governor at Curaçao demanding explanations, apologies, the immediate withdrawal of the blockade, and exemplary compensation. Hornblower stared at Hooper in astonishment.

"This is in legal form," he said, indicating the proclamation, "but I never signed it. This is not my signature."

"Then — ?" spluttered Hooper. "I thought you might be acting under secret orders from London."

"Of course not, sir." Hornblower stared at Hooper for another long second before the explanation came to him. "Ramsbottom!"

"What do you mean?"

"He's been posing as me, or as one of my officers at least. Is the Dutch officer who brought this available?"

"He's waiting in the next room. There's a Spaniard there, too, sent over in a fishing boat by Morillo from La Quaira."

"Can we have them in, sir?"

The Dutchman and the Spaniard were men full of indignation, which was not abated in the least by their presentation to the Admiral responsible, in their minds, for this trouble. The Dutchman spoke fluent English, and it was to him that Hornblower first addressed himself.

"How was this proclamation delivered?" he asked.

"By one of your ships. By one of your officers."

"What ship?"

"The brig-of-war *Desperate*."

"I have no such ship. There's none in the Navy List. Who brought it?"

"The captain."

"Who was he? What was he like?"

"He was an officer. A Commander, with epaulettes."

"In uniform?"

"In full uniform."

"Young? Old?"

"Very young."

"Small? Slender? Handsome?"

"Yes."

Hornblower exchanged a glance with Hooper.

"And this brig, the *Desperate*. About a hundred and seventy tons, bowsprit sieved nearly level, mainmast stepped rather far aft?"

"Yes."

"That settles it, sir," said Hornblower to Hooper, and, to the Dutchman, "you've been fooled, I'm sorry to say. This man was an impostor. This proclamation is a forgery."

The Dutchman stamped with annoyance. He was unable to find words to express himself in a foreign tongue for some moments. Finally from his splutterings emerged a name, which he repeated until it was understandable.

"The *Helmond*! The *Helmond*!"

"What is the *Helmond*, sir?" asked Hornblower.

"One of our ships. Your ship — this *Desperate* — captured her."

"A valuable ship?"

"She had on board the guns for the Spanish Army. Two batteries of field artillery, guns, limbers, ammunition, everything."

"Piracy!" exclaimed Hooper.

"It sounds like it," said Hornblower.

The Spanish officer had been standing by impatiently, apparently only half understanding the English conversation. Hornblower turned to him, and, after desperately trying to recapture his half-forgotten Spanish, entered upon a limping explanation. The Spaniard replied volubly, so volubly that more than once Hornblower had to ask him to speak more slowly. Ramsbottom had come sailing into La Guaira and had brought his precious proclamation with him. At the merest hint that the British Navy was instituting a blockade no ship

had dared to stir on the South American coast, except for the *Helmond*. She had been badly needed. Bolivar was marching on Caracas; a battle was imminent on which depended the entire Spanish control of Venezuela. Morillo and the Spanish army were in need of artillery. Now not only were they left destitute, but with this news it could be taken as certain that those guns, those two batteries of field artillery, were in Bolivar's hands. The Spanish officer wrung his hands in despair.

Hornblower translated briefly for the Governor's benefit, and Hooper shook his head in sympathy.

"Bolivar has those guns. No doubt about it. Gentlemen, I much regret this occurrence. But I must impress upon you that His Majesty's Government assumes no responsibility for it. If your chiefs took no steps to detect this impostor —"

That touched off a new explosion. The British Government should make sure that no impostor wore its uniform or posed as an officer in its service. It called for all Hooper's elephantine tact to quiet down the angry officers.

"If you will permit me to consult with the Admiral, gentlemen, we may reach some satisfactory conclusion."

Alone with the Governor again Hornblower struggled with a smile; he had never outgrown his tendency to laugh during a crisis. There was something amusing in the thought that a cocked hat and a pair of epaulettes should change the course of a war; it was a tribute to the power of the Navy that a single tiny ship should exert such enormous pressure.

"Ramsbottom and his Venezuelan mother!" said Hooper. "It's not merely piracy, it's high treason. We shall have to hang him."

"M'm," said Hornblower. "He probably holds a privateering commission from Bolivar."

"But masquerading as a British officer? Forging official documents?"

"That was a ruse of war. An American officer deceived the Portuguese authorities in Brazil in much the same way in 1812."

"I've heard some things about you, too," added Hooper with a grin.

"No doubt, sir. In war a belligerent who believes what he's told is a fool."

"But we're not belligerents."

"No, sir. And we've suffered no loss. The Dutch and the Spaniards have only themselves to blame."

"But Ramsbottom's a subject of His Majesty."

"Quite true, sir. But if he holds Bolivar's commission he can do things as an officer of the revolutionary forces which he could not do as a private person."

"D'ye mean to suggest we ought to allow him to continue this blockade of his? Nonsense, man."

"Of course not, sir. I'll arrest him, and I'll send his ship in for adjudication, at the first opportunity. But a friendly Power has asked you, sir, the representative of His Majesty, if you have instituted a blockade. You must do everything in your power to demonstrate the truth."

"Now for once you're talking like a sensible man. We must send word at once to Curaçao and Caracas. That will be your immediate duty. You'd better go in person."

"Yes, sir. I'll sail with the land breeze. Have you any further instructions for me, sir?"

"None whatever. What goes on on the high seas is your affair, not mine. You're answerable to the Cabinet through the Admiralty. I don't envy you, frankly."

"No doubt I'll survive, sir. I'll sail for La Guaira, and send another vessel to Curaçao. Perhaps if Your Excellency were to write official replies to the enquiries addressed to you they would be ready by the time I sail?"

"I'll draft 'em now." The Governor could not repress one further outburst. "This Ramsbottom — and his corned beef and caviare!"

"He used a sprat to catch a mackerel, Your Excellency," said Hornblower.

So it came about that the crew of HMS *Clorinda* did not spend that night in the debauchery of Kingston as they had expected. Instead they worked until dawn completing with stores and water, so hard that they had no breath to spare to curse the Admiral who did these things to them. In the very first light of morning they warped their ship out with the aid of the faint puffs of the land breeze, and *Clorinda*, her Admiral's flag flying at the mizzen, headed close-hauled to the south-eastward on her thousand-mile voyage to La Guaira. She had on board Brigadier-General Don Manuel Ruiz, Morillo's representative, to whom Hornblower had offered a passage back to his headquarters. The man was in a fever to return and put an end to Ramsbottom's blockade;

it was clear that the royal forces in Venezuela were hard pressed. He had no thought for anything else during that voyage. The lovely sunsets meant to him merely that another day had gone by without his reaching his destination. The gallant way in which *Clorinda* held her course, close-hauled, shouldering the long rollers aside in showers of spray, held no fascination for him, for she was not flying before the wind at her best speed. At noon each day, when the ship's position was pricked off on the chart, he would look long and despairingly, estimating by eye the further distance to be traversed. He had not had sufficient experience at sea to acquire the knack of resigning himself to the influence of forces beyond human control. When the wind drew southerly and foul, as it did for two days consecutively, he was clearly on the verge of accusing Hornblower of being in league with his enemies, and made no attempt to understand Hornblower's soothing explanation that on the starboard tack on which *Clorinda* was compelled to lie they were making easting which might be invaluable in possible later eventualities. He resented the caution of Captain Fell which led to *Clorinda*'s shortening sail as they entered the dangerous proximity of Grand Cay, and at dawn next day he was climbing the foremast shrouds as high as he dared, looking out for the first sight of the mountains of Venezuela — and even then he did not recognise as land the blue streak which he saw.

A shore boat came out to them before ever they dropped anchor, and there was an urgent conference on *Clorinda*'s quarterdeck between Ruiz and the officer it brought out.

"My General is in Carabobo," said Ruiz to Hornblower. "A battle is going to be fought. Bolivar is marching on Puerto Cabello, and my General has taken the army to meet him."

"Where is Ramsbottom and his ship?"

Ruiz looked to the arrival for the information.

"Near Puerto Cabello."

That was, of course, the likeliest place, a hundred miles or less to the westward, a roadstead where supplies might possibly be landed, and an ideal situation for intercepting all communications between Curaçao and La Guaira.

"Then I shall head for Puerto Cabello," said Hornblower. "You can accompany me if you wish, Don Manuel. The wind is fair and I'll land you there quicker than a horse would carry you."

Ruiz hesitated for a moment; he knew all about horses and he was suspicious about ships. But the advantage was so obvious that he accepted.

"Very well, then," said Hornblower. "Sir Thomas, we'll hoist that anchor again, if you would be so kind. Set a course for Puerto Cabello."

Now *Clorinda* had the lusty trade wind on her quarter, her best point of sailing; she had her studding sails out and every possible stitch of canvas out, and she flew along. A horse at full gallop might go faster, but no horse could do as *Clorinda* was doing and maintain full speed for hour after hour, nor could any horse ever attain full speed on the mountain tracks of the Maritime Andes. Naturally, no amount of speed could satisfy Ruiz. With telescope to his eye he watched the distant coast go by until his weary eye was almost blind, and then he paced about the quarterdeck, trickles of sweat running down his forehead and cheeks as the sun, climbing to its noontide height, blazed vertically down on him. He turned a suspicious eye on Hornblower when the crew of *Clorinda* poured aloft to take in sail.

"We are going in to shore now, General," explained Hornblower soothingly.

The leadsmen were in the chains as *Clorinda* headed in towards the roadstead. In the middle of their chant Ruiz suddenly turned to Hornblower and stood rigid, listening to another, more distant, sound.

"Cannons!" he said.

Hornblower strained his ears. The faintest, almost imperceptible noise, and then silence, save for the sound of the ship through the water and the bustle of preparing to come to an anchor.

"Order the 'still' for a moment, if you please, Sir Thomas."

Now the leadsmen ceased their chant, and every man in *Clorinda* stood silent, even though the wind still played through the rigging and the sea chattered alongside. A very distant, flat detonation. Another. Two more.

"Thank you, Sir Thomas. You may carry on now."

"Cannons!" repeated Ruiz, glaring at Hornblower. "They are fighting the battle."

Somewhere on the outskirts of Puerto Cabello Royalists and Republicans were locked in combat. And those guns that they had heard? They might well be those that the *Helmond* had carried, now in the hands of the insurgents and firing upon their legal owners. The fact that artillery was being employed indicated a pitched battle, no petty skirmish. Over there the fate of Venezuela was being decided. Ruiz was pounding his fist into his open palm.

"Sir Thomas, kindly have a boat ready to land the General without delay."

As the gig pulled away from *Clorinda's* side Hornblower looked up at the sun, called up before his mind's eye the chart of the Venezuelan coast, and reached a further decision. As always in the Service, a long, dull interval had heralded a period of activity. As the gig came skimming back again he was ready with his next order.

"Will you be so good as to make sail again, Sir Thomas? We can continue to search to the westward for Ramsbottom while daylight lasts."

It was desirable to obtain the earliest possible news of the result of the battle, but it was also, or more, desirable to lay hands on Ramsbottom as quickly as might be. They had not sighted him between La Guaira and Puerto Cabello; he could not be much farther along the coast. The sun was descending now, dazzling the lookouts as they peered towards it while *Clorinda* continued her course along the shores of the province of Carabobo. Not so far ahead the land trended abruptly northward to San Juan Point — a lee shore. It was curious that Ramsbottom should have gone even this far to leeward; unless he had put up his helm and headed clear away, guessing that his period of grace was at an end.

"Deck, there!" The lookout at the fore-topgallant masthead was hailing. "There's summat on the port bow, just in sight. Right in the eye of the sun. But it may be a ship, sir. A ship's masts an' yards, sir, with no sail set."

It would be incredible that Ramsbottom had anchored here on this dangerous lee shore. But incredible things have to be done in war. *Clorinda* had long ago taken in her studding sails. Now after a sharp order from Fell, and five minutes' activity on the part of her crew, she was gliding along under topsails and headsails alone. The sun sank into a bank of cloud, suffusing it with scarlet.

"Deck there! Two ships, sir. At anchor. One of 'em's a brig, sir."

A brig! Ramsbottom almost for certain. Now with the sun behind the cloud it was possible to train a telescope in the direction indicated. There they were, sharp and clear against the sunset, silhouetted in black against the scarlet cloud, the masts and yards of a ship and a brig at anchor. Sir Thomas was looking to Hornblower for orders.

"Approach as close as you consider advisable, if you please, Sir Thomas. And a boarding party ready to take possession."

"An armed boarding party, My Lord?"

"As you please. He'll never dare to oppose us by force."

The guns of the brig were not run out, there were no boarding nettings rigged. In any case the little brig stood no chance in an unsheltered anchorage against a frigate.

"I'll anchor if I may, My Lord."

"Certainly."

That was the *Bride of Abydos*, without a doubt. No mistaking her at all. And the other one? Most likely the *Helmond*. With the revolt of Maracaibo this part of the coast had fallen into the power of the insurgents. The batteries of field artillery that she had carried could be rafted ashore here — there was a beach in that little cove where it would be possible — and delivered to the insurgent army gathering for its march on Puerto Cabello. Ramsbottom, his task completed, would presumably be prepared to brazen it out, pleading — as Hornblower had already guessed — some privateering commission from Bolivar.

"I'll go with the boarding party, Sir Thomas."

Fell shot a questioning glance. Admirals had no business boarding strange craft from small boats, not only when bullets might fly, but when one of the infinite variety of accidents possible in small boats might lead to an elderly and not so active senior officer being dropped overside and never coming up again, with endless trouble later for the captain. Hornblower could follow Fell's train of thought, but he was not going to wait quiescent on *Clorinda's* quarterdeck until a report came back from the *Bride of Abydos* — not when a word would give him the power of finding out several minutes earlier.

"I'll get your sword and pistols, My Lord," said Gerard.

"Nonsense!" said Hornblower. "Look there!"

He had kept his telescope trained on the anchored ships, and had detected a significant activity around them. Boats were pulling hastily away from both of them and heading for the shore. Ramsbottom seemed to be absconding.

"Come along!" said Hornblower.

He ran to the ship's side and leaped for the boat's falls; sliding down, clumsily, cost him some of the skin from his soft palms.

"Cast off! Pull!" he ordered as Gerard tumbled in beside him. "Pull!"

The boat swung away from the ship's side, soared giddily up a swell and down again, the men throwing their weight on the oars. But the boat that was leaving the *Bride of Abydos* was not being handled in the man-o'-war fashion one would have expected of Ramsbottom. The oars were being plied without any co-ordination; the boat swung round on the swell, and then as somebody caught a crab swung round again. In next to no time Hornblower found himself alongside the struggling craft. The men at the oars were not the spruce seamen he had seen on board the *Bride of Abydos*. They were swarthy men clothed in rags. Nor was that Ramsbottom in the stern-sheets. Instead, it was someone with a heavy black moustache wearing some vestiges of a blue and silver uniform. The reddening sunset glared down upon him.

"Who are you?" demanded Hornblower, and then repeated the question in Spanish.

The boat had ceased its struggles and was lying on its oars, rising and falling on the swell.

"Lieutenant Perez of the First Regiment of Infantry of the Army of Greater Colombia."

Greater Colombia. That was what Bolivar called the republic he was trying to establish by his rebellion against Spain.

"Where is Mr Ramsbottom?"

"The Admiral has been on shore for the last week."

"The Admiral?"

"Don Carlos Ramsbottom y Santona, Admiral of the Navy of Greater Colombia." An Admiral; no less.

"What were you doing on board that ship?"

"I was taking care of her until Your Excellency came."

"Is there nobody on board, then?"

"Nobody."

The boats soared up a swell and sank down again. It was a sickly thing to do, not conducive to logical thought. He had been prepared to arrest Ramsbottom, but it would be another matter to arrest a lieutenant of infantry, in territorial waters.

"Where is the crew of the ship?"

"On shore with the Admiral. With the army."

Fighting for Bolivar, presumably. And presumably as artillerymen serving the stolen guns.

"Very well. You may go."

It was sufficient to make sure of the *Bride of Abydos*; there was no purpose in laying hands on men of Bolivar's army who had only been obeying the orders of their superiors.

"Lay me alongside the brig."

In the fading light the deck of the *Bride of Abydos* was not in too great disorder. The departing crew had apparently left everything shipshape, and the caretaking party of South American soldiers had not disturbed anything — although below deck it would probably be a different story. But what would have happened if a gale had blown up in this perilous anchorage on a lee shore would not bear thinking about. Presumably Ramsbottom had not cared what happened to his little ship once he had brought off his coup.

"Ahoy! Ahoy!"

Someone was hailing through a speaking trumpet from the other ship. Hornblower took the speaking trumpet from its becket by the wheel and hailed back.

"I am Admiral Lord Hornblower of His Britannic Majesty's Service. I am coming aboard."

It was almost dark when he mounted to the deck of the *Helmond*, to be welcomed by the light of a couple of lanterns. The captain who greeted him was a thick-set man speaking excellent English with a marked accent, Dutch, presumably.

"You have not arrived too soon, sir," was his uncompromising beginning, not the way to address any officer of the Royal Navy, certainly not an Admiral and a Peer.

"I'll thank you to be civil," snapped Hornblower, his temper frayed.

Two angry men faced each other in the wavering light, and then the Dutchman realised that it would be better to restrain his ill-temper in dealing with someone who, after all, had the power on this lonely coast to enforce any orders he might issue.

"Please come below, sir," he said. "Perhaps a glass of Schnapps — ?"

It was a comfortable, well-furnished cabin in which Hornblower was offered a seat and a glass.

"I was glad when I saw your topsails, sir," said the Dutch captain. "For ten days I have been through misery. My ship — my cargo — this shore —"

The disjointed words conveyed the anxieties of finding himself in the hands of the insurgents, and of being compelled to anchor off a lee shore with an armed guard on board.

"What happened?" asked Hornblower.

"That damned little brig fired a shot across my bows with Bonaire still in sight. They boarded me when I hove-to. Put an armed party on board. I thought she was one of yours, a ship-of-war. They brought me here and anchored, and the army came out to us. That was when I knew she was not a ship-of-war, not British.

"Then they took your cargo?"

"They did. Twelve nine-pounder field guns, with limbers and caissons and horse harness. One ammunition waggon. One repair cart with tools. Two thousand rounds of ammunition. One ton of gunpowder in kegs. Everything." The Dutchman was obviously quoting verbatim from his bill of lading.

"How did they get it ashore?"

"On rafts. Those Britishers worked like madmen. And there were seamen among them."

It was a handsome admission, hardly grudging. Presumably keg-pontoons had been employed; Hornblower told himself that he would have tackled the problem of getting the cargo on to the beach in that way, at least. Presumably a good deal of unskilled labour had been provided on shore by the insurgent forces, but that hardly detracted from the achievement.

"And then every single man went off with the guns?" asked Hornblower.

"Every man. Not too many for twelve guns."

Not too many. The *Bride of Abydos* carried a crew of some seventy-five men — hardly sufficient, in fact, to man two batteries in action.

"And they left a Venezuelan guard on board?"

"Yes. You saw them go when you came. They kept me here, at anchor on a lee shore."

That, of course, was to prevent the Dutchman spreading the news of the fraud that had been practised.

"Those — those brigands knew nothing about ships." The Dutchman was continuing his tale of tribulation.

"The *Desperate* started dragging her anchor once. I had to send my own men —"

"You were lucky they didn't burn your ship," said Hornblower. "Luckier still they didn't plunder it. You're lucky not to be in some prison on shore."

"That may be so, but —"

"As it is, sir," said Hornblower, rising, "you are free. You can use the land breeze to make an offing. Tomorrow night you can anchor in Willemstadt."

"But my cargo, sir? I have been detained. I have been in danger. My country's flag — ?"

"Your owners can take action as they please. I understand that Ramsbottom is a wealthy man. He can be sued for damages."

"But — but —" The Dutchman could find no words that would express adequately his feelings regarding both his recent treatment and Hornblower's scant sympathy.

"Your Government can address protests, of course. To the Government of Greater Colombia, or to King Ferdinand." Hornblower kept his face expressionless as he made the ridiculous suggestion. "I must congratulate you, sir, on your escape from very serious dangers. I trust you will have a prosperous voyage home."

He had freed the *Helmond*, and he had laid hands on the *Bride of Abydos*. That much he had accomplished so far, said Hornblower to himself as the boat took him back to *Clorinda*. The Governments at home could

squabble over the legal details, if they cared to go to the trouble. What the Cabinet and the Admiralty would think about his actions he could not imagine; he was conscious of a slight chill of apprehension when his mind dwelt upon that side of the situation. But an Admiral could not show apprehension to anyone, certainly not to a captain as stupid as Sir Thomas Fell.

"I'll be obliged, Sir Thomas," he said, when he regained *Clorinda's* deck, "if you will send a prize crew on board the brig. Would you please be good enough to instruct the officer whom you put in command to keep company with us? We shall sail for Puerto Cabello again as soon as it is convenient to you."

Fell might be stupid, but he was a capable seaman. Hornblower could leave to him the anxious business of making his way back along the coast at night; the land breeze, fluky and unpredictable though it might be, afforded an opportunity which must not be missed of regaining the precious miles that had been squandered to leeward. Hornblower could go down into his stifling cabin and compose himself to sleep. It had been a busy day, and he was physically weary. He lay on his cot with the sweat trickling irritatingly over his ribs, trying to persuade his mind to cease from debating the situation. The British public was turning a kindly eye on the struggle for liberty that was being waged in every corner of the world. British volunteers were playing their part — Richard Church had been leading the Greek rebellion against the Turks for years now; Cochrane was at this very moment fighting in the Pacific for South American independence. For that matter, as he knew, thousands of British soldiers were serving in the ranks of Bolivar's army just over there on the mainland. Private fortunes in England had been lavished in the cause of liberty, just as Ramsbottom had been lavishing his.

But none of this was any indication as to how the British Cabinet would react; national policy might well be at odds with national opinion. And the Lords of the Admiralty could be counted upon to be as unpredictable as ever. And that was equally true of His Majesty King George IV; Hornblower suspected that the First Gentleman of Europe had long ago forsaken his half-hearted liberalism. The near future might hold a severe reprimand for His Majesty's Commander-in-Chief in the West Indies; it might even hold disavowal and recall.

Hornblower's mind had now attained the comforting certainty that the future was uncertain, and that nothing he could do during the next few hours could change it. With that, he might well have gone to sleep; he was, in fact, on the point of dozing off when he brushed what he thought was a trickle of sweat from his bare ribs. It was not sweat. A flurry against his fingers told him it was a cockroach crawling over his skin, and he started up in disgust. The Caribbean was notorious for its cockroaches, but he had never grown to tolerate them. He walked across in the darkness and opened the door to the after cabin, admitting light from the lamp that swung there, and this revealed a dozen of the disgusting creatures scuttling about.

"My Lord?" It was the faithful Gerard hurrying out of bed as soon as he heard his Admiral stirring.

"Go back to bed," said Hornblower.

He put on the silk nightshirt with the elaborate smocking down the front which had been laid out for him, and went on deck. The moon had risen now, and *Clorinda* was creeping steadily along with the land breeze now blowing fresh abeam. Cockroaches had driven away all thought of his troubles; he could lean against the rail and contemplate the beauties of the beautiful night with placidity. It fell calm at dawn, but half an hour later a fortunate slant of wind enabled *Clorinda*, and the *Bride of Abydos* a mile astern, to hold their course for Puerto Cabello; the town on its peninsula was already in sight through the telescope and *Clorinda* approached rapidly. There were fishing boats setting out from the town, small craft which were using oars to enable them to get to seaward despite the unfavourable wind. Something about them appeared strange in the telescope, and as *Clorinda* drew up to them it became apparent that they were crowded with people, ridiculously overloaded. But they plied their oars unceasingly, and boldly rounded the peninsula into the open sea, turning eastward towards La Guaira.

"I think General Morillo has lost his battle," said Hornblower.

"Indeed, My Lord?" said Fell, deferentially.

"And I think there are plenty of people in Puerto Cabello who have no desire to be found there when El Liberador comes marching in," added Hornblower.

He had heard that the war of independence was being waged with Spanish ferocity, that even Bolivar's reputation had been clouded by executions and massacres. Here was a proof of it. But those crowded boats were also a proof that Puerto Cabello was expected to fall to Bolivar. He had won his battle of Carabobo; a

victory in the open field so close to Caracas meant the certain collapse of the royal cause. Carabobo would be the Yorktown of the South American war of independence; no doubt about that. Presumably Ramsbottom would consider the loss of the *Bride of Abydos* as a small thing compared with the freeing of a continent. It was necessary that all this should be confirmed without doubt, however. The Cabinet would be anxious for early and firsthand information regarding the situation in Venezuela.

"Sir Thomas," said Hornblower, "I shall go ashore."

"You'll have an armed guard, My Lord?"

"As you will," said Hornblower. A dozen seamen with muskets would hardly save him from the clutches of a conquering army, but agreement saved him from argument and reproachful looks.

By the time Hornblower set foot on the pier in the blinding sunlight the little harbour was deserted. Not a fishing boat was left, nor was there a human being in sight. He pressed on, his guard tramping behind him and Gerard at his side. The long, winding street was not quite deserted; there were a few women, a few old men, a few children to be seen, peering out of the houses. Then away to his right he heard a brief rattle of musketry, the reports sounding flat in the heavy, damp air. Now here came a ghastly column of sick and wounded, half-naked, hobbling along the road; some fell down to struggle to their feet again, and some, under Hornblower's very eyes, fell, not to rise again, and of these some managed to roll to the side of the road while others lay still while their staggering comrades stumbled over them. Wounded, half-naked, barefooted, crazy with fever or bending double with abdominal pains, they came reeling along the road, while behind them the rattle of musketry came nearer and nearer. At the heels of the last of the wounded came the first of the rearguard, soldiers whose rags were faintly reminiscent of the blue and white of the Spanish royal army. Hornblower made a mental note that the royal forces still could provide a disciplined rearguard, and so were not in total rout, but the rearguard was woefully small, a couple of hundred men, perhaps; they were not keeping good order, but they were fighting a steady fight, biting open their cartridges, ramming home their charges, spitting their bullets into their musket barrels, and waiting in ones and twos behind cover to get a fair shot at their pursuers. A dozen officers, their drawn swords flashing in the sun, were among them. The mounted officer-in-command caught sight of Hornblower and his party and reined round his horse in astonishment.

"Who are you?" he shouted.

"English," replied Hornblower.

But before another word could be exchanged the firing in the rear increased in intensity; not only that, but suddenly from out of a side lane level with the rearguard appeared a dozen horsemen, lancers, their spear points reflecting the sun, and the rearguard broke in disorder, running wildly down the road to escape being cut off. Hornblower saw a lance point enter between the shoulders of a running man, saw him fall on his face, sliding over the surface of the road for a yard before the lance point tore its way out again, leaving him struggling like a broken-backed animal. Over him swept the skirmishers of the insurgent advanced guard, a swarm of men of every shade of colour, running, loading, and firing. There was a moment when the air was full of bullets.

"My Lord —" expostulated Gerard.

"That's all right. It's all over now," said Hornblower.

The fight had swept past them up the road; no one had paid them any attention save for the single question of the mounted Spanish officer. The small column of infantry marching in regular order behind the skirmishers saw them, however, saw the glittering gold, the epaulettes, and the cocked hats. Again a mounted officer wheeled towards them with the same question, to receive the same answer from Hornblower.

"Ingleses?" repeated the officer. "English? Why — you're a British Admiral!"

"Commanding the British Squadron in West Indian waters," said Hornblower.

"A pleasure to see you, sir. William Jones, late Captain, Twenty-Third Foot, now Major commanding a battalion in the Army of Greater Colombia."

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Major."

"Pardon me, but I must attend to my duties," said Jones, wheeling his horse again.

"Hooray for England!" yelled someone in the marching ranks, and he was answered by a thin cheer; half of these ragged scarecrows must have been British, mingled indiscriminately with Negroes and South Americans. The cavalry followed them, regiment after regiment, a flood of men and horses filling the road like a river

brimming its banks. Lancers and light horse, sore-backed horses and lame horses; most of the men had coiled ropes at their saddle bows, and they were all ragged and drooping in their saddles with fatigue; from the appearance of both men and beasts they had marched far and fought hard, and now they were pressing on to the limit of their strength after their defeated foe. A thousand men had passed, estimated Hornblower, judging the column as well as he could, when a new sound came to his ears through the monotonous trampling of the horses' hoofs. A thumping and a jingling, loud and irregular. Here came the guns, dragged along by weary horses; at the heads of the horses walked men, ragged and bearded — they were wearing the remains of blue jumpers and white trousers. It was the crew of the *Bride of Abydos*. One of them lifted his weary head and recognised the party at the roadside.

"Good old Horny!" he shouted; his voice was thin with fatigue and sounded like an old man's.

In the mounted officer riding alongside Hornblower recognised one of Ramsbottom's lieutenants; he sat his plodding horse like a sailor, and raised his arm in a weary salute. One gun clattered by, and another followed it. The guns of Carabobo, which had won the independence of a continent.

Hornblower realised that he had not yet seen Ramsbottom, whom he would have expected to be at the head of the artillery column, but as the realisation came to him he saw something now beside the second gun. It was a horse litter, extemporised from two poles and some sheets of canvas. It was slung from two horses, one fore and one aft; the bight of canvas between the poles was shaded by an awning spread above it, and lying in the trough was a man, a smallish man, black-bearded, lying feebly against pillows behind his back. A seaman walked at the head of each horse, and with the plodding step of the animals the litter lurched and rolled, and the black-bearded man lurched and rolled at the same time. Yet he was able to take note of the group by the roadside, and he made an effort to sit up, and he called an order to the seamen leading the horses which caused them to turn out of the road and stop by Hornblower.

"Good morning, My Lord," he said; he spoke shrilly, like someone hysterical.

Hornblower had to look twice and more to recognise him. The black beard, the feverish eyes, the shocking dead pallor upon which the tan looked like some unnatural coating, all made identification difficult.

"Ramsbottom!" exclaimed Hornblower.

"The very same but a little different," said Ramsbottom, with a cackling laugh.

"Are you wounded?" asked Hornblower; at the moment the words passed his lips he perceived that Ramsbottom's left arm was concealed in a roll of rags — Hornblower had been looking so intently at the face that the arm had escaped his notice until then.

"I have made my sacrifice in the cause of liberty," said Ramsbottom, with the same laugh — it might have been a laugh of derision or a laugh of mere hysteria.

"What happened?"

"My left hand lies on the field of Carabobo," cackled Ramsbottom. "I doubt if it has received Christian burial."

"Good God!"

"Do you see my guns? My beautiful guns. They tore the Dons apart at Carabobo."

"But you — what treatment have you received?"

"Field surgery, of course. Boiling pitch for the stump. Have you ever felt boiling pitch, My Lord?"

"My frigate is anchored in the roadstead. The surgeon is on board —"

"No — oh no. I must go on with my guns. I must clear El Liberador's path to Caracas."

The same laugh. It was not derision — it was something the opposite. A man on the edge of delirium keeping a desperate hold on his sanity so as not to be diverted from his aim. Nor was it a case of a man laughing lest he weep. He was laughing lest he should indulge in heroics.

"Oh, you can't —"

"Sir! Sir! My Lord!"

Hornblower swung round. Here was a midshipman from the frigate touching his hat, agitated by the urgency of his message.

"What is it?"

"Message from the cap'n, My Lord. Ships-of-war in sight in the offing. A Spanish frigate an' what looks like a Dutch frigate, My Lord. Bearing down on us."

Desperate news indeed. He must have his flag flying in *Clarinda* to meet these strangers, but it was a maddening moment in which to be told about it. He turned back to Ramsbottom and back again to the midshipman, his customary quickness of thought not as apparent as usual.

"Very well," he rasped. "Tell the captain I'm coming immediately."

"Aye aye, My Lord." He turned again to Ramsbottom.

"I must go," he said. "I must —"

"My Lord," said Ramsbottom. Some of his feverish vitality had left him. He was leaning back again on his pillows, and it took him a second or two to gather his strength to speak again, and when he did the words lagged as he uttered them. "Did you capture the *Bride*, My Lord?"

"Yes." He must end this; he must get back to his ship.

"My bonny *Bride*. My Lord, there's another keg of caviare in the after lazarette. Please enjoy it, My Lord."

The cackling laugh again. Ramsbottom was still laughing as he lay back with his eyes closed, not hearing the hurried 'goodbye' which Hornblower uttered as he turned away. It seemed to Hornblower as if that laugh followed him while he hastened to the pier and down into the boat.

"Shove off! Put your backs into it!"

There lay *Clarinda* at anchor, with the *Bride of Abydos* close to her. And there, undoubtedly, were the topsails of two frigates heading in towards them. He scrambled up the ship's side with hardly a moment to spare for the compliments with which he was received. He was too busy taking in the tactical situation, the trend of the shore, the position of the *Bride of Abydos*, the approach of the strangers.

"Hoist my flag," he ordered, curtly, and then, recovering his poise, with the customary elaborate politeness,

"Sir Thomas, I'd be obliged if you'd get springs on the cable, out of the after ports on both sides."

"Springs, My Lord? Aye aye, My Lord."

Cables passed through the after ports to the anchor cable; by hauling in on one or the other with the capstan he could turn the ship to bring her guns to bear in any direction. It was only one of the many exercises Hornblower had put his crews through during the recent manoeuvres. It called for heavy, closely co-ordinated labour on the part of the hands. Orders were bellowed; warrant and petty officers ran at the heads of their different parties to rouse out the cables and drag them aft.

"Sir Thomas, please order the brig to kedge closer in. I want her inshore of us."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Now it became apparent that there was some time in hand. The approaching frigates, hull up now when a glass was trained on them from the quarterdeck, were shortening sail, and then, even while Hornblower held them in the field of his telescope, he saw their main-topsails suddenly broaden as they were swung round. They were heaving-to, and a moment later he saw a boat lowered from the Dutch frigate and pull to the Spanish one. That would mean a consultation, presumably. Thanks to the difference of language they could hardly be expected to agree on a course of action by signal nor even by speaking trumpet.

"The Spaniard's wearing a commodore's broad pendant, Sir Thomas. Will you please be ready to salute it as soon as he salutes my flag?"

"Aye aye, My Lord."

The consultation took some little time, the second half of one sandglass and the beginning of the next. A monstrous creaking down below, and a clanking of the capstan, told that the springs were being tested. *Clarinda* swung a trifle to starboard, and then a trifle to port.

"Springs are tested and ready, My Lord."

"Thank you, Sir Thomas. Now will you be good enough to send the hands to quarters and clear for action?"

"Clear for action? Aye aye, My Lord."

It was a detestable nuisance to take this precaution. It meant that his bedding and books and personal equipment down below would be swept away in a horrible muddle that might take days to straighten. But on the other hand, if those frigates came down determined to fight, his reputation would never survive being unready for them. It would be chaos to try to clear away the guns and bring up cartridges while actually under fire; the battle — if there were to be a battle — would be lost before it was begun. And there was something of the old thrill about these preparations; the pealing of the whistles, the hoarse cries of the petty officers, the

orderly rush of the men to the guns, the tramp of the marines to the quarterdeck, and the sharp order of their officer as they dressed into a rigid line.

"Ship cleared for action, My Lord."

"Thank you, Sir Thomas. Stand by, if you please."

There would have been just time even if the strangers had come instantly down and gone into action without parley. By a rapid use of his springs he would rake the first-comer thoroughly enough to have made her captain wish he had never been born. Now he must wait, and the ship's company, standing by their guns, must wait with him, the matches smouldering in their tubs, the fire parties standing by with their buckets, the powder boys, cartridge carriers in hand, waiting to start their race from powder magazine to guns and back again.

"Here they come, My Lord!"

Those topsails were narrowing again; those masts were coming into line. Now the frigates' bows were pointed straight at *Clorinda* as they came towards her. Hornblower held them steady in his telescope; no guns were run out, he could see, but it was impossible to tell if they were cleared for action. Nearer and nearer; now they were almost within extreme random cannon shot. At that moment there was a puff of smoke from the Spaniard's starboard bow, and for the life of him Hornblower could not check a gulp of excitement. The breeze blew the puff away, and then the puff was replaced by another; as the second appeared, the heavy thud of the first discharge came to Hornblower's ears. There was a momentary temptation to plunge into the luxury of mental arithmetic, involving the speed of sound conveyed over water, and the five seconds' interval between saluting guns, and the distance between the ships, but it had to be foregone.

"You may return the salute to the broad pendant, Sir Thomas."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

Thirteen guns for a Rear Admiral's flag; eleven for a Commodore; twenty-four guns, one hundred and twenty seconds, exactly two minutes; those ships, approaching at four miles in the hour would be a cable's length closer at the end of the salutes, within distant gunshot.

"Sir Thomas, I would be glad if you would take several turns upon the starboard spring."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

The violent creaking made itself heard again, and *Clorinda* turned herself to present her broadside towards the newcomers. No harm whatever in letting them know that a hot reception was awaiting them if they intended mischief; it might save much trouble later.

"They're taking in sail, my Lord!"

So he could see for himself, but there was nothing to be gained by saying so. The two ships obviously had heavy crews, judging by the rapidity with which sail was got in. Now round they went, up into the wind. Hornblower believed he could hear the roar of the cables as they anchored. It seemed like a decisive moment, and Hornblower was about to mark it by shutting up his telescope with a snap when he saw a boat lowering from the Spaniard.

"I fancy we'll be having a visitor shortly," said Hornblower.

The boat seemed to fly over the glittering water; the men at the oars were pulling like madmen — presumably the eternal desire of the men of one navy to show another navy what they could do.

"Boat ahoy!" hailed the officer of the watch.

The Spanish officer in the sternsheets, conspicuous by his epaulettes, hailed back; Hornblower could not be sure of what he said, but the letter that was waved at the same time told the story.

"Receive him on board, if you please, Sir Thomas."

The Spanish lieutenant looked sharply round him as he came over the ship's side; no harm in his seeing the men at quarters and the preparations made. He picked out Hornblower at once, and with a salute and a bow presented his letter.

Su excellencia el Almirante Sir Hornblower, said the superscription.

Hornblower broke the seal; he could read the Spanish of the letter easily enough.

The Brigadier, Don Luiz Argote, would be honoured if His Excellency Sir Hornblower would accord him the opportunity of an interview. The Brigadier would be delighted if he could visit His Excellency's ship and would be equally delighted if His Excellency would visit His Most Catholic Majesty's ship.

In Spanish naval usage, Hornblower knew, 'Brigadier' was equivalent to 'Commodore'.

"I'll write a reply," said Hornblower. "Sir Thomas, please make this gentleman welcome. Come with me, Gerard."

Down below, with the ship cleared for action, it was a nuisance to hunt up writing paper and ink; it was even more of a nuisance to have to compose a letter in Spanish, for in writing misspellings and bad grammar would be far more evident than in speech. Luckily the Brigadier's letter itself supplied most of the spelling and the tricky conditional form.

Rear Admiral Lord Hornblower would be delighted to receive the Brigadier Don Luiz Argote in his flagship whenever the Brigadier wishes.

Sealing wax and seal and candle had to be discovered; it would never do to appear careless about these formalities.

"Very well," said Hornblower, giving grudging approval of the second impression after the failure of the first attempt. "Take a boat to the *Bride of Abydos* as quick as lightning and see if there's any of that sherry left which Ramsbottom served at his dinner party."

The Brigadier, when he came up *Clorinda's* side, to be received with the appropriate compliments, was followed by another figure in cocked hat and epaulettes. Hornblower bowed and saluted and introduced himself.

"I took the liberty of asking Captain Van der Maesen, of the Royal Netherlands Navy, to accompany me," said the Brigadier.

"It is with much pleasure that I welcome Captain Van der Maesen on board," said Hornblower. "Perhaps you gentlemen will accompany me below. I regret very much that we will not be very comfortable, but, as you see, I have been exercising my crew in their duties."

A screen had been hurriedly run across the after part of the frigate, and the table and chairs replaced. The Brigadier sipped with increasing and astonished appreciation at the glass of wine offered him. Inevitably several minutes passed in desultory conversation — Spanish was the one language the three had in common — before the Brigadier began to discuss business.

"You have a beautiful ship here, milord," he said. "I regret much to find you in company with a pirate."

"You mean the *Bride of Abydos*, señor?"

"Naturally, milord."

Hornblower saw a trap opening before him.

"You call her a pirate, señor?"

"What do you call her, milord?"

"I am waiting to hear your opinion, señor." It was important not to commit himself.

"Her actions call for explanation, milord. She has captured and plundered a Dutch ship. That can be interpreted as an act of piracy. On the other hand it might be said she is operating under a so-called commission issued by the rebels in Venezuela. In the one case Captain Van der Maesen will seize her as a pirate. On the other, if she is a privateer, I will seize her as an enemy of my country."

"In neither case, señor, has a court of law determined her status. In the meanwhile, gentlemen, she is in my possession."

Hats were in the ring now. Hornblower met the eyes of the others with the least expression he could manage. Of one thing he was certain, that whatever might be eventually decided regarding the *Bride of Abydos* neither the British Government nor the British public would approve of his tamely allowing her to be taken out of his hands.

"Milord, I have assured Captain Van der Maesen of my support in any action he may decide to take, and he has given me the same assurance."

The Dutch captain confirmed this with a nod and a half-intelligible sentence. Two to one, in other words; odds that *Clorinda* could not hope to face.

"Then I hope, gentlemen, I hope very sincerely indeed, that you decide upon approving of my course of action."

It was the politest way of defying them that he could think of.

"I find it very hard to believe, milord, that you extend the I protection of His Britannic Majesty's Navy to pirates, or to privateers in a war in which His Majesty is neutral."

"You may have noticed, señor, that the *Bride of Abydos* is flying His Britannic Majesty's flag. Of course, you understand that as a naval officer I cannot permit that flag to be hauled down."

There it was, the ultimate defiance. Ten minutes from now and the guns might be firing. Ten minutes from now and this deck might be littered with dead and wounded. He might be dead himself. The Spaniard looked at the Dutchman and back to Hornblower.

"We would much regret taking strong action, milord."

"I am delighted to hear that, señor. That confirms me in my decision. We can part the best of friends."

"But —"

The Brigadier had not intended his last sentence to be interpreted as a sign of yielding. He had been uttering, he thought, a further threat. Hornblower's interpretation of it left him speechless for a moment.

"I am overjoyed to find that we are in agreement, gentlemen. Perhaps we can drink the healths of our sovereigns in another glass of this wine, señor — and may I take this opportunity of acknowledging the debt the rest of the world owes to your country for such an exquisite production?"

By taking their withdrawal for granted he was giving them a chance of withdrawing gracefully. The bitter moment of admitting that they had been outfaced had come and gone before they had realised it. Once more the Spaniard and the Dutchman exchanged unavailing glances, and Hornblower seized the opportunity to pour more wine.

"To His Most Catholic Majesty, señor. To His Majesty the King of the Netherlands."

He held his glass high. They could not refuse that toast, even though the Brigadier's mouth still opened and shut as he struggled to find words for his emotions. Common politeness forced the Brigadier to complete the toast, as Hornblower waited, glass in hand.

"To His Britannic Majesty."

They drank together.

"This has been a delightful visit, gentlemen," said Hornblower. "Another glass? No? It cannot be that you are leaving so soon? But I expect you have many duties calling for your attention."

As the side boys, white-gloved, formed up at the entry port, and the bosun's mates pealed upon their whistles, and the ship's company, still at their guns, stood to attention, in compliment to the departing visitors, Hornblower could spare a moment to glance round. Those side boys and bosun's mates and gun's crews might be facing imminent death at this moment if that interview had taken a more stormy course. He deserved their gratitude, but of course he would never receive it. Shaking hands with the Brigadier he made the final clarification of the situation.

"A prosperous voyage, señor. I hope I shall have the pleasure of meeting you again. I shall be sailing for Kingston as soon as the land breeze serves."

One of Barbara's regular letters, received months later, helped to round off the incident.

My dearest husband, (wrote Barbara as usual, and, as usual Hornblower read those words with a smile. There were several sheets to the letter, and the first sheet contained much of interest to Hornblower, but it was not until the second sheet that Barbara began her usual society and professional gossip.)

Last night the Lord Chancellor was my left-hand partner at dinner, and he had much to say about the *Bride of Abydos*, and in consequence, to my great pleasure, much to say about my dear husband. The Spanish and Dutch governments, through their ambassador and minister, have naturally lodged protests with the Foreign Secretary, who has only been able to acknowledge receipt of the notes and to promise a further reply when the legal aspects of the case are made clear. And, in all the history of Admiralty law, said the Lord Chancellor, there never was a case as complicated as this one. The insurers plead negligence on the part of the assured (I

hope that I have these technical terms right, my very dearest) because the captain of the *Helmond* took no steps to verify the bona fides of the *Bride of Abydos*, and they further plead negligence on the part of the Dutch government because the capture took place within Dutch territorial waters off Bonaire, and the Dutchmen deny hotly both that they were negligent and that the capture was really within their territorial waters. Further, the actual plundering and detention took place in Spanish territorial waters. And there seem to be untold complications arising from the fact that you found the *Bride of Abydos* abandoned by her crew — did you know, dearest, that it seems a matter of great legal importance as to whether her anchor was actually touching bottom or not? In any case, there has been no legal action in any court so far because no one seems to be able to decide which court has jurisdiction in the matter (I hope, dearest, you will give your wife all credit for listening attentively and taking note of these difficult expressions). Taking one thing with another, and allowing four months on the average for each necessary round trip to the West Indies to take evidence on commission, and taking into account demurrers and rebuttals and sur-rebuttals, the Lord Chancellor thinks that it will be thirty-seven years before any case reaches the House of Lords, and he went on to say, cackling into his soup, that our interest in the case will be greatly diminished by then.

This is by no means all the news, dearest. There is something further which would greatly distress me if it were not for the fact that I know my husband the Admiral will be delighted. Taking tea today with Lady Exmouth (I know how your dear eyes will open wide with horror at women being in possession of such secrets) I heard that Their Lordships take a most favourable view of your attitude towards the Spanish and Dutch naval authorities — dearest, I am so delighted, even though I could never doubt it. It has already been decided to extend your command for the extra year, and my pleasure in knowing how pleased you will be at this compliment almost — quite — allays my sorrow at the thought of our further separation. Dearest, there is no woman who could love you — there is no woman on earth who could love any man as much as I love you, the truest, the bravest, the boldest, the cleverest — I must not write like this because there is still further news to add.

This is that the Government has always, apparently, looked with favour at the attempt of the Spanish colonies to attain their independence, and with the greatest disfavour upon the decision of the Spanish government to attempt their reconquest with troops sent out from Europe. There have been hints that the other Powers, uneasy at the movement towards liberty, have been meditating giving military assistance to Spain in Spanish America. The victory at Carabobo, where poor Mr Ramsbottom and his guns played such a part, had made this intervention more unlikely. It is a great State secret, so great that over the teacups it is mentioned only in whispers, that the British Government meditates making a declaration that it will not permit military intervention in Spanish America. And it appears that our Government is in accord with the Americans over this, for it is believed that President Monroe is planning to issue a declaration regarding a similar doctrine, and discussions regarding it are taking place. So that my dearest husband finds himself at the centre of world affairs as he has always been at the centre of his wife's fondest affections.

THE HURRICANE

Hornblower came walking into his office at Admiralty House at half past five o'clock in the morning exactly. Now that the summer was come there was just enough daylight at that time to transact business and it was a fairly cool moment as well. Gerard and Spendlove, his flag-lieutenant and secretary, were waiting for him there — it would have gone hard with them if they had not been — and they pulled themselves erect, without any clicking of heels (for in three years they had found that their chief discountenanced the practice) and they said "Good morning, My Lord", "Good morning, My Lord" as if they were the two barrels of a shotgun. "Morning," said Hornblower. He had not had his breakfast coffee yet; otherwise he would have put 'good' in front of 'morning'.

He sat down at his desk, and Spendlove came to hover over his shoulder with a sheaf of papers while Gerard made the dawn report.

"Weather conditions normal, My Lord. High water today at eleven-thirty. No arrivals during the night, and nothing in sight this morning from the signal station. No news of the packet, My Lord, and no news of *Triton*." "A negative report if ever there was one," said Hornblower. The negatives in the last two phrases balanced each other; HMS *Triton* was bringing out his successor to relieve him of his command at the end of his three years' appointment, and Hornblower was not happy over the prospect of ceasing to be Commander-in-Chief in the West Indies; but the West India packet was bringing out his wife, whom he had not seen during all this time, and to whose arrival he was eagerly looking forward. She was coming out so as to make the return voyage to England with him.

"The packet's due any day, My Lord," said Gerard, soothingly.

"Your business is to tell me things I don't know, Mr Gerard," snapped Hornblower. It annoyed him to be soothed like a child, and it annoyed him still more that his personal staff should think him human enough to be anxious to see his wife. He looked over his shoulder at his secretary. "What do you have there, Spendlove?" Spendlove made a hasty rearrangement of the papers in his hand. Hornblower's morning coffee was due at any moment, and Spendlove had something he did not want to show his chief until it had come and was half drunk at least.

"Here are the dockyard returns to the thirty-first ultimo, My Lord," he said.

"Can't you say 'to the end of last month'?" demanded Hornblower, taking them from him.

"Aye aye, My Lord," said Spendlove, passionately hoping the coffee would come soon.

"Anything in these?" asked Hornblower, glancing over them.

"Nothing for your special attention, My Lord."

"Then why trouble me with them? Next?"

"The warrants for the new gunner in *Clorinda*, My Lord, and for the dockyard cooper."

"Your coffee, My Lord," said Gerard at this moment, the relief in his voice perfectly apparent.

"Better late than never," snapped Hornblower. "And for God's sake don't fuss round me. I'll pour it for myself." Spendlove and Gerard were busily making room on his desk for the tray to be put down, and Spendlove hastily withdrew his hand from the coffee-pot handle.

"Too damned hot," said Hornblower, taking a sip. "It's always too damned hot."

Last week the new system had been begun, whereby coffee was brought in to him after his arrival in his office, instead of awaiting him there, because he had complained then that it was always too cold, but neither Spendlove nor Gerard saw fit to remind him of this.

"I'll sign those warrants," said Hornblower. "Not that I think that cooper's worth his salt. His barrels open up into bird-cages."

Spendlove scattered sand from the caster over the wet ink of Hornblower's signatures, and put the warrants aside. Hornblower took another sip of coffee.

"Here's your refusal of the Crichtons' invitation, My Lord. In the third person, so your signature isn't necessary."

If that had been said to him a little while before, Hornblower would have demanded why in that case he was being bothered with it, forgetful of his own standing order that nothing was to go out in his name without his seeing it. But even two sips of coffee had done their work.

"Very well," he said, glancing over it, and taking up his cup again.

Spendlove watched the level of the liquid sink in the cup, and judged the moment to be more propitious now. He laid a letter on the desk.

"From Sir Thomas, My Lord."

Hornblower uttered a small groan as he picked it up; Captain Sir Thomas Fell of HMS *Clorinda* was a fussy individual, and a communication from him usually meant trouble — unnecessary trouble, and therefore to be grudged. Not in this case, though. Hornblower read the official document and then craned over his shoulder at Spendlove.

"What's all this about?" he demanded.

"It's rather a curious case, I hear, My Lord," answered Spendlove.

It was a 'circumstantial letter', a formal request from Captain Fell for a court martial to be held on Bandsman Hudnutt of the Royal Marines, for 'wilful and persistent disobedience to orders'. Such a charge if substantiated

meant death, or else such a flogging that death would be preferable. Spendlove was perfectly well aware that his admiral detested hangings and floggings.

"The charges are preferred by the Drum-Major," commented Hornblower to himself.

He knew the Drum-Major, Cobb, perfectly well, or at least as well as the peculiar circumstances permitted. As Admiral and Commander-in-Chief Hornblower had his own band, which was under the command of Cobb, holding warrant rank. Previous to all official occasions where music had to be provided Cobb reported to Hornblower for orders and instructions, and Hornblower would go through the farce of agreeing with the suggestions put forward. He had never publicly admitted that he could not tell one note from another; he could actually distinguish one tune from another by the jigginess or otherwise of the time. He was a little uneasy in case all this was more common knowledge than he hoped.

"What d'you mean by 'a curious case', Spendlove?" he asked.

"I believe an artistic conscience is involved, My Lord," replied Spendlove, cautiously. Hornblower was pouring, and tasting, his second cup of coffee; that might have a bearing on the breaking of Bandsman Hudnutt's neck, thought Spendlove. At the same time Hornblower was feeling the inevitable irritation resulting from having to listen to gossip. An Admiral in his splendid isolation never — or only rarely — knew as much about what was going on as his most junior subordinate.

"An artistic conscience?" he repeated. "I'll see the Drum-Major this morning. Send for him now."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

He had received the one necessary clue, and need not demean himself by prying further unless the interview with Cobb should prove unfruitful.

"Now let's have that draught report until he comes."

Drum-Major Cobb did not arrive for some time, and his resplendent uniform when he did arrive hinted that he had taken care about his appearance; tunic and pantaloons were freshly ironed, his buttons glittered, his sash was exactly draped, his sword-hilt shone like silver. He was an enormous man with an enormous moustache, and he made an enormous entrance into the room, striding over the resounding floor as if he were twice as heavy as he actually was, clashing his boot-heels together as he halted before the desk and swept his hand upward in the salute fashionable at the moment among the Royal Marines.

"Good morning, Mr Cobb," said Hornblower, mildly; the 'Mr', like the sword, was an indication that Cobb was a gentleman by virtue of his warrant even though he had risen from the ranks.

"Good morning, My Lord." There was as much flourish in the phrase as there had been in the salute.

"I want to hear about these charges against this bandsman — Hudnutt."

"Well, My Lord —" A sideways glance from Cobb gave Hornblower a hint.

"Get out of here," said Hornblower to his staff. "Leave Mr Cobb alone with me."

When the door was shut Hornblower was all good manners.

"Please sit down, Mr Cobb. Then you can tell me at your ease what really happened."

"Thank you, My Lord."

"Well, now?"

"That young 'Udnutt, My Lord, 'e's a fool if ever there was one. I'm sorry this 'as 'appened, My Lord, but 'e deserves all 'e's going to get."

"Yes? He's a fool, you say?"

"'E's a downright fool, My Lord. I'm not saying 'e isn't a good musician, 'cause 'e is. There ain't no one 'oo can play the cornet the way 'e does. That's the truth, My Lord. 'E's a boy wonder at it. The cornet's a newfangled instrument, My Lord. We ain't 'ad it in our bands for more'n a year. Blow it like a trumpet, you do, you 'ave to 'ave a lip for it, although it 'as keys as well, My Lord. An' 'e's a marvel at it, or 'e was, My Lord."

That change to the past tense indicated that in Cobb's positive opinion Hudnutt, through death or disablement, would never play the cornet again.

"He's young?"

"Nineteen, My Lord."

"And what did he do?"

"It was mutiny, My Lord, flat mutiny, although I've only charged him with disobedience to orders."

Mutiny meant death by the Articles of War; disobedience to orders meant 'death or such less penalty —'

"How did it happen?"

"Well, My Lord, it was like this. We was rehearsing the new march that come out in the last packet. *Dondello*, it's called, My Lord. Just the cornet an' the drums. An' it sounded different, an' I had 'Udnutt play it again. I could 'ear what 'e was doin', My Lord. There's a lot of B flat accidentals in that march, an' 'e wasn't flatting them. I asked 'im what 'e meant by it, an' he said it sounded too sweet. That's what 'e said, My Lord. An' it's written on the music. *Dolce*, it says, and *dolce* means sweet, My Lord."

"I know," lied Hornblower.

"So I says, 'You can play that again and you flat those B's.' An' 'e says, 'I can't.' An' I says, 'You mean you won't?' An' then I says, 'I'll give you one more chance' — although by rights I shouldn't 'ave, My Lord — an' I says, 'This is an order, remember,' an' I gives 'em the beat an' they starts off and there, was the B naturals. So I says, 'You 'eard me give you an order?' an' 'e says, 'Yes.' So there wasn't nothing I could do after that, My Lord. I calls the guard an' I 'ad 'im marched to the guard-'ouse. An' then I 'ad to prefer charges, My Lord."

"This happened with the band present?"

"Yes, My Lord. The 'ole band, sixteen of 'em."

Wilful disobedience to an order, before sixteen witnesses. It hardly mattered if there were six or sixteen or sixty; the point was that everyone in Hornblower's command knew by now that discipline had been defied, an order deliberately disobeyed. The man must die, or he must be flogged into a crippled wreck, lest other men defy orders. Hornblower knew he had his command well in hand, but he knew, too, of the turbulence that lay below the surface. And yet — if the order that had been disobeyed had been something different, if there had been a refusal to lay out along a yard, say, however perilous the conditions, Hornblower would not have given all this thought to the matter, despite his detestation of physical cruelty. That sort of order must be instantly obeyed. 'Artistic conscience,' Spendlove had said. Hornblower had no idea of any difference between B and B flat, but he could dimly understand that it might be important to some people. A man might be tempted to refuse to do something that offended his artistic sensibilities.

"I suppose the man was sober?" he demanded suddenly.

"As sober as you and me, My Lord."

Another idea crossed Hornblower's mind.

"What's the chances of a misprint in the music?" he asked; he was struggling with things he did not understand.

"Well, My Lord, there *is* such things. But it's for me to say if there's a misprint or not. An' although he can read music I don't know if 'e can read print, My Lord, an' if 'e can I don't expect 'e can read Eytalian, but there it says *dolce*, it says, on the official music, My Lord."

In Cobb's eyes this aggravated the offence, if aggravation were possible. Not only had his order been disobeyed, but Hudnutt had not respected the written instructions sent by whoever was responsible in London for sending out music to marine bands. Cobb was a marine first and a musician second; Hudnutt might be a musician first and a marine second. But — Hornblower pulled himself up sharply — that made Hudnutt's condemnation all the more necessary. A marine had to be a marine, first, foremost, and all the time. If marines started to choose whether they could be marines or not, the Royal Regiment would cease to be a military body, and it was his duty to maintain it as a military body.

Hornblower studied Cobb's expression intently. The man was speaking the truth, at least as far as the truth was apparent to him. He was not wilfully distorting facts because of personal prejudice or as a result of some old feud. If his action, and his report on it, had been influenced by jealousy or natural cruelty, he was unaware of it. A court martial would be impressed by his reliability as a witness. And he remained unperturbed under Hornblower's steady stare.

"Thank you, Mr Cobb," said Hornblower at last. "I am glad to have had such a clear statement of the facts. That will be all for the present."

"Thank you, My Lord," answered Cobb, shooting his great bulk up out of the chair with an astonishing mixture of agility and military rigidity. His heels clashed as his hand swept up in the salute; he turned about with parade precision, and marched out of the room with resounding steps as precise as if timed by his own metronome.

Gerard and Spendlove came back into the room to find Hornblower staring at nothing, but Hornblower shook off his preoccupation instantly. It would never do for his subordinates to guess that he was moved by human feelings over a mere administrative matter.

"Draft an answer to Sir Thomas for my signature, if you please, Mr Spendlove. It can be a mere acknowledgement, but then add that there is no possibility of immediate action, because I cannot assemble the necessary number of captains at present with so many ships detached."

Except in emergency a court where sentence of death might be passed could not be convened unless there were seven captains and commanders at least available as judges. That gave him time to consider what action he should take.

"This man's in the dockyard prison, I suppose," went on Hornblower. "Remind me to take a look at him on my way through the dockyard today."

"Aye aye, My Lord," said Gerard, careful to betray no surprise at an Admiral allotting time to visit a mutinous marine.

Yet it was not far out of Hornblower's way. When the time came he strolled slowly down through the beautiful garden of Admiralty House, and Evans, the disabled sailor who was head gardener, came in a jerky hurry to open the wicket gate in the fifteen-foot palisade that protected the dockyard from thieves, in this portion of its course dividing the Admiralty garden from the dockyard. Evans took off his hat and stood bobbing by the gate, his pigtail bobbing at his back, and his swarthy face split by a beaming smile.

"Thank you, Evans," said Hornblower, passing through.

The prison stood isolated at the edge of the dockyard, a small cubical building of mahogany logs, set diagonally in a curious fashion, possibly — probably — more than one layer. It was roofed with palm thatch a yard or more thick, which might at least help to keep it cool under the glaring sun. Gerard had run on ahead from the gate — with Hornblower grinning at the thought of the healthful sweat the exercise would produce — to find the officer-in-charge and obtain the key to the prison, and Hornblower stood by while the padlock was unfastened and he could look into the darkness within. Hudnutt had risen to his feet at the sound of the key, and when he stepped forward into the light he was revealed as a painfully young man, his cheeks hardly showing a trace of his one-day's beard. He was naked except for a waistcloth, and the officer-in-charge clucked with annoyance.

"Get some clothes on and be decent," he growled, but Hornblower checked him.

"No matter. I've very little time. I want this man to tell me why he is under charges. You others keep out of earshot."

Hudnutt had been taken by surprise by this sudden visit, but he was a bewildered person in any case, obviously. He blinked big blue eyes in the sunlight and wriggled his gangling form with embarrassment.

"What happened? Tell me," said Hornblower.

"Well, sir —"

Hornblower had to coax the story out of him, but bit by bit it confirmed all that Cobb had said.

"I couldn't play that music, sir, not for nothing."

The blue eyes looked over Hornblower's head at infinity; perhaps at some vision invisible to the rest of the world.

"You were a fool to disobey an order."

"Yes, sir. Mebbe so, sir."

The broad Yorkshire which Hudnutt spoke sounded odd in this tropical setting.

"How did you come to enlist?"

"For the music, sir."

It called for more questions to extract the story. A boy in a Yorkshire village, not infrequently hungry. A cavalry regiment billeted there, in the last years of the war. The music of its band was like a miracle to this child, who had heard no music save that of wandering pipers in the ten years of his life. It made him conscious of — it did not create for it already existed — a frightful, overwhelming need. All the children of the village hung round the band (Hudnutt smiled disarmingly as he said this) but none so persistently as he. The trumpeters noticed him soon enough, laughed at his infantile comments about music, but laughed with sympathy as time went on; they let him try to blow their instruments, showed him how to cultivate a lip, and were impressed by the

eventual results. The regiment returned after Waterloo, and for two more years the boy went on learning, even though those were the hungry years following the peace, when he should have been bird-scaring and stone-picking from dawn to dark.

And then the regiment was transferred and the hungry years went on, and the boy labourer began to handle the plough still yearning for music, while a trumpet cost more than a year's full wages for a man. Then an interlude of pure bliss — the disarming smile again — when he joined a wandering theatrical troupe, as odd-job boy and musician; that was how he came to be able to read music although he could not read the printed word. His belly was empty as often as before; a stable yard meant a luxurious bed to him; those months were months of flea-bitten nights and foot-sore days, and they ended in his being left behind sick. That happened in Portsmouth, and then it was inevitable that, hungry and weak, he should be picked up by a marine recruiting-sergeant marching through the streets with a band. His enlistment coincided with the introduction of the *cornet à pistons* into military music, and the next thing that happened to him was that he was shipped off to the West Indies to take his place in the Commander-in-Chief's band under the direction of Drum-Major Cobb. "I see," said Hornblower; and indeed he could dimly see.

Six months with a travelling theatrical troupe would be poor preparation for the discipline of the Royal Marines; that was obvious, but he could guess at the rest, at this sensitiveness about music which was the real cause of the trouble. He eyed the boy again, seeking for ideas regarding how to deal with this situation.

"My Lord! My Lord!" This was Gerard hastening up to him. "The packet's signalled, My Lord. You can see the flag at the lookout station masthead!"

The packet? Barbara would be on board. It was three years since he had seen her last, and for three weeks now he had been awaiting her from minute to minute.

"Call away my barge. I'm coming," he said.

A wave of excitement swept away his concern regarding the Hudnutt affair. He was about to hurry after Gerard, and then hesitated. What could he say in two seconds to a man awaiting trial for his life? What could he say when he himself was bubbling with happiness, to this man caged like an animal, like an ox helplessly awaiting the butcher?

"Goodbye, Hudnutt." That was all he could say, leaving him standing dumbly there — he could hear the clash of keys and padlock as he hastened after Gerard.

Eight oars bit into the blue water, but no speed that they could give the dancing barge could be fast enough to satisfy him. There was the brig, her sails trimmed to catch the first hesitant puffs of the sea breeze. There was a white dot at her side, a white figure — Barbara waving her handkerchief. The barge surged alongside and Hornblower swung himself up into the main chains, and there was Barbara in his arms; there were her lips against his, and then her grey eyes smiling at him, and then her lips against his again, and the afternoon sun blazing down on them both. Then they could stand at arm's length and look at each other, and Barbara could raise her hands and twitch his neckcloth straight, so that he could be sure they were really together, for Barbara's first gesture was always to straighten his neckcloth.

"You look well, my dear," she said.

"So do you!"

Her cheeks were golden with sunburn after a month at sea; Barbara never strove after the fashionable creaminess that distinguished the lady of leisure from the milkmaid or the goose-girl. And they laughed in each other's faces out of sheer happiness before they kissed again and then eventually drew apart.

"Dear, this is Captain Knyvett, who has looked after me so kindly on the voyage."

"Welcome aboard, My Lord." Knyvett was short and stocky and grizzled. "But I fancy you'll not be staying with us long today."

"We'll both be your passengers when you sail again," said Barbara.

"If my relief has come," said Hornblower, adding to Barbara, "*Triton* hasn't arrived yet."

"'Twill be two full weeks before we're ready to sail again, My Lord," said Knyvett. "I trust we shall have the pleasure of your company and her Ladyship's."

"I sincerely hope so," said Hornblower. "Meanwhile we'll leave you now — I hope you'll dine at Admiralty House as soon as you have leisure. Can you get down into the barge, my dear?"

"Of course," said Barbara.

"Gerard, you'll stay on board and look after Her Ladyship's baggage."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

"No time even to say how d'ye do to you, Mr Gerard," said Barbara, as Hornblower led her away to the main chains.

Barbara had no hoops in her skirts; she knew enough about shipboard breezes to dispense with those. Hornblower dropped down into the stern-sheets of the barge, and a growl from the coxswain at the tiller turned the eyes of the boat's crew to seaward so that they would see nothing they should not see, while Knyvett and Gerard swung Barbara down into Hornblower's arms in a flurry of petticoats.

"Give way!"

The barge surged away from the ship's side, over the blue water, towards the Admiralty House pier, with Barbara and Hornblower hand in hand in the stern-sheets.

"Delightful, dear," said Barbara, looking about her when she landed. "A Commander-in-Chief's life is spent in pleasant places."

Pleasant enough, thought Hornblower, except for yellow fever and pirates and international crises and temperamental marines awaiting trial, but this was not the time to mention such things. Evans, hobbling on his wooden leg, was at the pier to greet them, and Hornblower could see that he was Barbara's slave from the first moment that he was presented to her.

"You must take me round the gardens the first moment I'm free," said Barbara.

"Yes, Your Ladyship. Of course, Your Ladyship."

They walked slowly up to the house; here it was a delicate business to show Barbara round and to present the staff to her, for Admiralty House was run along lines laid down at the Admiralty; to alter a stick of furniture or to change the status of any of the naval ratings working there was something Barbara would not be able to do. She was only a tolerated visitor there, and barely tolerated at that. She would certainly itch to change the furniture about and to reorganise the staff, but she was doomed to frustration.

"It seems to be as well, darling," said Barbara with a twinkle, "that my stay here is to be short. How short?"

"Until Ransome arrives in *Triton*," answered Hornblower.

"You should know that, dear, considering how much gossip you picked up from Lady Exmouth and the others."

"Yes, but it's still confusing to me. When does your appointment end?"

"It ended yesterday, legally. But my command continues until I am legally relieved of it by Ransome when he comes. *Triton* has made a long passage."

"And when Ransome comes?"

"He takes over from me, and, of course, moves into this house. His Excellency has invited us to be his guests at Government House until we sail for home, dear."

"I see. And if Ransome is so late that we miss the packet?"

"Then we wait for the next. I hope not. It would be uncomfortable."

"Is Government House as bad as that?"

"It's tolerable, dear. But I was thinking of Ransome. No new Commander-in-Chief wants to have his predecessor staying on."

"Criticising all his actions, of course. Is that what you'd do, dear?"

"I wouldn't be human if I did not."

"And I know so well you're human, dear," said Barbara, putting out her hands to him. They were in the bedroom now, out of sight of servants and staff, and they could be human for a few precious moments until a thunderous knock at the door heralded the arrival of Gerard and the baggage, and on his heels came Spendlove with a note for Barbara.

"A note of welcome from Her Excellency, dear," explained Barbara when she had read it. "We are commanded to dinner *en famille*."

"No more than I expected," said Hornblower, and then, looking round to see that Spendlove had withdrawn, "no more than I feared."

Barbara smiled into his eyes conspiratorially.

"A time will come," she said.

There was so much to talk about, so much news to be exchanged; the long, long letters that had passed between them during their three years' separation needed amplification and explanation, and in any case, Barbara had been five weeks at sea without news. Late on the second day, while they were dining alone together, a mention of Hudnutt came into the conversation. Hornblower explained the situation briefly.

"You're going to court martial him?" asked Barbara.

"Likely enough, when I can convene a court."

"And what will the verdict be?"

"Guilty, of course. There's no doubt about it."

"I don't mean the verdict. I mean the sentence. What will that be?" Barbara was entitled to ask questions like this, and even to express an opinion regarding her husband's performance of his official duties, now that he had let slip a mention of the subject to her.

Hornblower quoted from the Articles of War which had regulated his official life for nearly thirty years.

"Every person so offending, being convicted thereof by the sentence of the court martial, shall suffer death, or such less punishment as from the nature and degree of the offence the court martial shall deem him to deserve."

"You don't mean that, dear?" Barbara's grey eyes opened wide across the little table from him. "Death? But you said 'such less punishment'. What could that be?"

"Flogging round the fleet. Five hundred lashes."

"Five hundred lashes? For playing B natural instead of B flat?"

That was exactly what one might expect a woman to say.

"Dear, that's not the charge. The charge is wilful disobedience to orders."

"But it's such a trifling matter."

"Dear, disobedience to orders can never be a trifling matter."

"Would you flog a man to death because he won't play a B flat? What a bloodthirsty way to balance the account!"

"There's no thought of balancing accounts, dear. Punishment is inflicted to deter other men from disobeying orders. It's not revenge."

But woman-like Barbara clung to her position, however much her flank might be turned by cold logic.

"But if you hang him — or if you flog him, I expect — he'll never play another B natural again. What good does that do?"

"It's the good of the Service, dear —"

Hornblower, on his part, was holding a position which he knew to be not quite tenable, but Barbara's vehemence was causing him to grow heated in defence of his beloved Service.

"They'll hear about this in England," said Barbara, and then a new thought struck her. "He can appeal, of course — can he?"

"In home waters he could. But I am a Commander-in-Chief in a foreign station, and from my decision there is no appeal."

It was a sobering speech. Barbara gazed across the table at this man, changed suddenly from her tender, loving, sensitive husband into a potentate who held the power of life and death. And she knew that she could not, she must not, exploit her privileged position as wife to influence his decision. Not because of the good of the Service, but for the sake of their married happiness.

"And the trial will be soon?" she asked; the change in her was apparent in her tone.

"The moment I can convene a court. Delay in matters of discipline defeats its own object. If a man were to mutiny on Monday he should be tried on Tuesday and hanged on Wednesday. But there are not enough captains available. *Triton's* captain, when Ransome arrives, would give the necessary number, but then I shall be relieved of command and the matter will be out of my hands. But if *Flora* should come in before that — I detached her to the Gulf Coast — I shall be responsible."

"I see, dear," said Barbara, not taking her eyes from his face. Even before he spoke again she was aware that there was something which would modify the harshness of what he had said so far.

"Naturally, I have not made up my mind yet, dear," he said. "But there is a further possibility which I'm considering."

"Yes?" She could hardly breathe the word.

"The confirmation of the finding and the sentence would be the last act of my command. That would present an excuse — a reason. I could commute the sentence as an act of clemency in recognition of the good behaviour of the squadron during the period I have commanded it."

"I see, dear. And if Ransome arrives before *Flora*?"

"I can do nothing except —"

"Except — ?"

"I could suggest to Ransome that he might begin his command with an act of clemency."

"And would he?"

"I know very little about Ransome, dear. I simply cannot say."

Barbara opened her mouth to speak. She was going to say, 'Will he think a B flat more important than a man's life?' but she changed her speech in the nick of time. Instead she said the other thing that had also, and longer, been hovering on her lips.

"I love you, darling," she said.

Again their eyes met across the table, and Hornblower felt his passion flooding to meet hers like a union of two rushing rivers. He knew perfectly well that all he had said about discipline and examples had been of no effect in changing Barbara's mind; a woman (even more than a man) convinced against her will was of the same opinion still. But Barbara had not said so; she had said something else — and something (as always) more appropriate to the occasion. And not by one single variation of tone, not by a hair's-breadth raising of an eyebrow, had she brought into the conversation the fact that he was tone deaf. A lesser woman would have used that as if it were a relevant argument in this matter. She knew of his tone deafness, and he knew she knew, and she knew that he knew; and so on *ad infinitum*, but there had never been any need for him to admit the defect or for her to admit her knowledge, and he loved her.

Next morning he had to tell himself that the Commander-in-Chief in the West Indies, even if he were awaiting his relief, still had duties to do; even if his wife had newly joined him. But it was delightful to have Barbara walk down with him through the Admiralty House gardens to see him on his way as far as the wicket gate in the lofty dockyard palisade. It was a little unfortunate that at the moment when Evans was unlocking the gate Hudnutt should appear on the other side of the palisade taking his exercise. He was marching up and down between a file of marines under command of a corporal, the guard in parade uniform with bayonets fixed, Hudnutt hatless, as a prisoner under charges had to be.

"Pris'ner an' escort — halt!" bellowed the corporal at sight of his Admiral. "Escort, present — arms!"

Hornblower formally acknowledged the salute before turning to say goodbye to his wife.

"Escort, sl-o-o-pe arms!" bellowed the corporal, in marine fashion, as if the escort had been at the other side of the dockyard instead of two yards from him.

"Is that the bandsman — Hudnutt, dear?" asked Barbara.

"Yes," said Hornblower.

"Pris'ner an' escort, by the right, quick — march!" bellowed the corporal, and the little group marched off.

Barbara watched it go; she could look now that Hudnutt had his back to her and was unaware of it. Previously she had refrained from staring at the man who would soon be on trial for his life. The trim marine uniform could not conceal the gangling, undeveloped body; and the sun shone on the fair hair.

"He's nothing more than a boy," said Barbara.

That could be another irrelevant fact if she wanted to argue with her husband regarding his duty. Seventeen or seventy, a man under orders must obey orders.

"He's not very old, dear," agreed Hornblower.

Then he kissed the cheek that Barbara held up to him — he was not at all sure if an Admiral in uniform should kiss his wife goodbye in the presence of his staff, but Barbara had no doubts about it. He left her standing there by the gate chatting to Evans, looking round her at the lovely garden on the one side of the palisade and at the business-like dockyard through the palings.

The presence of his wife was delightful, even though it meant greatly increased activities for him. The next two or three days involved considerable entertaining; island society wished to make the most of the fleeting presence of an Admiral's wife, a peeress, and of the bluest of blood in her own right. To Hornblower,

regretfully contemplating the immediate end of his period in command, it was a little like the aristocrats during the French Revolution dancing before the summons to the guillotine, but Barbara seemed to enjoy it all, perhaps because she had just endured five very dull weeks at sea and was facing the prospect of five more. "You danced a good deal with young Bonner, dear," he remarked to her when they were home again after the Governor's party.

"He's a very good dancer," said Barbara.

"He's something of a villain, I believe," countered Hornblower. "There's never been anything proved, but much suspected — smuggling, slave running, and all the rest of it."

"He's invited to Government House," said Barbara.

"Nothing proved, as I said. But in my official capacity I've often been interested in the activities of those fishing boats of his. You may find you've been dancing with a jailbird one of these days, dear."

"Jailbirds are more amusing than military secretaries," smiled Barbara.

Barbara's activity was astonishing. Even after a night's gaiety she went riding during the day, and Hornblower was content that she should, as long as there were young men available eager to act as Lady Hornblower's escort, seeing that he had his duties to attend to and disliked horses in any case. It was even amusing to observe the transparent adoration which she received from everyone, from His Excellency, from the young men who rode with her, from Evans the gardener, from everyone she had anything to do with.

Barbara was out riding one morning, before the heat of the day, when a messenger was brought in to Hornblower at Admiralty House.

"Message from the cap'n, My Lord. *Triton*'s signalled. She's heading in with a fair wind."

Hornblower stared for a moment; although this was a message that might have come at any time during the last month he was not ready for its full impact.

"Very well. My compliments to the captain, and I'll come down."

So this was the end of his three years as Commander-in-Chief. Ransome would take over command, possibly today, but certainly tomorrow, and he himself would be on half pay and due to go home. A queer mixture of thoughts went through his mind as he made himself ready to meet Ransome; young Richard about to enter Eton; the thought of a freezing winter in Smallbridge; the auditing of his final accounts; it was not until he was on his way to his barge that he remembered that now he would be relieved of the necessity to come to a decision in the Hudnutt case.

Triton wore no Admiral's flag, for Ransome legally held no command until he had taken over; the salutes at the moment merely acknowledged *Triton*'s joining the West Indian command. Ransome was a burly man with the heavy, fashionable side-whiskers, more grey than black. He wore a small decoration of Companion of the Bath, insignificant compared with Hornblower's magnificent Grand Cross. Presumably if he survived this appointment without any great blunder he might hope for knighthood. He presented his captain, Coleman, with whom Hornblower was quite unacquainted, and then turned an attentive ear to Hornblower's explanation of the arrangements made so far and of future plans.

"I'll assume command tomorrow," decided Ransome.

"That will allow time to arrange the full ceremonial," agreed Hornblower. "In that case, sir, would you care to spend tonight at Government House? I understand a command there awaits you if you think it convenient."

"No need to move twice," said Ransome. "I'll spend tonight on board here."

"Admiralty House will be ready for you tomorrow, of course, sir. Perhaps you might like to give us the honour of your company at dinner today? There might perhaps be information that I could give you regarding the situation here."

Ransome shot a glance at Hornblower charged with a certain amount of suspicion; he did not wish to have any ready-made policies thrust upon him by his predecessor. Yet the suggestion was obviously sensible.

"It would be a great pleasure. I must thank you, My Lord."

Hornblower took a tactful step to allay that suspicion.

"The packet in which my wife and I are taking passage to England is making ready for sea at present, sir. We sail in her, in a matter of a few days only."

"Very well, My Lord," said Ransome.

"Then, having repeated my welcome, sir, I shall take my leave. Shall we expect you at four o'clock? Or would some other time be convenient?"

"Four o'clock will suit me well," said Ransome.

The king is dead, long live the king, thought Hornblower, on his way back. Tomorrow he would be supplanted, and would become a mere half-pay officer. The splendour and dignity of a Commander-in-Chief would be transferred from him to Ransome. And he found the thought a little irksome; he had found his polite pose of deference to Ransome more than a little irksome; and he really thought Ransome could have been more polite in return. He gave vent to a good deal of this feeling as he told Barbara about the interview, and he checked himself at sight of Barbara's amused twinkle and raised eyebrow.

"You are the sweetest simpleton, my very dearest," said Barbara. "Have you no idea at all of any possible explanation?"

"None, I'm afraid," said Hornblower.

Barbara came up close to him and looked into his face.

"No wonder that I love you," she said. "Don't you understand that no man could find it easy to replace Hornblower? Your period of command has been overwhelmingly successful. You've set a standard Ransome will find it hard to live up to. One might say he's jealous, envious — and he showed it."

"I can't really believe that," said Hornblower.

"And I love you because you can't believe it," said Barbara. "I could tell you so in a hundred ways, if I did not have to go and put on my finest gown to win Admiral Ransome's heart."

Ransome was a man of fine presence, bulk and side-whiskers and all; Hornblower had not really appreciated the fact at their first meeting. His manner was somewhat more cordial in Barbara's presence, which might have been the effect of Barbara's personality, but might also have been, as Hornblower realised, the result of Ransome's knowing that Lady Hornblower was a person of much influence in political circles. Hornblower did his best to exploit Ransome's faint cordiality. He passed the wine, he let slip as casually as possible bits of useful information regarding West Indian conditions — casually, so that Ransome could not suspect him of trying to bring influence to bear on him regarding his future policy, and yet useful information that Ransome could snap up and treasure with a smile at Hornblower's carelessness. Yet all the same, dinner was not a tremendous success. There was still a certain tenseness.

And as dinner was approaching its end Hornblower was conscious of a glance darted at him by Barbara; it was only one glance, and of the most fleeting nature. Ransome could not have been conscious of it, but Hornblower understood. Barbara was jogging his memory regarding a matter that was important to her. He awaited a suitable turn in the conversation before mentioning the subject.

"Oh, yes," he said, "there's a court martial pending. A marine bandsman —"

He went on to tell Ransome the circumstances of the case, treating it lightly. He was aware, even if Ransome was not, of the closeness with which Barbara was studying Ransome's expression as the narrative continued.

"Repeated and deliberate disobedience to a lawful order," Ransome was repeating to himself Hornblower's own words. "It could have been mutiny."

"So it could," agreed Hornblower. "But it's rather a curious case. I'm glad you have the decision to make regarding it, and not I."

"It seems to me as if the evidence will be quite incontrovertible."

"No doubt." Hornblower made himself smile, telepathically conscious of the intensity of Barbara's interest.

"But the circumstances are a little unusual."

The stony expression on Ransome's face was most discouraging. Hornblower knew the situation to be hopeless. He would have abandoned any further effort if Barbara had not been there, but as it was he went on, uselessly.

"If the trial had been held during the period of my command I might have — naturally I had not made up my mind — commuted the sentence to mark my appreciation of the good behaviour of the squadron."

"Yes?" said Ransome; no monosyllable could have expressed greater disinterest, but Hornblower plunged on.

"It had occurred to me that you might find this a favourable opportunity to display clemency as your first official act."

"That will be a matter for my own decision."

"Of course," agreed Hornblower.

"And I cannot imagine my taking any action of that sort, naturally. I cannot have the squadron believing that I shall be lenient as regards discipline. I cannot have my command unsettled at the start."

"Of course," said Hornblower again. He could see the uselessness of further argument, and he might as well be graceful about it. "You are the best judge of all the circumstances, as well as the only judge."

"Now I shall leave you gentlemen to your wine," said Barbara, suddenly. Hornblower looked at her just in time to see her frozen expression melt into the smile he knew so well. "I shall say goodnight to you, Admiral. I shall make every effort — as far as the rules of the Navy allow — to see that this house is in good condition for you to take over tomorrow, and I hope you will be comfortable in it."

"Thank you," said Ransome; the two men were on their feet now.

"Goodnight, dear," said Barbara to Hornblower. The latter was aware that the smile she gave him was not quite real, and he knew her to be acutely upset.

She left them, and Hornblower passed the port, and settled down again to what proved to be a long evening. Ransome, having asserted himself, and having made it perfectly clear that he would remain uninfluenced by any suggestion Hornblower might put forward, was by no means averse to acquiring any information that might come his way. Nor to finishing the bottle of port and starting on another.

So that it was very late before he went to bed, and he used no light for fear of disturbing Barbara. He crept about the room as silently as he could. In the darkness the glances that he directed at the other bed (naval establishments made small allowance for wives, and that allowance did not include double beds) under its mosquito net revealed nothing to him, and he was glad. If Barbara had been awake they could hardly have avoided discussing the Hudnutt case.

Nor was there any time next morning, for the moment Hornblower was called he had to hurry into the dressing room and array himself in his best uniform with his ribbon and star and hasten away to the ceremony of the change of command. As the officer to be relieved he was first upon the quarterdeck of the *Clorinda*, and stationed himself on the starboard side, his staff behind him. Captain Sir Thomas Fell had received him, and next busied himself with receiving the other captains as they came on board. The marine band — without Hudnutt — played selections on the poop; the pipes of the bosun's mates twittered unceasingly to welcome the continuous arrivals; the sun blazed down as if this were just some ordinary day. Then came a pause, intense in its drama. Then the band burst into a march again, there were ruffles of drums and flourishes of bugles as Ransome came up the side with his staff behind him, to take up his station on the port side. Fell came forward to Hornblower with his hand at his hat brim.

"Ship's company fallen in, My Lord."

"Thank you, Sir Thomas." Spendlove pressed a paper into Hornblower's hand; Hornblower stepped forward.

"Orders from the Lords Commissioners for the execution of the office of Lord High Admiral, to me, Horatio Lord Hornblower, Knight Grand Cross of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, Rear-Admiral of the Red Squadron —"

He really had trouble in preventing his voice from trembling, forcing himself to read in a harsh and matter-of-fact tone. He folded the paper and gave his last order.

"Sir Thomas, please have the goodness to haul down my flag."

"Aye aye, My Lord."

The first of the thirteen saluting guns went off as the red ensign came slowly down from the mizzen peak. A long, long, descent; sixty seconds for thirteen guns, and when the flag completed its descent Hornblower was the poorer by forty-nine pounds three shillings and seven pence a month command pay. A moment later Ransome came forward, paper in hand, to read the orders of the Lords Commissioners to him, Henry Ransome, Companion of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, Rear-Admiral of the Blue Squadron.

"Hoist my flag, Sir Thomas."

"Aye aye, sir."

Up to the mizzen peak rose the Blue Ensign; until it broke at the peak the ship was silent, but then it unfolded itself in the breeze and the salute roared out and the band played. When the last gun fired Ransome was legally Commander-in-Chief of His Majesty's Ships and Vessels in West Indian waters. More blaring from the

band, and in the midst of it Hornblower stepped forward raising his hand in salute to the new Commander-in-Chief.

"Permission to leave the ship, sir?"

"Permission granted."

Ruffles of drums, bugle calls, pipes, and he went down the ship's side. He might have been sentimental; he might have felt agony of regret, but there was instant distraction awaiting him.

"My Lord," said Spendlove beside him in the stern-sheets.

"Well?"

"That prisoner — Hudnutt, the marine bandsman —"

"What about him?"

"He's escaped, My Lord. He broke prison during the night."

That settled Hudnutt's fate beyond all doubt. Nothing could save him. He was as good as dead; or soon perhaps he would be worse than dead. No deserter, no escaped prisoner, ever succeeded in evading recapture in Jamaica. It was an island, and not too large an island. And there was a standing reward of ten pounds sterling for information resulting in the apprehension of a deserter, and in Jamaica, far more than in England, ten pounds was a fortune. A journeyman's wages for a year or more; more money than any slave could hope to see in a lifetime. No deserter stood a chance; his white face, to say nothing of his uniform, would call attention to him wherever he might be in the island, and the standing reward made it certain that he would be betrayed. Hudnutt was doomed to recapture. And he was doomed beyond that. There would be additional charges at his court martial. Prison breaking. Desertion. Damage to government property. Damage to his uniform. He would probably be hanged. The only other chance was that he would be flogged round the fleet to die for certain under the lash. Hudnutt was a dead man, and this was the end of his talent for music. It was a sombre enough thought to occupy his mind all the way to the pier, and it kept him silent as he climbed into the Governor's carriage to be driven to Government House — he had no Commander-in-Chief's carriage now. He was still silent as they drove away.

But they had hardly gone a mile when they met a lively cavalcade clattering down on horseback towards them. First Hornblower saw Barbara — he would have picked her out in any crowd even if she had not been conspicuous on a white horse. His Excellency rode on one side of her and Lady Hooper on the other, chattering eagerly. Behind them came a mixed party, of aides-de-camp and civilians; at the rear rode the Assistant Provost-Marshal and two troopers of his guard.

"Ha, Hornblower!" called the Governor, reining up. "Your ceremonial seems to have finished earlier than I expected."

"Good morning, sir," said Hornblower. "Your servant, ma'am."

Then he smiled at Barbara — he could always smile at the sight of her despite any depression. In her hunting veil the smile she gave him in return was hardly apparent.

"You can join us in our hunt. One of my aides-de-camp will give you his horse," said Hooper, and then, peering into the carriage, "No, perhaps not, in those silk stockings. You can follow us in the carriage, like a lady with certain expectations. Like the Queen of France, by Gad! Turn that carriage, coachman."

"What are you hunting, sir?" asked Hornblower, a little bewildered.

"That deserter of yours. He might show us some sport," answered Hooper.

They were hunting man, the biggest game of all — but Hudnutt, dreamy, scatter-brained Hudnutt, would be poor game. Two coloured servants rode in the party, each holding a leash of bloodhounds, tawny and black; grim, horrible creatures. He wanted to have nothing to do with this hunt, nothing whatever. He wanted to order the carriage to turn back again. This was a nightmare, and it was beyond his power to awaken himself from it. It was horrible to see Barbara taking part in it. At the dockyard gate, at the high palisade, the cortege halted.

"That's the prison," said the Assistant Provost-Marshal, pointing. "You can see the hole in the roof, sir."

An area of thatch had been torn away. Probably that prison was not very strongly built; to escape from it meant that the fifteen-foot palisade had to be scaled next — and even then certain recapture somewhere in the island awaited the man to achieve that feat.

"Come on," said the Assistant Provost-Marshal, and he and his guard and the men with the bloodhounds trotted into the dockyard to the prison and dismounted. They took the bloodhounds into the prison, where presumably the hounds smelt at the prisoner's bedding. Then they reappeared at the door, smelling at the ground below the hole in the roof. Instantly they caught the scent, throwing themselves against their leashes so that the coloured servants had a difficult task to remount, and then they came pelting across the dockyard again. They threw themselves against the palisade, leaping up at it, slaving with excitement.

"Bring 'em round to this side!" shouted the Governor, and then, turning to Hornblower, "Your man's a marine, isn't he? Even a sailor would find it hard to scale that palisade."

Hudnutt might have done it in some exalted mood, thought Hornblower — those dreamers were like madmen sometimes.

The bloodhounds were brought round through the dockyard gate again and led to the corresponding point on the outside of the palisade. They caught the scent again in a flash, throwing themselves against their leashes and galloping down the road.

"Gone away!" yelled the Governor, spurring his horse after them.

Hudnutt had climbed that fifteen-foot palisade, then. He must have been insane. The cavalcade had all gone on ahead; the coachman was urging the carriage horses along as fast as their dignity and the inequalities of the road would permit; the carriage lurched and leaped, throwing Hornblower against Gerard beside him and sometimes even against Spendlove opposite. Straight up the road they went, heading for the open country and the Blue Mountains beyond. The horsemen ahead reined back into a trot, and the coachman followed their example, so that the progress of the carriage became more sedate.

"A hot enough scent, My Lord," said Gerard, peering forward at the bloodhounds still straining at their leashes.

"And yet this road must have been well travelled since he went along it," said Spendlove.

"Ah!" said Gerard, still peering forward. "They're leaving the road."

As the carriage reached the corner they saw that the horsemen had turned up a broad lane through fields of cane; the coachman, nothing daunted, swung up into the lane after them, but after two more miles of rapid progress he pulled his horses to a halt.

"A check here, Hornblower," said the Governor. "This lane fords the Hope River here."

The halted cavalcade was breathing the horses; Barbara waved her gloved hand to him.

"No scent the other side," explained the Governor, and then, calling to the men with the bloodhounds. "Cast upstream as well as down. And on both sides."

The Assistant Provost-Marshal acknowledged the order with a salute.

"Your man knew we'd have bloodhounds after him," said the Governor. "He waded along the river. But he has to come out sooner or later, and we'll pick up the scent again there."

Barbara guided her horse to the side of the carriage, and raised her veil to speak to him.

"Good morning, dear," she said.

"Good morning," said Hornblower.

It was hard to say more, when the events of the last hour or two, and all their implications, were allowed for. And Barbara was hardly flushed with the heat and the exercise. She looked drawn and tired; her smile was positively wan. It occurred to Hornblower that she was participating in this hunt as unwillingly as he was. And it seemed likely that she had allowed the move from Admiralty House to Government House this morning to trouble her; womanlike she would not have been able to allow the Navy to execute the task without her supervision even though the Navy had made similar moves by the hundred thousand. She had tried to order it all and was weary in consequence.

"Come and sit in the carriage, dear," he said. "Gerard will take your horse."

"Mr Gerard is wearing silk stockings the same as you are, dear," replied Barbara, smiling through her weariness, "and I have too much respect for his dignity to set him on a side saddle in any case."

"My groom will lead your horse, Lady Hornblower," interposed the Governor. "This hunt looks as if it's going to turn out badly."

Hornblower scrambled down from the carriage to help Barbara from the side-saddle and up into the carriage. Gerard and Spendlove, who had followed him out, followed them back after a moment's hesitation and sat with their backs to the horses.

"We should have heard something from the bloodhounds by now," said the Governor. The four bloodhounds had now cast up and down both banks for a considerable distance. "Can he have climbed a tree?"

A man could be more resourceful than any fox, Hornblower knew. But it was an unexpected aspect of Hudnutt's character.

"Not a trace of scent, Your Excellency," said the Assistant Provost-Marshal trotting up. "Nothing at all."

"Oh, well then, we'll go home again. A poor day's sport after all. We'll precede you, Lady Hornblower, with your permission."

"We'll see you at the house, dear Lady Hornblower," echoed Lady Hooper.

The carriage turned again and followed the horsemen down the lane.

"You've had a busy morning, I fear, my dear," said Hornblower; with his staff sitting across the carriage from them he had to retain a certain formality of tone.

"Not busy at all," answered Barbara, turning her head to meet his glance. "A very pleasant morning, thank you, dear. And you — your ceremonial went off without a hitch, I hope?"

"Well enough, thank you. Ransome —" he changed what he was going to say abruptly. What he would say about Ransome to Barbara's private ear was not the same as what he would say in the hearing of his staff. The carriage trotted on, and conversation proceeded only fitfully in the heat. It was long before they swung through the gates of Government House, with Hornblower acknowledging the salute of the sentry, and drew up at the door. Aides-de-camp and butlers and maids awaited them; but Barbara had already dealt with the move, and in the vast, cavernous bedroom and dressing room allotted to principal guests Hornblower's things were already disposed along with hers.

"At last alone," smiled Barbara. "Now we can look forward to Smallbridge."

Indeed that was so; this was the beginning of one of those periods of transition which Hornblower knew so well, as did every sailor, the strange days, or weeks, between one life and the next. He had ceased to be a Commander-in-Chief; now he had to endure existence until he would at least be master in his own house. The urgent need at the moment was for a bath; his shirt was sticking to his ribs under his heavy uniform coat. Perhaps never again, never in all his life, would he take a bath under a wash-deck pump somewhere out with the trade winds blowing upon him. On the other hand, he would not, at least while he was in Jamaica, have to wear a uniform again.

It was later in the day that Barbara made her request to him.

"Dear, would you please give me some money?"

"Of course," said Hornblower.

He felt a delicacy about this which most men would laugh at. Barbara had brought a good deal of money to their marriage, which, of course, was now his property, and he felt an absurd guilt that she should have to ask him for money. That feeling of guilt was perfectly ridiculous, of course. Women were not supposed to dispose of money in any way, except small sums for housekeeping. They could not legally sign a cheque, they could enter into no business transaction at all, which was perfectly right and proper seeing how incapable women were. Except perhaps Barbara. It was the husband's business to keep all moneys under his own hand and dole out under his own supervision what was needed.

"How much would you like, dear?" he asked.

"Two hundred pounds," said Barbara.

Two hundred pounds? Two hundred pounds! That was something entirely different. It was a fortune. What in the world would Barbara want two hundred pounds for here in Jamaica? There could not be one single gown or pair of gloves in the whole island that Barbara could possibly want to buy. A few souvenirs, perhaps. The most elaborate tortoiseshell toilet set in Jamaica would not cost five pounds. Two hundred pounds? There would be a few maids to whom she would have to give vails on leaving, but five shillings each, half a guinea at most, would settle those.

"Two hundred pounds?" he said it aloud this time.

"Yes, dear, if you please."

"It will be my business to tip the butler and grooms, of course," he said, still trying to find reasons why she should think she needed this stupendous sum.

"Yes, no doubt, dear," said Barbara, patiently. "But I need some money for other purposes."

"But it's a lot of money."

"I think we can afford it, though. Please, dear —"

"Of course, of course," said Hornblower hastily. He could not bear it that Barbara should have to plead to him. All he had was hers. It was always a pleasure to him to anticipate her wants, to forestall any request so that it never need be uttered. He felt shame that Barbara, exquisite Barbara, should ever have to abase herself so low as to ask a favour of him, unworthy as he was.

"I'll write an order on Summers," he said. "He's Coutts's correspondent in Kingston."

"Thank you, dear," said Barbara.

Yet as he handed the order over he could not refrain from further speech.

"You'll be careful, dear, won't you?" he said. "Two hundred pounds, whether in notes or gold —"

His misgivings ceased to be voiced, died away in incoherent mumblings. He had no wish to pry. He had no wish to exert over Barbara the sort of parental authority that both law and custom gave a husband over his wife. And then he thought of a possible explanation. Lady Hooper was a keen and clever card player. Presumably Barbara had lost heavily to her. Well, in that case he need not worry. Barbara was a good player, too, and level headed, and cool. She would win it back. In any case she was no gambler. Perhaps on the voyage home they would have a few hands of piquet — if Barbara had any fault at all it was a tendency to discard a little thoughtlessly when playing the younger hand, and he could give a little unobtrusive advice. And there was a smug pleasure, and a tender pleasure, in the thought of Barbara not caring to admit, to a husband who notoriously won, that she had lost at cards. The deep respect that he felt for her was accompanied (as the flavour of a beef steak may be accompanied by that of mustard) by the knowledge that she was still human. Hornblower knew that there can be no love without respect — and no love without a twinkle of amusement as well.

"You are the dearest man in the world," said Barbara, and he realised that her eyes had been fixed on his face for the last several seconds.

"It is my greatest happiness to hear you say so," he answered, with a sincerity that no one could doubt. And then a recollection of their position in this house, as mere guests, came to them both to modify the intensity of their feelings.

"And we shall be the most unpopular people in Jamaica if we keep Their Excellencies waiting for their dinner," said Hornblower.

They were only guests, now, mere hangers-on, their presence only tolerated by people who had their official lives still to live; that was what Hornblower thought at dinner time when the new Commander-in-Chief sat in the place of honour. He thought of the Byzantine General, blinded and disgraced, begging in the market-place, and he nearly said, 'Spare a penny for Belisarius' when the Governor turned to include him in the conversation.

"Your marine hasn't been apprehended yet," said Hooper.

"Not my marine any longer, sir," laughed Hornblower. "Admiral Ransome's marine now."

"I understand there's no doubt that he *will* be apprehended," said Ransome.

"We've not lost a deserter yet during the time of my appointment here," said Hooper.

"That's very reassuring," was Ransome's comment.

Hornblower stole a glance at Barbara across the table. She was eating her dinner with apparent composure; he had feared lest this reminder should upset her, for he knew how strongly she felt about Hudnutt's fate. A woman was liable to think that the inevitable should not be inevitable in matters in which she was interested. Barbara's mastery of her feelings was something more to admire about her.

Lady Hooper changed the subject, and conversation became general and gay. Hornblower actually began to enjoy himself, with a lightheaded feeling of irresponsibility. There were no cares on his shoulders; soon — the moment the packet was ready to sail — he would be on his way to England, and he would be pleasantly settled in Smallbridge while these people here went on dealing with unrewarding problems in tropical heat. Nothing here mattered to him any more. If Barbara were happy he had not a care in the world, and Barbara was seemingly happy, chattering away to her neighbours on either hand.

It was pleasant, too, that there was not to be any heavy drinking, for after dinner there was to be a reception in honour of the new Commander-in-Chief to which all the island society not eligible for dinner had been invited. He found himself looking at life with fresh eyes and actually approving of it.

After dinner, when the men and the ladies met again in the drawing room and the first new guests were being announced, he was able to exchange a word or two with Barbara and to see that she was happy and not over-tired. Her smile was bright and her eyes sparkling. He had to turn away from her in the end to shake hands with Mr Hough, just arrived with his wife. Other guests were streaming in; a sudden influx of blue and gold and white marked the arrival of Coleman, *Triton's* captain, and a couple of his lieutenants. Ransome himself was presenting Coleman to Barbara, and Hornblower could not help but hear the conversation close behind him. "Captain Coleman is an old friend of mine," said Barbara. "You were Perfecto Coleman in those days, weren't you, captain?"

"And you were Lady Leighton, ma'am," said Coleman.

A harmless enough remark, but enough to shatter Hornblower's frail happiness, to darken the brightly-lit room, to set the babble of conversation in the room roaring in Hornblower's ears like a torrent, through the din of which Barbara's words pierced shrill like a whistle note.

"Captain Coleman was my first husband's flag-lieutenant," said Barbara.

She had had a first husband; she had been Lady Leighton. Hornblower nearly always contrived to forget this. Rear-Admiral Sir Percy Leighton had died for his country, of wounds received in the battle of Rosas Bay, thirteen full years ago. But Barbara had been Leighton's wife, Leighton's widow. She had been Leighton's wife before she had been Hornblower's. Hornblower hardly ever thought about it, but when he did he still experienced a jealousy which he knew to be insane. Any reminder not only reawoke that jealousy, but brought back to him with agonising clarity the recollection of the despair, the envy, the black self-derision he had known in those days. He had been a desperately unhappy man then, and this made him the same desperately unhappy man now. He was no longer the successful sailor, terminating a brilliant period of command. He was the thwarted lover, despised even by his own despicable self. He knew again all the misery of limitless and yet unsatisfied desire, to blend with the jealousies of the moment.

Hough was awaiting a reply to some remark he had made. Hornblower forced himself to extemporise some casual sentence which may or may not have been relevant. Hough drifted away, and Hornblower found himself against his will looking over at Barbara. She had her ready smile for him, and he had to smile back, and he knew it to be a dreadful, lopsided, mirthless smile, like a grin on the face of a dead man. He saw a worried look come on her face; he knew how instantly she was conscious of his moods, and that made it worse than ever. She was the heartless woman who had spoken of her first husband — that jealousy of his was a mood she knew nothing of, was not susceptible to. He was a man who had stepped suddenly from firm ground into a morass of uncertainty that would engulf him.

Captain Knyvett had entered the room, bluff and grizzled, dressed in blue broadcloth with unpretentious brass buttons. As he approached Hornblower could only with an effort remember him as the captain of the Jamaica packet.

"We sail a week from today, My Lord," he said. "The announcement for the mail will be made tomorrow."

"Excellent," said Hornblower.

"And I can see from all this," went on Knyvett, with a gesture indicating Admiral Ransome's presence, "that I shall have the pleasure of Your Lordship's company, and Her Ladyship's."

"Yes, yes, quite so," said Hornblower.

"You will be my only passengers," said Knyvett.

"Excellent," repeated Hornblower.

"I trust Your Lordship will find the *Pretty Jane* a well-found and comfortable ship."

"I trust so," said Hornblower.

"Her Ladyship, of course, is familiar with the deckhouse that will be your accommodation. I shall ask her if she can suggest any addition that will add to your comfort, My Lord."

"Very well."

Knyvett drifted away after this cold reception, and it was only after he had gone that Hornblower realised that Knyvett must have received an impression of a top-lofty peer with hardly bare politeness for a mere packet-captain. He regretted it, and made a desperate effort to get himself under control again. A glance at Barbara revealed her chatting animatedly with young Bonner, the fishing-boat owner and general merchant with the

shady reputation, against whom Hornblower had already warned her. That could have added to his misery if it were possible.

Again he made the effort to control himself. He knew the expression on his face to be frozen and blank, and he tried to make it more pleasing as he forced himself to stroll through the crowd.

"Can we tempt you, Lord Hornblower?" asked an old lady standing by the card-table in an alcove. She was a good whist player, Hornblower remembered.

"Why certainly, with pleasure," he made himself say.

He had something to think about now; for the first few hands it was hard to concentrate, especially as the noise of an orchestra was added to the din of the party, but old habits reasserted themselves with the necessity to remember the distribution of fifty-two cards. By sheer will-power he achieved the transformation of himself into a thinking machine, playing coldly and correctly, and then, when the rubber appeared to be lost, he was carried away despite himself. The next hand afforded an opportunity for brilliance, for that injection into his so-far mechanical play of the human quality, the flexibility, the unpredictable cunning which marked the difference between a second-class player and a first-class one. By the fourth lead he had made a fair estimate of the hands. One particular lead might enable him to clear the board, to win every trick and the rubber; with orthodox play the hand would end with his making only twelve tricks and the rubber still in doubt. It was worth trying — but it was now or never. Without hesitation he led his queen of hearts to the ace that his partner was forced to play; he took the next trick and along with it control of the situation, cleared trumps, led out his established winners, saw with satisfaction his opponents discard first the knave and then the king of hearts, and he finally laid down the three of hearts to take the last trick amid the dismay of his opponents.

"Why, that's Grand Slam," said the old lady who was his partner, quite astonished. "I don't understand — I don't see how — we've won the rubber after all!"

It had been a neat piece of work; there was a perceptible glow of accomplishment within him. That was a hand that he would be able to play over in his mind in future while composing himself to sleep. When the card playing was finished and the guests beginning to leave he was able to meet Barbara's eye with a more natural expression, and Barbara with a relieved sigh was able to tell herself that her husband was coming out of his unpredictable mood.

It was as well that he was, for the next few days were bound to be difficult. There was almost nothing for him to do as the *Pretty Jane* made ready for sea. As a helpless spectator he had to stand by and watch Ransome taking over the command he had held for three years. The Spanish question was likely to be difficult with the French invasion of Spain to restore Ferdinand VII; there was the Mexican question as well as the Venezuela question; he could not help fretting over the possibility of Ransome mishandling them. On the other hand, there was the small comfort that Hudnutt had so far succeeded in evading capture; Hornblower honestly feared that if he should be apprehended and sentenced while they were still in the island Barbara might take action herself with personal appeals to Ransome or even to the Governor. Barbara actually seemed to have forgotten about the case, which was more than Hornblower had; he was still profoundly disturbed about it, and inclined to fret himself into a fever at his complete lack of power to exert any influence in the matter. It was hard to be philosophic about it, to tell himself that no individual, not even Hornblower, could hold back the working of the inexorable machine of the Articles for the Regulating and Better Government of His Majesty's Navies. And Hudnutt was a more capable person than he had ever imagined, seeing that he had been able to maintain himself free from capture for a week now — unless perhaps he was dead. That might be best for Hudnutt.

Captain Knyvett came in person with the news that the *Pretty Jane* was almost ready for sea.

"The last of the cargo's going on board now, My Lord," he said. "The logwood's all in and the coir is on the quay. If Your Lordship and Her Ladyship will come on board this evening we'll sail with the land breeze at dawn."

"Thank you, captain. I am greatly obliged to you," said Hornblower, trying not to be fulsome to make up for his coldness at the Governor's party.

Pretty Jane was a flush-decked brig, save that amidships she carried a small but substantial deckhouse for her passengers. Barbara had inhabited it for five weeks on the outward voyage. Now they entered it together, with all the bustle of the ship's getting ready for sea going on round them.

"I used to look at that other bed, dear," she said to Hornblower as they stood in the deckhouse, "and I used to tell myself that soon my husband would be sleeping there. It seemed too good to be possible, dear."

A noise outside distracted them.

"This case, ma'am?" asked the Government House servant who was bringing their baggage on board under Gerard's supervision.

"That? Oh, I've asked the captain about that already. It's to go in the steerage."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Delicacies in tin boxes," explained Barbara to Hornblower.

"I brought them all the way out for you to enjoy while going home, dear."

"You are too good to me," said Hornblower.

A case that size and weight would be a nuisance in the deckhouse. In the steerage its contents would be readily accessible.

"What is coir?" asked Barbara, looking out to see one of the final bales going down the hatchway.

"The hairy husks of coconuts," explained Hornblower.

"What in the world are we carrying those to England for?" asked Barbara.

"There are machines now which can weave it. They make coco-matting by the mile in England now."

"And logwood?"

"They extract a dye from it. A bright red dye."

"You are my unfailing source of information, dear," said Barbara, "as well as everything else in life for me."

"Here's Their Excellencies coming, My Lord," warned Gerard, arriving at the deckhouse door.

That meant the final goodbyes, in the dying evening. A painful, sad moment; much shaking of hands; kisses on each cheek for Barbara from Lady Hooper; the word 'goodbye' repeated over and over again, overwhelming in its finality. Goodbye to friends and to acquaintances, goodbye to Jamaica and to the command-in-chief.

Goodbye to one life, with the next still to disclose itself. Goodbye to the last shadowy figure disappearing in the darkness of the quay, and then to turn again to Barbara standing beside him, permanent in these transitions,

In the first light of next morning Hornblower could hardly be blamed for being on deck, feeling oddly awkward with the necessity for keeping out of the way, watching while Knyvett warped the *Pretty Jane* away from the quay, to catch the land breeze and head out of the harbour. Luckily Knyvett was made of sturdy stuff, and was not in the least discomposed at having to handle his ship under the eye of an Admiral. The land breeze filled the sails; *Pretty Jane* gathered way. They dipped the flag to Fort Augusta, and then, with the helm hard over, came round to leave Drunken Cay and South Cay on their port side before beginning the long reach to the eastward. And Hornblower could relax and contemplate the new prospect of breakfasting with his wife on shipboard.

He surprised himself at the ease with which he accustomed himself to being a passenger. At first he was so anxious to give no indication of interference that he did not even dare to look into the binnacle to note their course. He was content to sit with Barbara in two hammock chairs in the shade of the deckhouse — there were becketts to which the chairs could be hooked to prevent them sliding down the deck to leeward as *Pretty Jane* heeled over — and think about nothing in particular, watching the flying fish furrowing the surface, and the patches of yellow Sargasso weed drift by, gold against the blue, and an occasional turtle swimming manfully along far from land. He could watch Captain Knyvett and his mate take their noon sights and assure himself that he had no interest at all in the figures they were obtaining — and in truth he was really more interested in the punctuality of mealtimes. He could crack an idle joke with Barbara to the effect that *Pretty Jane* had made this run so often she could be trusted to find her way home without supervision; and his mind was lazy enough to think that funny.

It was actually his first holiday after three years of strenuous work. During much of that time he had frequently been under severe strain, and during all of it he had been busy. He sank into idleness as a man might sink into a warm bath, with the difference that he had not expected to find this relaxation and ease in idleness, and

(more important, perhaps) in the cessation of responsibility. Nothing mattered during those golden days. He was the person least concerned in all the ship, as *Pretty Jane* thrashed her way northward, in the burning question as to whether the wind would hold steady to enable her to weather Point Maysi, without having to go about, and he did not care when they did not succeed. He endured philosophically the long beat to windward back towards Haiti, and he smiled patronisingly at the petty jubilation on board when they succeeded on the next tack and passed through the Windward Channel so that they might almost consider themselves out of the Caribbean. A persistent northward slant in the Trades kept them from attempting the Caicos Passage, and they had to hold away to the eastward for Silver Bank Passage. Caicos or Silver Bank — or for that matter Turks Island or Mouchoir — he did not care. He did not care whether he arrived home in August or September.

Yet his instincts were only dormant. That evening, when they were truly in the Atlantic, he felt restless and disturbed for the first time since leaving Jamaica. There was something heavy in the breathing of the air, and something unusual about the swell that was rolling the *Pretty Jane* so heavily. A gale before morning, he decided. A little unusual in these latitudes at this time of year, but nothing really to worry about. He did not trouble Barbara with his notions, but he woke several times in the night to find the ship still rolling heavily. When the watch was called he noted that all hands were kept on deck to shorten sail, and he was tempted to go out to see what was happening. A clatter outside awoke Barbara.

"What's that?" she asked, sleepily.

"Only the deadlights, dear," he answered.

Someone had slammed the deadlights against the deckhouse windows and clamped them home — Knyvett must be expecting to ship some heavy seas. Barbara went back to sleep, and Hornblower actually followed her example, but in half an hour he was awake again. The gale was unceasing, and the ship was working considerably in the swell, so that everything was groaning and creaking. He lay in the darkness to feel the ship heaving and lying over under him, and he could both hear and actually feel the vibration of the taut standing rigging transmitted to his bunk via the deck. He would like to go out and have a look at the weather, but he did not wish to disturb Barbara.

"Awake, dear?" said a small voice the other side of the deckhouse.

"Yes," he answered.

"It seems to be getting rough."

"A little," he said. "There's nothing to worry about. Go to sleep again, dear."

Now he could not go out because Barbara was awake and would know about it. He made himself lie still; it was pitch dark in the deckhouse with the deadlights in, and, perhaps because of the cessation of ventilation, it was now overpoweringly hot despite the gale. *Pretty Jane* was leaping about extravagantly, and every now and then lying over so far that he feared lest Barbara should be rolled out of her bunk. Then he was conscious of a change in the vessel's behaviour, of a difference in the thunderous creaking that filled the darkness. Knyvett had hove the *Pretty Jane* to; she was not lying over, but she was pitching fantastically, indicating a really heavy sea outside. He wanted so much to go out and see for himself. He had no idea even of what the time was — it was far too dark to look at his watch. At the thought that it might be dawn he could restrain himself no longer.

"Awake, dear?" he asked.

"Yes," said Barbara.

She did not add, 'how could anyone sleep in this din?' for Barbara lived up to the principle that no person of breeding should ever complain about things he was unable, or unwilling, to do anything to remedy.

"I shall go out on deck if you do not mind my leaving you, dear," he said.

"Please go if you wish to, of course, dear," answered Barbara, nor did she add that she wished she could go out too.

Hornblower groped for his trousers and his shoes, and felt his way to the door. Long experience warned him to brace himself as he unfastened it, but even he was a little surprised at the raging wind that awaited him; it was wild even though, with *Pretty Jane* hove-to, the door on the after side was in the lee of the deckhouse. He stepped over the coaming and managed to slam the door. The wind was tremendous, but what was more surprising still was its warmth; it seemed to be of brick-kiln heat as it screamed round him. He balanced himself on the heaving deck in the hot, noisy darkness, and timed his rush to the wheel, and he was only just

prepared for the extra violence of the wind when he emerged from the lee of the deckhouse. Out of that lee, too, the air was full of flying spray which drenched him and modified his impression of the heat of the air — he was aware of all this by the time he reached the wheel. There were shadowy figures there in the darkness; a white shirtsleeve waved to him to acknowledge his presence, indicating that Knyvett was there. Hornblower looked into the binnacle; it was really an effort to collect his faculties and make the correct deductions from what he could see of the swinging needle. The wind was blowing from well out to the west of north. Looking up in the darkness he could just make out that the brig was hove-to under the maintopmast staysail, of which only a corner was showing. Knyvett was shouting into his ear.

"Hurricane!"

"Likely enough," shouted Hornblower in reply. "Worse before it's better!"

A hurricane had no business to appear at this time of year, a good two months earlier than one should be expected, but that hot breath, the indications of yesterday evening, the direction of the wind at present, all seemed to prove that that was what they were experiencing. It remained to be seen whether they were right in the path of it or only on its fringe. *Pretty Jane* shuddered and lurched drunkenly as a mass of water came in over her bow, gleaming white, almost phosphorescent, as it raced aft at them; Hornblower hung on desperately as it surged past him waist deep — a nasty warning of what might be still to come. They were in very considerable danger. *Pretty Jane* might not endure the pounding she would have to undergo, and in any case, with the considerable leeway she was making they might be cast ashore, and utterly destroyed, on San Domingo or Puerto Rico or some intervening cay. The wind shrieked at them, and a combination of wind and wave laid *Pretty Jane* over, over until the deck was almost vertical, with Hornblower hanging on as his feet could gain no hold on the planking. A wave burst against her exposed bottom clean over her, cascading round them, and then she came slowly back again. No ship would be expected to endure that sort of thing for long. A muffled bang aloft, followed by a series of sharper sounds, attracted his attention to the topmast staysail just as it blew out from its gaskets and flew into ribbons which cracked like whips while they lasted. One thundering small fragment remained, whipping from the stay, just enough to keep *Pretty Jane's* starboard bow to the sea.

Daylight was coming; there was a yellow tinge all about them, shut in by the low sky overhead. As Hornblower looked aloft he saw a hump, a bubble, appear on the main yard, and the bubble promptly burst into fragments. The wind was tearing the sail from its gaskets. The process was repeated along the yard, as the wind with fingers of steel pried into the solid roll of the sail to tear it loose, rip it open, split it into ribbons, and then tear off the ribbons to whirl them away to leeward. It was hard to believe that a wind could have such power.

It was hard to believe, too, that waves could be so high. A glance at them explained at once the fantastic motion of the ship. They were appalling in their immensity. The one approaching the starboard bow was not as high as a mountain — Hornblower had used the expression 'mountain high' himself, and now, trying to estimate the height, had to admit to himself that it was an exaggeration — but it was as high as a lofty church steeple. It was a colossal ridge of water moving, not with the speed of a racehorse, but with the speed of a hurrying man, straight upon them. *Pretty Jane* lifted her bow to it, lurching and then climbing, rising ever more steeply as she lay upon the towering slope. Up — up — up; she seemed to be almost vertical as she reached the crest, where it was as if the end of the world awaited her. At the crest the wind, temporarily blanketed by the wave, flung itself upon her with redoubled force. Over she lay, over and over, while at the same time her stern heaved itself up as the crest passed under her. Down — down — down; the deck almost vertical, bows down, and almost vertical on her beam, and as she wallowed down the slope minor waves awaited her to burst over her. With the water surging round him waist deep, chest deep, Hornblower felt his legs carried away from under him and he had to hang on with every ounce of his strength to save himself.

Here was the ship's carpenter trying to say something to the captain — it was impossible to speak intelligently in that wind, but he held up one hand with the fingers spread. Five feet of water in the hold, then. But the carpenter repeated the gesture. Then he tried again. Two spreadings of the fingers — ten feet of water, then. It could hardly be the case, but it was true — the heavy heavings of the *Pretty Jane* showed she was waterlogged. Then Hornblower remembered the cargo with which she was laden. Logwood and coir; logwood floated only sluggishly, but coir was one of the most buoyant substances known. Coconuts falling into the sea

(as they often did, thanks to the palm's penchant for growing at the water's edge) floated for weeks and months, carried about by the currents, so that the wide distribution of the coconut palm was readily accounted for. It was coir that was keeping *Pretty Jane* afloat even though she was full of water. It would keep her afloat for a long time — it would outlast the *Pretty Jane*, for that matter. She would work herself to fragments before the coir allowed her to sink.

So perhaps they had another hour or two of life before them. Perhaps. Another wave, cascading green over *Pretty Jane*'s upturned side, brought a grim warning that it might not be as long as that. And amid the rumble and the roar of the bursting wave, even as he hung on desperately, he was conscious of a succession of other sounds, harder and sharper, and of a jarring of the deck under his feet. The deckhouse! It was lifting on its bolts under the impact of the water. It could not be expected to stand that battering long; it was bound to be swept away, soon. And — Hornblower's visual imagination was feverishly at work — before then its seams would be forced apart, it would fill with water. Barbara would be drowned inside it before the weight of water within tore the deckhouse from its bolts, for the waves to hurl it overside with Barbara's drowned body inside. Clinging to the binnacle Hornblower went through some seconds of mental agony, the worst he had ever known in his life. There had been times and times before when he had faced death for himself, when he had weighed chances, when he had staked his own life, but now it was Barbara's life that he was staking. To leave her in the deckhouse meant her certain death soon. The alternative was to bring her out upon the wave-swept deck. Here, tied to the mast, she would live as long as she could endure the buffeting and the exposure, until the *Pretty Jane* broke up into fragments, possibly. For himself he had played out a losing game to the bitter end more than once; now he had to brace himself to do the same for Barbara. He made the decision. On Barbara's behalf he decided to struggle on as long as was possible. Forcing himself to think logically while the stupefying wind roared round him, he made his plans. He awaited a comparatively calm moment, and then made the perilous brief journey to the foot of the mainmast. Now he worked with frantic rapidity. Two lengths of the main-topsail halliards; he had to keep his head clear to prevent his fumbling fingers from entangling them. Then two desperate journeys, first to the wheel, and then to the deckhouse. He tore open the door and stumbled in over the coaming, the lines in his hands. There were two feet of water in the deckhouse, surging about with the motion of the ship, Barbara was there; he saw her in the light from the door. She had wedged herself as well as she might in her bunk.

"Dearest!" he said. Within the deckhouse it was just possible to be heard, despite the frantic din all round.

"I'm here, dear," she replied.

Another wave burst over the *Pretty Jane* at that moment; water came pouring in through the gaping seams of the deckhouse and he could feel the whole thing lift again on its bolts and he knew a moment of wild despair at the thought that he might already be too late, that the deckhouse was going to be swept away at this moment with them in it. But it held — the surge of the water as *Pretty Jane* lay over the other way flung Hornblower against the other bulkhead.

"I must get you out of here, dear," said Hornblower, trying to keep his voice steady. "You'll be safer tied to the mainmast."

"As you wish, of course, dear," said Barbara, calmly.

"I'm going to put these lines round you," said Hornblower.

Barbara had managed to dress herself in his absence; at any rate she had some sort of dress or petticoat on. Hornblower made fast the lines about her while the ship rolled and swayed under their feet; she held her arms up for him to do so. He knotted the lines round her waist, below her tender bosom.

"Listen carefully," said Hornblower, and he told her, while they were still in the comparative calm of the deckhouse, what he wanted her to do, how she had to watch her chance, rush to the wheel, and from there to the mainmast.

"I understand, dear," said Barbara. "Kiss me once more, my very dearest."

He kissed her hurriedly, his lips against her dripping cheek. It was only the most perfunctory kiss. To Hornblower's subconscious mind Barbara in making her request was risking their lives for it — staking ten thousand future kisses against one immediate one. It was womanlike for her to do so, but odds of ten thousand to one had no appeal for Hornblower. And still she lingered.

"Dearest, I've always loved you," she said; she was speaking hurriedly and yet with no proper regard for the value of time, "I've loved no one but you in all my life. I had another husband once. I couldn't say this before because it would have been disloyal. But now — I've never loved anyone but you. Never. Only you, darling." "Yes, dear," said Hornblower. He heard the words, but at that urgent moment he could not give them their rightful consideration. "Stand here. Hold on to this. Hold on!"

It was only a lesser wave that swept by them.

"Wait for my signal!" bellowed Hornblower into Barbara's ear, and then he made the hurried dash to the binnacle. One group of men had bound themselves to the wheel.

There was a frantic moment as he looked about him. He waved, and then Barbara crossed the heaving deck as he took up on the line. He had just time to fling a bight round her and pull it tight and seize hold himself as the next crest burst over the ship. Over — over — over. Sluggishly the *Pretty Jane* wallowed up again. He had an idea that one man at least was missing from the group at the wheel, but there was no time to think about that, for there was the passage to the mainmast still to be accomplished.

At last that was done. There were four men there already, but he was able to make Barbara as secure as possible, and then himself. *Pretty Jane* lay over again, and again; it was at some time shortly after this that a fresh monstrous wave swept away the deckhouse and half the ship's rail — Hornblower saw the wreckage go off to leeward, and noted the fact, dully. He had been right in taking Barbara away from there.

It may have been the loss of the deckhouse that called his attention to the behaviour of the *Pretty Jane*. She was lying in the trough of the sea, not riding with her bows to the waves. The loss of the windage of the deckhouse, right aft, perhaps made this more noticeable. She was rolling wildly and deeply in consequence, and was being swept by the waves more thoroughly. She could not be expected to survive this for long, nor could the miserable human beings on her deck — of whom Barbara was one and he was another. The *Pretty Jane* would rack herself to pieces before long. Something was needed to keep her bows to the sea. In the normal way a small area of canvas exposed right aft would bring this about, but no canvas would stand against that wind, as had been early demonstrated. In the present circumstances the pressure of the wind against the foremast and bowsprit with their standing rigging balanced that against the mainmast, keeping her lying broadside on to wind and wave. If canvas could not be exposed aft then the windage forward must be reduced instead. The foremast should be cut away. Then the pressure on the mainmast would bring her bows on to the sea, increasing her chances, while the loss of the mast would perhaps ease the roll as well. There was no doubt about it; the mast should be cut away, instantly.

Aft there was Knyvett, bound to the wheel, no more than a few feet away; it was his decision as captain. As *Pretty Jane* wallowed to bring her deck horizontal for a moment, with water no more than knee deep over it, Hornblower waved to him. He pointed forward to the weather foremast shrouds; he gesticulated, he thought he conveyed his meaning clearly enough, but Knyvett showed no sign of understanding. He certainly made no move to act upon the suggestion. He merely gazed stupidly and then looked away. Hornblower felt a moment of fury; the next roll and submergence made up his mind for him. The discipline of the sea might be disregarded in the face of this indifference and incompetence.

But the other men beside him at the mainmast were as indifferent as Knyvett. He could not rouse them to join him in the effort. They had a momentary safety here at the mast, and they would not leave it; probably they could not understand what he had in mind. That outrageous wind was perfectly stupefying as it screamed round them, and the constant deluges of water, and the desperate need to struggle for a footing, gave them no chance to collect their thoughts.

An axe would perhaps be best to cut those shrouds, but there was no axe. The man beside him had a knife in a sheath at his belt. Hornblower put his hand on the hilt, and made himself think reasonably again. He tested the edge, found it sharp, and then unbuckled belt and all and rebuckled it about his own waist — the man offering no objection, merely gazing stupidly at him as he did so. Again there was need to plan, to think clearly, in the howling wind and the driving spray and the solid water that surged round him. He cut himself two lengths of line from the raffle about him, and made each of them fast round his chest with an end hanging free. Then he looked over to the foremast shrouds, planning again. There would be no time to think things out when the moment for action began. A length of the rail still survived its battering there — presumably the weather shrouds had acted as some sort of breakwater to it. He eyed and measured the distance. He eased

the knots that held him to the mast. He spared a glance at Barbara, forcing himself to smile. She was standing there in her bonds; the hurricane was blowing her long hair, wet though it was, straight out horizontally from her head. He put another line about her to make her secure. There was nothing else he could do. This was Bedlam, this was insanity, this was a wet, shrieking hell, and yet a hell in which he had to keep his head clear. He watched his moment. First he almost misjudged it, and had to draw back, swallowing hard in the tense excitement, before the next wave engulfed him. As it surged away he watched *Pretty Jane's* motion again, set his teeth, and cast off his bonds and made the rush up the steep deck — wave and deck offering him a lee which saved him from being blown away by the wind. He reached the rail with five seconds to spare — five seconds in which to secure himself, to knot himself to the shrouds as the crest burst over him, in a torrent of water which first swept his legs from under him, and next tore his grip loose so that for a second or two only the lines held him before an eddy enabled him to re-establish his grip.

Pretty Jane wallowed clear again. It was awkward to fasten the lanyard of the sheath knife to his wrist, but he had to consume precious moments in doing so; otherwise all his efforts so far would be wasted in ridiculous failure. Now he was sawing desperately at the shroud; the soaked fibres seemed like iron, but he felt them part little by little, a few fibres at a time. He was glad he had made sure the knife was sharp. He had half-severed the rope before the next deluge burst over him. The moment his shoulders were clear of the water he continued to saw at the rope; he could feel, as he cut, a slight variation of tension as the ship rolled and the shroud faintly slackened. He wondered if, when the rope parted, it would fly dangerously, and he decided that as long as the other shrouds held the reaction would not be too violent.

So it proved; the shroud simply vanished under his knife — the wind caught its fifty-foot length and whirled it away out of his world, presumably blowing it out as a streamer from the masthead. He set about the next, sawing away in the intervals of being submerged under the crashing waves. He cut and he hung on; he struggled for air in the driving spray, he choked and suffocated under the green water, but one shroud after another parted under his knife. The knife was losing its edge, and now he was faced with an additional problem; he had severed nearly every shroud — the aftermost ones — within reach and soon he would have to shift his position to reach the foremost ones. But he did not have to solve that problem after all. At the next roll and the next wave, actually while he was struggling under water, he was conscious of a series of shocks transmitted through the fabric of the ship through his clutching hands — four minor ones and then a violent one. As the wave fell away from him his swimming eyes could see what had happened. The four remaining shrouds had parted under the strain, one, two, three, four, and then the mast had snapped off; looking back over his shoulder he could see the stump standing eight feet above the deck.

The difference it made to the *Pretty Jane* was instantly apparent. The very next roll ended half-heartedly in a mere violent pitch, as the shrieking wind, acting upon her mainmast, pushed her stern round and brought her bows to the sea, while the loss of the leverage of the lofty foremast reduced the amplitude of the roll in any case. The sea that broke over Hornblower's head was almost negligible in violence and quantity. Hornblower could breathe, he could look about him. He observed something else; the foremast, still attached to the ship by the lee shrouds, was now dragging ahead of her as she made stern way through the water under the impulse of the wind. It was acting as a sea anchor, a very slight restraint upon the extravagance of her motions; moreover, as the point of attachment was on the port side, she was slightly turned so that she met the waves a trifle on her port bow, so that she was riding at the best possible angle, with a very slight roll and a long pitch. Waterlogged though she was, she still had a chance — and Hornblower on the starboard bow was comparatively sheltered and able to contemplate his handiwork with some sort of pride.

He looked across at the pitiful groups of people, clustering bound to the mainmast and the wheel and binnacle; Barbara was out of his sight in the group at the mainmast, hidden from him by the men there, and he was consumed with a sudden anxiety lest further mishap might have befallen her. He began to cast himself loose to return to her, and it was then, with the cessation of the all-consuming preoccupation regarding the ship, that a sudden recollection struck him, so forcibly that he actually paused with his fingers on the knots. Barbara had kissed him, in the lee of the vanished deckhouse. And she had said — Hornblower remembered well what she had said; it had lain stored in his memory until this moment, awaiting his attention when there should be a lull in the need for violent action. She had not merely said that she loved him; she had said she had never loved anyone else. Hornblower, huddled on the deck of a waterlogged ship with a hurricane shrieking

round him, was suddenly aware that an old hurt was healed, that he would never again feel that dull ache of jealousy of Barbara's first husband, never, as long as he lived.

That was enough to bring him back to the world of practical affairs. The remaining length of his life might well be measured in hours. He would more likely than not be dead by nightfall, or by tomorrow at latest. And so would Barbara. So would Barbara. The absurd tiny feeling of well-being that had sprung up within him was instantly destroyed and replaced by a frantic sorrow and a despair that was almost overwhelming. He had to exert all his will-power to make himself master of his drooping body again, and of his weary mind. He had to act and to think, as though he was not exhausted and as though he did not despair. The discovery that the sheath knife still dangled at his wrist awoke the self-contempt that invariably stimulated him; he untied the lanyard and secured the knife in its sheath before setting himself to study the motion of the *Pretty Jane*.

He cast himself loose and dashed for the mainmast. The tremendous wind might well have carried him clean aft and overboard, but the upheaving of the stern checked his progress sufficiently for him to swing into the lee of the group at the mainmast and to clutch one of the lines there and hang on. The men there, hanging apathetic in their lashings, spared him hardly a glance and made no move to help him. Barbara, her wet hair streaming out sideways, had a smile and a hand for him, and he forced his way into the group beside her and bound himself next to her. He took her hand in his again, and was reassured by the return of the pressure he gave it. Then there was nothing to do except to remain alive.

Part of the process of remaining alive was not to think about being thirsty, as the day wore on and the yellow daylight was replaced by black night. It was hard not to do so, once he had realised how thirsty he was, and now he had a new torment when he thought that Barbara was suffering in that way, too. There was nothing he could do about that at all, nothing, except to stand in his bonds and endure along with her. With the coming of night, however, the wind lost its brick-kiln heat and blew almost chilly, so that Hornblower found himself shivering a little. He turned in his bonds and put his arms round Barbara, holding her to him to conserve her bodily warmth. It was during the night that he was troubled by the behaviour of the man next to him, who persisted in leaning against him, more and more heavily, so that repeatedly Hornblower had to take his arms from around Barbara and thrust him fiercely away. At the third or fourth of those thrusts he felt the man fall limply away from him and guessed he was dead. That made a little more room about the mast, and he could put Barbara squarely against it, where she could lean back with her shoulders supported. Hornblower could guess that she would find that a help, judging by the agonising cramp in his legs, and the utter weariness of every part of his body. There was a temptation, a terrible temptation, to give up, to let everything go, to let himself fall to the deck and die like the man beside him. But he would not; that was for the sake of the wife in his arms more than for himself; because of his love rather than because of his pride.

With the change in the temperature of the wind came a gradual moderation in its violence; Hornblower, during those black hours, would not allow himself to hope at first, but he became more and more convinced of it as the night wore on. At last there was no denying the fact. The wind was dying away — the hurricane was moving away from them, most likely. Some time during the night it was only a strong gale, and later on Hornblower, lifting his head, made himself admit that it was nothing more than a fresh breeze which would call for only a single reef — a topgallant breeze, in fact. The motion of the *Pretty Jane* continued to be violent, as was only to be expected; the sea would take much longer to die away than would the wind. She was still pitching and plunging wildly, heaving up and racing down, but she was not being swept by the waves to nearly such a great extent, even allowing for her improved behaviour, bows to sea. It was not great cataracts of water that came surging by them, dragging them against their bonds to lacerate their skin. The water ceased to be waist high; later on it only surged past their knees and the spray had ceased to drive past them.

With that Hornblower was able to notice something else. It was raining, raining in torrents. If he turned his face to the sky a few precious drops fell into his parched, open mouth.

"Rain!" he said into Barbara's ear.

He released himself from her arms — he did it actually roughly, so anxious was he not to waste a single second of this rainstorm. He took off his shirt — it tore into rags as he dragged it from the lines that encompassed him — and held it out in the invisible rain that lashed down on them in the darkness. He must not waste a second. The shirt was wet with sea water; he wrung it out, working over it feverishly, alternately with spreading it in the rain. He squeezed a fragment into his mouth; it was still salt. He tried again. He had never wished for

anything so much as now, for the rainstorm to continue in this violence and for the sea spray not to be driving too thickly. The water he wrung from the fragment of shirt could be considered fresh now. He felt for Barbara's face with the sopping wet object, pressing it against her.

"Drink!" he croaked into her ear.

When she put up her hands to it he guessed from her movements that she understood, that she was sucking the precious liquid from the fabric. He wanted her to hurry, to drink all she could, while the rain persisted; his hands were shaking with desire. In the darkness she would not know that he was waiting so anxiously. She yielded the shirt back to him at last, and he spread it to the rain again, hardly able to endure the delay. Then he could press it to his mouth, head back, and gulp and swallow, half mad with pleasure. The difference it made to squeeze that water into his mouth was beyond measure.

He felt strength and hope returning — the strength came with the hope. Perhaps that shirt held five or six wineglassfuls of water; it was sufficient to make this vast difference. He spread the shirt again above his head, to soak it again in the torrential rain, and gave it to Barbara, and when she returned it to him in the darkness he repeated the process for himself. And when he had squeezed it almost dry he realised that while he was doing so the rain had ceased, and he felt a moment's regret. He should have saved that wet shirt as a reserve, but he ceased to chide himself. Most of the water in it would have drained out, and there was still enough spray in the air to have made the remainder undrinkable in a few minutes.

But now he could think better; he could soberly decide that the wind was moderating fast — the rainstorm itself was an indication that the hurricane had gone on its way, leaving in its wake the prodigious rains that were not unusual then. And there, over the starboard bow, was the faintest hint of pink in the sky, not the threatening yellow of the hurricane, but the dawn of a different day. He felt for the knots that held him bound, and by slow degrees he fumbled them undone. As the last one released him he staggered back with the heave of the ship, and sank back with a thump and a splash into a sitting position on the wet deck. That was a fantastic pleasure, to sit down, hip deep in the water still washing over the deck. Just to sit, and very slowly flex and straighten his knees, to feel life returning into his dead thighs; that was heaven, and it would be a seventh heaven to put his head down and allow sleep to overcome him.

That was something he must not do, all the same. Sleeplessness and physical fatigue were things that must be stoically ignored, as long as there was a chance that they would survive, and daylight increasing round them. He heaved himself up to his feet and walked back to the mast on legs that would hardly obey him. He released Barbara, and she at least could sit down, deck awash or not. He eased her until her back was to the mast and then passed a line around her again. She could sleep in that fashion; she was already so weary that she did not notice — or she gave no sign of it if she did — the doubled-up corpse that lay within a yard of her. He cut the corpse loose and dragged it with the heave of the ship out of the way, before attending to the other three there. They were already fumbling with the knots of their lashings, and as Hornblower began to cut the lines first one and then another opened their mouths and croaked at him.

"Water!" they said. "Water!"

They were as helpless and as dependent as nestlings. It was apparent to Hornblower that not one of them had had the sense, during that roaring rainstorm in the dark, to soak his shirt; they could hardly have failed to have held up open mouths to the rain, but what they would catch then would be a trifle. He looked round the horizon. One or two distant squalls were visible there, but there was no predicting when or if they would pass over the *Pretty Jane*.

"You'll have to wait for that, my lads," he said.

He made his way aft to the other group around the wheel and binnacle. There was a corpse here still hanging in its lashing — Knyvett. Hornblower took note of the fact, with the terse requiem that perhaps with death overpowering him then might be some excuse for his not attempting to cut away the foremast. Another corpse lay on the deck, among the feet of the six survivors here. Nine men had survived of the crew of sixteen, and apparently four had disappeared entirely, washed overboard during the night, or perhaps during the night before. Hornblower recognised the second mate and the steward; the group, even the second mate, were croaking for water just like the others, and to them Hornblower made the same grim reply.

"Get those dead men overboard," he added.

He took stock of the situation. Looking over the side he could see that *Pretty Jane* had about three feet of freeboard remaining, as close as he could judge while she was pitching extravagantly in the still-turbulent sea. He was conscious now, as he walked about right aft, of dull thumpings under his feet corresponding to the heave and the roll. That meant floating objects battering on the underside of the deck as they were flung up against it by the water inside surging about. The wind was steady from the north-east — the trade wind had reasserted itself after the temporary interruption of the hurricane; the sky was still gloomy and overcast, but Hornblower could feel in his bones that the barometer must be rising rapidly. Somewhere down to leeward, fifty miles away, a hundred miles, two hundred perhaps, was the chain of the Antilles — he could not guess how far, or in what direction, *Pretty Jane* had drifted during the storm. There was still a chance for them, or there would be if he could solve the water problem.

He turned to the tottering crew.

"Get the hatches up," he ordered. "You, Mr Mate, where are the water casks stowed?"

"Amidships," said the mate, running a dry tongue over his dry lips at the thought of water. "Aft of the main hatchway."

"Let's see," said Hornblower.

Water casks constructed to keep fresh water in would also perhaps keep sea water out. But no cask was ever quite tight; every cask leaked to some extent, and only a small amount of water percolating in would make the contents unfit to drink. And casks that had been churned about for two nights and a day by the surging sea water below decks would probably be stove in, every one of them.

"It's only a faint hope," said Hornblower, anxious to minimise the almost certain disappointment ahead of them; he looked round again to see what chance there was of a rain-squall coming.

When they looked down the open hatchway they could appreciate the difficulties. The hatchway was jammed with a couple of bales of coir; as they watched them they could see them move uneasily with the motion of the ship. The water that had invaded the ship had floated up the cargo — *Pretty Jane* was actually supported by the upward pressure of the cargo on the underside of the deck. It was a miracle that she had not broken her back. And there was not a chance of going down there. It would be certain death to venture amid those surging bales. There was a general groan of disappointment from the group round the hatchway.

But another possibility was present in Hornblower's mind, and he turned upon the steward.

"There were green coconuts for the use of the cabin," he said. "Were there any left?"

"Yes, sir. Four or five dozen." The man could hardly speak, with thirst, or weakness, or excitement.

"In the lazarette?"

"Yes, sir."

"In a sack?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come along," said Hornblower.

Coconuts floated as lightly as coir, and were more watertight than any cask.

They pried up the after-hatch cover, and looked down at the heaving water below. There was no cargo there; the bulkhead had stood the strain. The distance down to the surface corresponded to the three-foot freeboard remaining to *Pretty Jane*. There were things to be seen there — almost at once a wooden piggin came floating into sight, and the surface was nearly covered with fragments. Then something else floated into view — a coconut. Apparently the sack had not been fastened — Hornblower had hoped he might find a whole sackful floating there. He leaned far down and scooped it up. As he rose to his feet again with the thing in his hand there was a simultaneous wordless croak from the whole group; a dozen hands stretched out for it, and Hornblower realised that he must maintain order.

"Stand back!" he said, and when the men still advanced on him he pulled out his sheath knife.

"Stand back! I'll kill the first man to lay a hand on me!" he said. He knew himself to be snarling like a wild beast, his teeth bared with the intensity of his feeling, and he knew that he would stand no chance in fight, one against nine.

"Come now, lads," he said. "We'll have to make these last. We'll ration 'em out. Fair divs all round. See how many more you can find."

The force of his personality asserted itself; so did what remained of the common sense of the crew, and they drew back. Soon three men were kneeling round the hatchway, with the others leaning precariously over them to look over their shoulders.

"There's one!" croaked a voice.

An arm went down and a coconut was scooped up.

"Give it here," said Hornblower, and he was obeyed without question; another was already visible, and another after that. They began to pile up at Hornblower's feet, a dozen, fifteen, twenty, twenty-three of the precious things, before they ceased to appear further.

"With luck we'll find some more later," said Hornblower. He looked round the group, and over at Barbara huddled at the foot of the mainmast. "Eleven of us. Half a one each for today. Another half each tomorrow. And I'll go without for today."

No one questioned his decision — partly, perhaps, because they were all too anxious to wet their lips. The first coconut was chopped open at the end, with desperate care lest a drop be spilt, and the first man took a drink. There was no chance at all of his drinking more than his half, with everyone grouped round him, and the man destined for the other half snatching it from his lips at every sip to see how far down the surface had sunk. The men forced to wait were wild with eagerness, but they had to wait all the same. Hornblower could not trust them to make a division without fighting or waste unless he was supervising. After the last man had drunk he took the remaining half over to Barbara.

"Drink this, dear," he said, as at the touch of his hand she blinked awake from her heavy doze. "

She drank eagerly before she took the nut from her lips.

"You've had some, dear?" she asked.

"Yes, dear, I've had mine," said Hornblower steadily.

When he returned to the group they were scraping the thin jelly out from inside the nuts.

"Don't damage these shells, lads," he said. "We'll need 'em when we get a rain-squall. And we'll put those nuts under Her Ladyship's guard. We can trust her."

They obeyed him again.

"We got two more up while you was away, sir," volunteered one of the men.

Hornblower peered down the hatchway at the litter-covered water. Another idea came up into his mind, and he turned to the steward again.

"Her Ladyship sent a chest of food on board," he said. "Food in tin boxes. It was put aft here somewhere. Do you know where?"

"It was right aft, sir. Under the tiller ropes."

"M'm," said Hornblower.

As he thought about it a sudden motion of the ship tossed the water below up in a fountain through the hatchway. But it ought to be possible to reach that chest, break it open, and bring up its contents. A strong man, able to stay submerged for long periods, could do it, if he did not mind being flung about by the send of the water below.

"We'd have something better to eat than coconut jelly if we got those boxes up," he said.

"I'll have a go, sir," said a young seaman, and Hornblower was inexpressibly relieved. He did not want to go down there himself.

"Good lad," he said. "Put a line round yourself before you go down. Then we can haul you out if we have to."

They were setting about their preparations when Hornblower checked them.

"Wait. Look for'rard!" he said.

There was a rain-squall a mile away. They could see it, a vast pillar of water to windward streaming down from the sky, well defined; the cloud was lower whence it fell, and the surface of the sea which received it was a different grey from the rest. It was moving down towards them — no, not quite. The centre was heading for a point some distance on their beam, as everyone could see after a moment's study. There was an explosion of blasphemy from the grouped hands as they watched.

"We'll get the tail of it, by God!" said the mate.

"Make the most of it when it comes," said Hornblower.

For three long minutes they watched it approach. A cable's length away it seemed to stand still, even though they could feel the freshening breeze around them. Hornblower had run to Barbara's side.

"Rain," he said.

Barbara turned her face to the mast, and bent down and fumbled under her skirt. A moment's struggle brought down a petticoat, and she stepped out of it and did her best to wring the salt damp out of it as they waited. Then came a few drops, and then the full deluge. Precious rain; ten shirts and a petticoat were extended to it, wrung out, re-extended, wrung out again, until the wringings tasted fresh. Everyone could drink, madly, with the rain roaring about them. After two minutes of it Hornblower was shouting to the crew to fill the empty coconut shells, and a few men had sense and public spirit enough to wring their shirts into them before returning to the ecstasy of drinking again — no one wanted to waste a single second of this precious rain. But it passed as quickly as it came; they could see the squall going away over the quarter, as far out of their reach as if it were raining in the Sahara Desert. But the young hands of the crew were laughing and joking now; there was an end to their care and their apathy. There was not one man on board except Hornblower who spared a thought for the possibility, the probability, that this might be the only rain-squall to touch the ship for the next week. There was urgent need for action, even though every joint and muscle in his body ached even though his mind was clouded with weariness. He made himself think; he made himself rally his strength. He cut short the silly laughter, and turned on the man who had volunteered to venture down into the steerage.

"Put two men to tend your line. The steward had better be one of 'em," he said. "Mr Mate, come for'rard with me. We want to get sail on this ship as soon as may be."

That was the beginning of a voyage which was destined to become legendary, just as did the hurricane which had just passed — it was called Hornblower's Hurricane, singled out not only because Hornblower was involved in it but also because its unexpected arrival caused widespread damage. Hornblower never thought that the voyage itself was particularly notable, even though it was made in a waterlogged hulk precariously balanced upon bales of coir. It was only a matter of getting the hulk before the wind; a spare jib-boom (the only spare spar surviving the storm) made a jury mast when fished to the stump of the foremast, and the sacking from coir bales provided sails. Spread on the jury foremast these enabled them to get the *Pretty Jane* before the trade wind, to creep along at a mile an hour while they set to work on extemporising aftersails that doubled her speed.

There were no navigating instruments — even the compass had been dashed from its gimbals during the storm — and on the first two days they had no idea where they were, except that somewhere to leeward lay the chain of the Antilles, but the third day proved fine and clear and dawn had hardly broken before a hand at the mainmast-head saw the faintest, tiniest dark streak on the horizon far ahead. It was land; it might be the high mountains of San Domingo far off, or the low mountains of Puerto Rico somewhat nearer; there was no knowing at present, and even when the sun had set they were still ignorant — and they were thirsty, with small appetite for the meagre ration of corned beef that Hornblower doled out to them from the recovered stores.

And despite fatigue they could sleep that night on their coir mattresses on the deck that an occasional small wave still swept. Next morning the land was nearer still, a low profile that seemed to indicate it might be Puerto Rico, and it was in the afternoon that they saw the fishing boat. It headed for them, puzzled at the strange vessel bearing down upon it, and it was not long before it was alongside, the mulatto fishermen staring at the group of strange figures waving to them. Hornblower had to urge his dazed mind, stupid with lack of sleep and fatigue and hunger, to remember his Spanish as he hailed them. They had a breaker of water on board, and they had a jar of cold garbanzos as well; there was a can of corned beef to add to the feast. Barbara caught, even though she spoke no Spanish, two words of the excited conversation that went on.

"Puerto Rico?" she asked.

"Yes, dear," said Hornblower. "Not very surprising — and much more convenient for us than San Domingo. I wish I could remember the name of the Captain-General there — I had dealings with him in the affair of the *Estrella del Sur*. He was a marquis. The Marques de — de — Dearest, why don't you lie down and close your eyes? You're worn out."

He was shocked anew at her pallor and look of distress.

"I'm well enough, thank you, dear," replied Barbara, even though the strained tone of her voice denied her words. It was one more proof of her indomitable spirit.

It was when they were discussing what to do next that the second mate showed the first sign of any spirit. They could all desert the waterlogged hulk and sail into Puerto Rico in the fishing boat, but he stoutly refused to do so. He knew the law about salvage, and there might be some value still in the poor hull, and certainly in its cargo. He would work the *Pretty Jane* in tomorrow himself, and he insisted on staying on board with the hands.

Hornblower faced a decision of a sort he had never yet encountered in a varied career. To leave the ship now savoured of desertion, but there was Barbara to think of. And his first reaction, that he would not dream of deserting his men, was promptly ended by his reminding himself that they were not 'his men' at all.

"You're only a passenger, My Lord," said the mate — it was odd how 'My Lord' seemed to come naturally again now that they were in touch with civilisation.

"That's so," agreed Hornblower. Nor could he possibly condemn Barbara to another night on the deck of this waterlogged hulk.

So they came sailing into San Juan de Puerto Rico, two years after Hornblower had last visited the place in very different circumstances. Not unnaturally their arrival set the whole place in an uproar. Messengers sped to the Fortaleza, and it was only a few minutes later that a figure appeared on the quay which Hornblower's swimming eyes contrived to recognise, tall and thin, with a thin moustache.

"Mendez-Castillo," he said, saving Hornblower any further trouble about remembering his name. "It grieves me greatly to see Your Excellencies in such distress, even while I have much pleasure in welcoming Your Excellency again to Puerto Rico."

Some sort of formalities had to be observed, even in these conditions.

"Barbara, my dear, allow me to present Señor — Major — Mendez-Castillo, aide-de-camp to His Excellency the Captain-General." Then he continued in Spanish. "My wife, la Baronesa Hornblower."

Mendez-Castillo bowed deeply, his eyes still busy estimating the extent of the weakness of the new arrivals. Then he reached the very important decision.

"If Your Excellencies are agreeable, I would suggest that your formal welcome by His Excellency should be postponed until Your Excellencies are better prepared for it."

"We are agreeable," said Hornblower. In his exasperation he was about to burst out violently regarding Barbara's need for rest and care, but Mendez-Castillo, now that the point of etiquette was settled, was all consideration.

"Then if Your Excellencies will give yourselves the trouble of stepping down into my boat I shall have the pleasure of escorting you to make your informal entrance into the Palace of Santa Catalina. Their Excellencies will receive you, but formal etiquette need not be observed, and Your Excellencies will be able to recover from the dreadful experiences I fear Your Excellencies have undergone. Would Your Excellencies be so kind as to come this way?"

"One moment, first, if you please, señor. The men out there in the ship. They need food and water. They may need help."

"I will give an order for the port authorities to send out to them what they need."

"Thank you."

So they went down into the boat for the brief trip across the harbour; despite his mortal fatigue Hornblower was able to note that every fishing boat and coasting craft there was hurriedly getting to sea, presumably to examine the chances of salvaging or plundering the *Pretty Jane*; the second mate had been perfectly right in refusing to leave her. But he did not care, now. He put his arm about Barbara as she drooped beside him. Then up through the water-gate of the Palace, with attentive servants awaiting them. Here were His Excellency and a dark, beautiful woman, his wife: she took Barbara under her protection instantly. Here were cool, dark rooms, and more servants scurrying about in obedience to the orders His Excellency volleyed out. Valets and maids and body servants.

"This is Manuel, my principal valet, Your Excellency. Any orders Your Excellency may give him will be obeyed as if they came from me. My physician has been sent for and will be here at any moment. So now my wife and I

will withdraw and leave Your Excellencies to rest, assuring Your Excellencies that our sincerest hope is for your rapid recovery."

The crowd thinned away. For one more moment Hornblower had to keep his faculties alert, for the doctor came bustling in, to feel pulses and to look at tongues. He produced a case of lancets and was making preparations to draw blood from Barbara and it was only with difficulty that Hornblower stopped him, and with further difficulty prevented him from substituting leeches for venesection. He could not believe that bleeding would hasten the cure of the lacerations Barbara bore on her body. He thanked the doctor and saw him out of the room again with a sigh of relief and mental reservations regarding the medicines he promised to send in. The maids were waiting to relieve Barbara of the few rags she wore.

"Do you think you will sleep, darling? Is there anything more I can ask for?"

"I shall sleep, dearest." Then the smile on Barbara's weary face was replaced by something more like a grin, perfectly un-ladylike. "And as nobody else but us here can speak English I am free to tell you that I love you, dearest. I love you, I love you, more than any words that I know can tell you."

Servants or no servants, he kissed her then before he left her to go into the adjoining room where the valets awaited him. His body was crisscrossed with angry welts still raw where, during the storm, the force of the waves had flung him against the ropes that held him to the mast. They were horribly painful as he was sponged with warm water. He knew that Barbara's sweet, tender body must be marked in the same fashion. But Barbara was safe; she would soon be well, and she had said that she loved him. — And — and she had said more than that. What she had told him in that deckhouse had drawn out all the pain from a mental wound far, far, deeper than the physical hurts he now bore. He was a happy man as he lay down in the silk nightshirt with the elaborate heraldic embroidery which the valet had ready for him. His sleep was at first deep and untroubled, but conscience awoke him before dawn, and he went out on to the balcony in the first light, to see the *Pretty Jane* creeping into the harbour, escorted by a dozen small craft. It irked him that he was not on board, until he thought again of the wife sleeping in the next room.

There were happy hours still to come. That balcony was deep and shaded, looking out over harbour and sea, and there he sat in his dressing-gown an hour later, rocking idly in his chair, with Barbara opposite him, drinking sweet chocolate and eating sweet rolls.

"It is good to be alive," said Hornblower; there was a potency, an inner meaning, about those words now — it was no hackneyed turn of speech.

"It is good to be with you," said Barbara.

"*Pretty Jane* came in this morning safely," said Hornblower.

"I peeped out at her through my window," said Barbara.

Mendez-Castillo was announced, presumably having been warned that His Excellency's guests were awake and breakfasting. He made enquiries on behalf of His Excellency, to receive every assurance of a rapid recovery, and he announced that news of the recent events would be despatched at once to Jamaica.

"Most kind of His Excellency," said Hornblower. "Now, as regards the crew of the *Pretty Jane*. Are they being looked after?"

"They have been received into the military hospital. The port authorities have stationed a guard on board the vessel."

"That is very well indeed," said Hornblower, telling himself that now he need feel no more responsibility.

The morning could be an idle one now, only broken by a visit from the doctor, to be dismissed, after a new feeling of pulses and looking at tongues, with grateful thanks for his un-tasted medicines. There was dinner at two o'clock, a vast meal served ceremoniously but only sampled. A siesta, and then supper eaten with more appetite, and a peaceful night.

Next morning was busier, for there was now the question of clothes to be dealt with. Dressmakers were sent in to Barbara by Her Excellency, so that Hornblower found all the mental exercise he needed in acting as interpreter over matters demanding a vocabulary he did not possess, and shirt-makers and tailors sent in to him by His Excellency. The tailor was somewhat disappointed on being told that Hornblower did not wish him to make a complete uniform for a British Rear Admiral, gold lace and all. As a half-pay officer, with no appointment, Hornblower did not need anything of the sort.

After the tailor came a deputation, the mate and two members of the crew of *Pretty Jane*.

"We've come to enquire after Your Lordship's health, and Her Ladyship's," said the mate.

"Thank you. You can see Her Ladyship and I are quite recovered," said Hornblower. "And you? Are you being well looked after?"

"Very well, thank you."

"You're master of the *Pretty Jane* now," commented Hornblower.

"Yes, My Lord."

It was a strange first command for a man to have.

"What are you going to do with her?"

"I'm having her hauled out today, My Lord. Maybe she can be patched up. But she'll have lost all her copper."

"Very likely."

"I expect I'll have to sell her for what she'll fetch, hull and cargo," said the mate, with a note of bitterness in his voice — that was to be expected in a man who had received his first command only to face losing it instantly.

"I hope you're lucky," said Hornblower.

"Thank you, My Lord." There was a moment's hesitation before the next words came. "And I have to thank Your Lordship for all you did."

"The little I did I did for my own sake and Her Ladyship's," said Hornblower.

He could smile as he said it; already, in these blissful surroundings, the memory of the howl of the hurricane and the crash of the waves sweeping *Pretty Jane's* deck was losing its painful acuteness. And the two seamen could grin back at him. Here in a vice-regal palace it was hard to remember how he had stood, with bared teeth and drawn knife, disputing with them possession of a single green coconut. It was pleasant that the interview could end with smiles and goodwill, so that Hornblower could lapse back into delightful idleness with Barbara beside him.

Seamstresses and tailors must have worked hard and long, for next day some of the results of their efforts were ready to be tried on.

"My Spanish grandee!" said Barbara, eyeing her husband dressed in coat and breeches of Puerto Rican cut.

"My lovely señora," answered Hornblower with a bow. Barbara was wearing comb and mantilla.

"The señoras of Puerto Rico wear no stays, fortunately," said Barbara. "I could bear nothing of the sort at present."

That was one of the few allusions Barbara made regarding the lacerations and bruises that she bore all over her body. She was of a Spartan breed, trained in a school which scorned to admit physical weakness. Even in making her mock-formal curtsy to him as she spoke she was careful to betray none of the pain the movement cost her; Hornblower could hardly guess at it.

"What am I to tell Mendez-Castillo today when he comes to make his enquiries?" asked Hornblower.

"I think, dear, that now we can safely be received by Their Excellencies," said Barbara.

Here in little Puerto Rico was to be found all the magnificence and ceremonial of the court of Spain. The Captain-General was the representative of a king in whose veins ran the blood of Bourbons and Habsburgs, of Ferdinand and Isabella, and his person had to be surrounded by the same ritual and etiquette, lest the mystic sanctity of his master should be called into question. Even Hornblower did not come to realise, until he began to discuss the arrangements with Mendez-Castillo, the enormous condescension, the extreme strain put upon palace etiquette, involved in the back-stairs visit Their Excellencies had paid to the battered castaways who had claimed their hospitality. Now that was all to be forgotten in their formal reception.

There was amusement to be found in Mendez-Castillo's apologetic and nervous mentioning of the fact that Hornblower could not expect the same formalities as had welcomed him on his last visit. Then he had been a visiting Commander-in-Chief; now he was only a half-pay officer, a distinguished visitor (Mendez-Castillo hastened to add) but an unofficial one. It dawned upon him that Mendez-Castillo expected him to flare out and to be offended at being told that this time he would be received only by flourishes and not by a full band, by the salutes of the sentries instead of by the turning out of the whole guard. He was able to confirm his reputation for tact by declaring quite truthfully — his candour was mistaken for the most diplomatic concealment of his own feelings — that he did not care in the least.

So it turned out. Barbara and Hornblower were smuggled unobtrusively out of the postern gate of the Palace and escorted into a boat, to be rowed round to the massive water-gate where Hornblower had made his

previous entrance. There with slow and solemn step they passed in through the gate, Barbara on Hornblower's left arm. On either hand the sentries presented arms and Hornblower acknowledged the salute by taking off his hat. As they came into the courtyard beyond they were welcomed by the flourishes that Mendez-Castillo had promised. Even Hornblower's tone-deaf ear could assure him that there was no stinting of those flourishes. Long drawn out, continued until Hornblower wondered how the trumpeter's breath could last so long; and he could guess from the variation between squeakiness and dullness that the trumpeter was displaying a considerable virtuosity. Two more sentries stood at the foot of the steps beyond, presenting arms; the trumpeter stood at the top of the steps over to one side, and he put his instrument to his lips for a further series of fanfares as Hornblower removed his hat again and he and Barbara began the climb. Tremendous, those flourishes were; even though Hornblower was bracing himself to make his ceremonial entrance into the great hall he could not help but dart a glance at the trumpeter. One glance called for a second glance. Pigtailed and powdered; dressed in a glittering uniform; what was there about that figure to demand his attention? He felt Barbara on his arm stiffen and miss her step. The trumpeter took his instrument from his lips. It was — it was Hudnutt. Hornblower almost dropped his hat with surprise.

But they were over the threshold of the great door, and he must walk steadily forward with Barbara if he were not to ruin all the precious ceremonial. A voice bellowed their names. Ahead of them at the end of an avenue of halberdiers were two chairs of state backed by a semicircle of uniforms and court gowns, with Their Excellencies sitting awaiting them. On Hornblower's last visit the Captain-General had risen and taken seven steps forward to meet him, but that had been when he was a Commander-in-Chief; now he and Barbara were only private persons and Their Excellencies remained sitting, as he and Barbara went through the moves they had been instructed to make. He bowed to His Excellency, having already been presented to him; he waited while Barbara was presented and made her two curtsies; he bowed again as he was presented to Her Excellency; then they drew a little to one side to await Their Excellencies' words.

"A great pleasure to welcome Lord Hornblower again," said His Excellency.

"An equally great pleasure to make the acquaintance of Lady Hornblower," said Her Excellency.

Hornblower went through the form of consulting with Barbara as to how he should reply.

"My wife and I are deeply appreciative of the great honour done us by our reception," said Hornblower.

"You are our welcome guests," said His Excellency, with a finality in his tone that indicated the end of the conversation. Hornblower bowed again, twice, and Barbara went down in two more curtsies, and then they withdrew diagonally so as to allow Their Excellencies no glimpse of their backs. Mendez-Castillo was on hand to present them to other guests, but Hornblower had first to pour out to Barbara his astonishment at the recent encounter.

"Did you see the trumpeter, dear?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Barbara, in an expressionless tone. "It was Hudnutt."

"Amazing," went on Hornblower. "Extraordinary. I'd never have believed he was capable of it. He broke out of prison and he climbed that fence and he got himself out of Jamaica over to Puerto Rico — Quite remarkable."

"Yes," said Barbara.

Hornblower turned to Mendez-Castillo. "Your — your trompetero," he said; he was guessing at the Spanish word for 'trumpeter', and he put his hand up before his mouth in a gesture that indicated what he was trying to say.

"You thought he was good?" asked Mendez-Castillo.

"Superb," said Hornblower. "Who is he?"

"The best of the musicians in His Excellency's orchestra," answered Mendez-Castillo.

Hornblower looked keenly at him, but Mendez-Castillo preserved a diplomatic lack of expression.

"A fellow countryman of yours, sir?" persisted Hornblower.

Mendez-Castillo spread his hands and elevated his shoulders.

"Why should I concern myself about him, My Lord?" he countered. "In any case, art knows no frontiers."

"No," said Hornblower. "I suppose not. Frontiers are elastic in these days. For instance, señor, I cannot remember if a convention exists between your government and mine regarding the mutual return of deserters."

"A strange coincidence!" said Mendez-Castillo. "I was investigating that very question a few days ago — quite idly, I assure you, My Lord. And I found that no such convention exists. There have been many occasions when, as a matter of goodwill, deserters have been handed back. But most lamentably, My Lord; His Excellency has altered his views in that respect since a certain ship — the *Estrella del Sur*, whose name you may possibly recall, My Lord — was seized as a slaver outside this very harbour in circumstances that His Excellency found peculiarly irritating."

There was no hostility; nor was there any hint of glee in Mendez-Castillo's expression as he made this speech. He might as well have been discussing the weather.

"I appreciate His Excellency's kindness and hospitality even more now," said Hornblower. He hoped he was giving no indication that he was a man who had just been hoist by his own petard.

"I will convey that information to His Excellency," said Mendez-Castillo. "Meanwhile there are many guests who are anxious to make Your Lordship's acquaintance and that of Her Ladyship."

Later in the evening it was Mendez-Castillo who came to Hornblower with a message from Her Excellency, to the effect that the Marquesa quite understood that Barbara might be tired, not having fully recovered yet from her recent experiences, and suggesting that if Her Ladyship and His Lordship chose to retire informally Their Excellencies would understand; and it was Mendez-Castillo who guided them to the far end of the room and through an unobtrusive door to where a back stairs led to their suite. The maid allotted to attend to Barbara was waiting up.

"Ask the maid to go, please," said Barbara. "I can look after myself."

Her tone was still flat and expressionless, and Hornblower looked at her anxiously in fear lest her fatigue should be too much for her. But he did what she asked.

"Can I help in any way, dear?" he asked as the maid withdrew.

"You can stay and talk to me, if you will," answered Barbara.

"With pleasure, of course," said Hornblower. There was something strange about this situation. He tried to think of some topic to relieve the tension. "I still can hardly believe it about Hudnutt —"

"It is about Hudnutt that I wanted to speak," said Barbara. There was something positively harsh about her voice. She was standing more stiffly and more rigidly than usual — no back could ever be straighter — and she was meeting Hornblower's eyes with a kind of fixed stare like a soldier at attention awaiting sentence of death.

"Whatever is the matter, dearest?"

"You are going to hate me," said Barbara.

"Never! Never!"

"You don't know what it is I'm going to tell you."

"Nothing you could tell me —"

"Don't say that yet! Wait until you hear. I set Hudnutt free. It was I who arranged for his escape."

The words came like sudden forked lightning. Or it was as if in a dead calm the main-topsail yard had fallen without warning from its slings on to the deck.

"Dearest," said Hornblower, unbelieving, "you're tired. Why don't you —"

"Do you think I'm delirious?" asked Barbara. Her voice was still unlike anything Hornblower had ever heard; so was the brief, bitter laugh that accompanied her words. "I could be. This is the end of all my happiness."

"Dearest —" said Hornblower.

"Oh —" said Barbara. There was a sudden overwhelming tenderness in that single sound, and her rigid attitude relaxed, but instantly she stiffened again and snatched back the hands she had held out to him. "Please listen. I've told you now. I set Hudnutt free — I set him free!"

There could be no doubting that she meant what she said, truth or not. And Hornblower, standing unable to move, staring at her, gradually reached the realisation that it was true after all. The realisation seeped through the weak places in his unbelief, and as he thought of each piece of evidence it was as if he were marking off a new height in a rising tide.

"That last night at Admiralty House!" he said.

"Yes."

"You took him out through the wicket gate into the gardens!"

"Yes."

"Then Evans helped you. He had the key."

"Yes."

"And that fellow in Kingston — Bonner — must have helped you, too."

"You said he was something of a villain. He was ready for adventure at least."

"But — but the scent the bloodhounds followed?"

"Someone dragged Hudnutt's shirt along the ground on a rope."

"But — but even so — ?" She did not need to tell him; as he said those words he made the next deduction.

"That two hundred pounds!"

"The money I asked you for," said Barbara, sparing herself nothing. A ten-pound reward would not avail if someone were willing to spend two hundred pounds to help a prisoner escape.

Hornblower knew all about it now. His wife had flouted the law. She had set at naught the authority of the Navy. She had — the rising tide reached suddenly up to a new level.

"It's a felony!" he said. "You could be transported for life — you could be sent to Botany Bay!"

"Do I care?" exclaimed Barbara. "Botany Bay! Does that matter now that you know? Now that you'll never love me?"

"Dearest!" Those last words were so fantastically untrue that he had nothing else to say in reply. His mind was hard at work thinking about the effect of all this on Barbara. "That fellow Bonner — he could blackmail you."

"He's as guilty as I am," said Barbara. The unnatural harshness of her voice reached its climax there, and a sudden softness came back into her voice with her next words, an overwhelming tenderness, which she could not help as she smiled her old quizzical smile at this husband of hers. "You're only thinking about me!"

"Of course," said Hornblower, surprised.

"But you must think about yourself. I've deceived you. I've cheated you. I took advantage of your kindness, of your generosity — oh!"

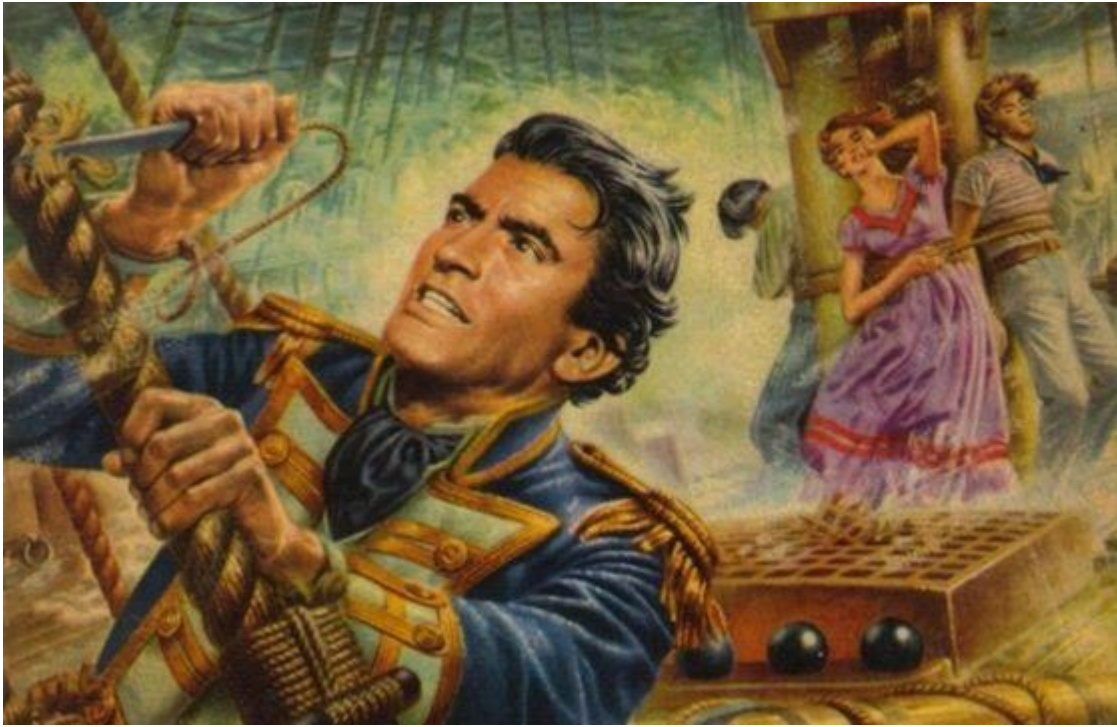
The smile changed to tears. It was horrible to see Barbara's face distort itself. She was still standing like a soldier at attention. She would not allow her hands to cover her face; she stood with the tears streaming down and her features working, sparing herself nothing of her shame. He would have taken her into his arms at that moment except that he was still immobilised by astonishment, and Barbara's last words had set a fresh torrent of thought pouring through his mind to hold him paralysed. If any of this were to come out the consequences would be without limit. Half the world would believe that Hornblower, the legendary Hornblower, had connived at the escape and desertion of a petty criminal. Nobody would believe the truth — but if the truth did find credence half the world would laugh at Hornblower being outwitted by his wife. There was a horrible gaping chasm opening right beside him. But there was already this other chasm — this awful distress that Barbara was suffering.

"I was going to tell you," said Barbara, still erect, blinded by her tears so that she could see nothing. "When we reached home I was going to tell you. That's what I thought before the hurricane. And there in the deckhouse I was going to tell you, after — after I told you the other. But there wasn't time — you had to leave me. I had to tell you I loved you, first. I told you that, and I should have told you this instead. I should have."

She was advancing no excuse for herself; she would not plead; she would face the consequences of her act. And there in the deckhouse she had told him she loved him, that she had never loved any other man. The last realisation came upon him. Now he could shake off the astonishment, the bewilderment, that had held him helpless up to that moment. Nothing counted in the world except Barbara. Now he could move. Two steps forward and she was in his arms. Her tears wetted his lips.

"My love! My darling!" he said, for, unbelieving and blinded she had not responded.

And then she knew, in the darkness that surrounded her, and her arms went about him, and there was no such happiness in all the world. There had never been such perfection of harmony. Hornblower found himself smiling. He could laugh out loud out of sheer happiness. That was an old weakness of his, to laugh — to giggle — in moments of crisis. He could laugh now, if he allowed himself — he could laugh at the whole ridiculous incident; he could laugh and laugh. But his judgement told him that laughter might be misunderstood at this moment. He could not help smiling, though, smiling as he kissed.



The Last Encounter

C. S. Forester
(1966)

Admiral of the Fleet Lord Hornblower sat with his glass of port before him alone at his dining-table at Smallbridge, it was a moment of supreme comfort. There was heavy rain beating against the windows; there had been unending rain for days now, as a climax to one of the wettest springs in local memory. Every now and again the noise of the rain would increase in volume as gusts of wind drove the heavy drops against the panes. The farmers and the tenants would be complaining worse than ever, now, in face of the imminent prospect of a harvest ruined before it had begun to ripen, and Hornblower felt distinct satisfaction in the thought that he was not dependent on his rents for his income. As Admiral of the Fleet he could never be on half-pay; rain or shine, peace or war, he would receive his very handsome three thousand a year, and with his further three thousand a year from his investments in the Funds he would never again know the pinch of poverty, nor even the need for care. He could be considerate towards his tenants; he might also contrive to allow Richard a further five hundred a year — as Colonel in the Guards with his frequent need for attendance on the young Queen at court Richard's tailor's bills must be heavy.

Hornblower took a sip of his port and stretched his legs under the table and enjoyed the warmth of the fire at his back. Two glasses of excellent claret were already playing their part inside him in the digestion of a really superb dinner — that was a further cause for self-congratulation, in that at the age of seventy-two he had a digestion that never caused him a moment's disquiet. He was a lucky man; at the head of his profession, at the ultimate, unsurpassable summit (his promotion to Admiral of the Fleet was recent enough to be still a source of unalloyed gratification) and in the enjoyment of his full health, a large income, a loving wife, a fine son, promising grandchildren, and a good cook. He could sip his port and enjoy every drop of it, and when the glass should be empty he would walk through into the drawing-room where Barbara would be sitting reading, and waiting for him, beside another roaring fire. He had a wife who loved him, a wife whom the advancing years had strangely made more beautiful than in youth, the sinking of her cheeks calling attention to the magnificent

modelling of the bones of her face, just as her white hair was in strange and lovely contrast with her straight back and effortless carriage. She was so beautiful, so gracious, and so dignified. It was the perfect final touch that lately she had had to wear spectacles for reading, which modified her dignity profoundly so that she always whipped them off when there was a chance of a stranger seeing her. Hornblower could smile again at the thought of it and take another sip of his port; it was better to love a woman than a goddess.

It was strange that he should be so happy and so secure, he who had known so much unhappiness, so much harassing uncertainty, so much peril, and so much hardship. Cannon ball and musket shot, drowning and disease, professional disgrace, and military execution; he had escaped by a hair's breadth from them all. He had known the deepest private unhappiness, and now he knew the deepest happiness. He had endured poverty, even hunger, and now he had wealth and security. All very gratifying, said Hornblower to himself; even in his old age he could not address himself without a sneer. 'Call no man happy until he is dead,' said someone or other, and it was probably true. He was seventy-two, and yet there was still time for this dream that surrounded him to reveal itself as a dream, to change to a nightmare. Characteristically he had no sooner congratulated himself on his happiness than he began to wonder what would imperil it. Of course: full of good food and before this warm fire he had forgotten the turmoil the world was in. Revolution — anarchy — social upheaval; all Europe, all the world, was in a convulsion of change. Mobs were on the march, and armies too; this year of 1848 would be remembered as a year of destruction — unless its memory should be later overlain by the memory of years to follow more destructive still. In Paris the barricades were up and a red republic proclaimed. Metternich was in flight from Vienna, the Italian tyrants in exile from their capitals. In Ireland famine and disease accompanied economic disaster and rebellion. Even here in England the agitators were rousing the mob, and voicing startling demands for parliamentary reform, for better working conditions, for changes which could not amount to less than a social revolution.

Perhaps, old man though he was, he would yet live to see his happiness and security torn from him by an ungrateful fate that made no allowance for his lifelong and kindly Liberalism. For six years of his life he had warred against bloody and victory-crazed revolution; for the next fourteen he had warred against the grinding and treacherous tyranny that had inevitably supplanted the revolution. For fourteen years he had staked his life in a struggle against Bonaparte — a struggle with an actual personal aspect, growing more and more personal as he gained promotion. He had fought for liberty, for freedom, but that did not make the fight a less personal one. In two hemispheres, on fifty coasts, Hornblower had fought for liberty and Bonaparte for tyranny, and the struggle had ended in Bonaparte's fall. For nearly thirty years Bonaparte had been in his grave, and Hornblower was now sitting with a comfortable fire warming his back and a glass of excellent port warming his interior, but at the same time in typical fashion he was impairing his happiness by wondering whether it might be taken from him.

The wind shook the house again and the rain roared against the windowpanes. The dining-room door opened silently and Brown the butler came in to put more coal on the fire. Like the good servant he was he searched the room with his eyes to see that all was well; his unobtrusive glance took note of Hornblower's bottle and glass — Hornblower knew that Brown had taken in the fact that he had not yet finished his first glass of port; the knowledge would be of help in the exact timing of the bringing in of the coffee into the drawing-room when Hornblower should decide to move.

Faintly through the house came the jangle of the front door bell; now who was there who could possibly be ringing at the door at eight o'clock at night, on a night like this? It could not be a tenant — tenants would go to the side door if by any chance they had business at the house — and no caller was expected. Hornblower felt the urgings of curiosity, especially as the bell jangled a second time almost before its first janglings had died away. The dining-room windows and doors shook a trifle, indicating that the footman had opened the front door. Hornblower pricked up his ears; he imagined that he could hear voices in the outer hall.

"Go and see who that is, Brown," he ordered.

"Yes, my lord."

There had been many years when 'Aye, aye, sir' had been Brown's reply to an order, but Brown never forgot that he was now a butler, and butler to a peer at that. He walked silently across the room — even while wondering who the caller might be Hornblower found himself as usual admiring the cut of Brown's evening clothes. The perfection of cut, and yet with just that something about it to make it plain to the discriminating

observer that they were a butler's clothes and not a gentleman's. Brown silently shut the door behind him, and Hornblower wished he had not, for in the interval while the door was open and Brown was passing through there had been a tantalizing moment when conversation could be heard — a loud, rather harsh voice making some sort of demands and the footman responding with unyielding deference.

Even now the door was shut Hornblower believed he could hear that harsh voice, and curiosity completely overcame him. He rose and pulled at the bell cord beside the fire. Brown came in again, and with the opening of the door the harsh voice became distinctly audible.

"What the devil's going on, Brown?" demanded Hornblower.

"I'm afraid it's a lunatic, my lord."

"A lunatic?"

"He says he's Napoleon Bonaparte, my lord."

"God bless my soul! And what does he want here?"

Even at seventy-two there was a little tingle of quickened blood in arteries and veins at the chance of action. A man who thought he was Napoleon Bonaparte might well intend causing trouble when coming to the house of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Hornblower. But Brown's next words were not so promising of trouble.

"He wishes to borrow a carriage and horses, my lord."

"What for?"

"It seems there has been trouble on the railway, my lord. He says he must reach Dover as soon as possible to catch the Calais packet. His business, he says, is of the greatest importance."

"What is he like?"

"He is dressed like a gentleman, my lord."

"H'm."

It was not so very long ago that the railway had made its way round the edge of the park at Smallbridge, sullyng the fair fields of Kent on its way to Dover. From the upper windows of the house the foul smoke of the engines could be seen, and the raucous sound of their whistles could be heard. But the worst prognostications of the pessimists had not been realized. The cows still gave down their milk, the pigs still harrowed, the orchards still bore their fruit, and there had been singularly few accidents.

"Will that be all, my lord?" asked Brown, recalling his master to the fact that there was still an intruder in the outer hall who had to be dealt with.

"No. Bring him in here," said Hornblower.

The life of a country gentleman might be pleasant and secure but sometimes it was damnably dull.

"Very good, my lord."

Hornblower took a glance in the ormolu mirror over the fireplace as Brown withdrew; his cravat and his shirt front were in good order, the sparse white hairs were tidy, and there was something of the old twinkle in the brown eyes under the snow-white eyebrows. Brown returned and held the door as he made his announcement.

"Mr Napoleon Bonaparte."

It was not the figure that the prints had made so familiar that came into the room. No green coat and white breeches, no cocked hat and epaulettes; the man who entered wore a civilian suit of grey, apparent under an unbuttoned cloak with a cape. The grey was nearly black with wet; the man was soaked to the skin, and as high as the knees of his tight strapped trousers he was plastered with mud; but he would have been a dandy had his clothes not been in so deplorable a condition. There was something about his figure that might recall Bonaparte's — the short legs that made his height a little below average — and there might be something about the grey eyes that studied Hornblower so keenly in the candlelight, but the rest of his appearance was unexpectedly not even a parody or a travesty of the Emperor's. He actually wore a heavy moustache and a little tuft of beard — if anyone could imagine the great Napoleon with a moustache! — and instead of the short hair with the lock drooping on the forehead this man wore his hair fashionably long; it would have been in ringlets over the ears if it had not been so wet that it hung in rats' tails.

"Good evening, sir," said Hornblower.

"Good evening. Lord Hornblower, I understand?"

"That is so."

The newcomer spoke good English, but with a decided accent. But it did not seem to be the accent of a Frenchman.

"I must apologize for intruding upon you at this time."

Mr Bonaparte's gesture towards the polished dining-table showed that he was appreciative of the importance of the period of digestion after dinner.

"Please do not give it another thought, sir," said Hornblower. "And if it should be more convenient for you to speak French pray do so."

"French or English are equally convenient to me, my lord. Or German or Italian, for that matter."

Now once again that was not like the Emperor — Hornblower had read that his Italian was bad and that he spoke no English at all. A strange sort of madman this must be. Yet that gesture had opened the cloak a little further, and within it Hornblower could see a broad red ribbon and the glitter of a star. The man was wearing the Grand Eagle of the Legion of Honour, so he must be insane. One final test —

"How should I address you, sir?" asked Hornblower.

"As Your Highness, if you could be so good, my lord. Or as Monseigneur — that might be more convenient."

"Very well, Your Highness. My butler gave me a not very clear account of how I might be of service to Your Highness. Perhaps Your Highness would be kind enough to command me?"

"The kindness is yours, my lord. I tried to explain to your butler that the railway line beside your park has been blocked. The train I was in was unable to proceed farther."

"Most regrettable, Your Highness. These modern inventions —"

"They have their inconveniences. I understand that as a result of the recent heavy rain the embankment in what they call a cutting has given way, and a large mass of earth, to the amount of some hundreds of tons, has fallen on the rails."

"Indeed, Your Highness?"

"Yes, I was given to understand that it might even be a matter of some days before the line is clear again. And my business is of an importance which will not brook the delay of a single hour."

"Naturally, Your Highness. Affairs of State are invariably pressing."

This madman talked a strange mixture of sanity and nonsense; and he reacted to Hornblower's heavy-handed humour quite convincingly. The heavy eyelids raised themselves a trifle, and the cold grey eyes searched Hornblower's.

"You speak truth, my lord, without, I fear, giving it its full weight. My business is of the greatest importance. Not only does the fate of France hinge upon my arrival in Paris, but the future history of the world — the whole destiny of mankind!"

"The name of Bonaparte implies nothing less, Your Highness," said Hornblower.

"Europe is falling into anarchy. She is a prey to traitors, self-seekers, ideologues, demagogues, of uncounted fools, and of knaves without number. France under strong guidance again can give order back to the world."

"Your Highness says no more than the truth."

"Then you will appreciate the urgency of my business, my lord. The elections are about to be held in Paris, and I must be there — I must be there within forty-eight hours. That is the reason why I waded through mud under a deluge of rain to your house."

The stranger looked down at his mud-daubed clothes and at the trickles of water draining from them.

"I could find your Highness a change of clothing," suggested Hornblower.

"No time for that, even, thank you, my lord. Farther down the railway line, beyond this unfortunate landslide, and beyond the tunnel — I think at a place called Maidstone — I can catch another train which will take me to Dover. From thence the steam packet to Calais — the train to Paris — and my destiny!"

"So Your Highness wishes to be driven to Maidstone?"

"Yes, my lord."

It was eight miles of fairly easy road — not an impossibly extravagant request from a stranger in distress. But the wind was southwesterly — Hornblower pulled himself up with a jerk. These steam packets paid no attention to wind or tide, although it was hard for a man who had all his life commanded sailing vessels to remember it. The madman had a sane enough plan up to a point — as far as Paris. There he would presumably be put away in an asylum where he would be harmless and unharmed. Not even the excitable French would

do anything to injure so entertaining an eccentric. But it would be hard on the coachman to have to turn out on a night like this and drive sixteen miles at a madman's whim. Hornblower changed his mind again. He was wondering how to decline the request without hurting the poor soul's feelings when the door from the drawing-room opened to admit Barbara. She was tall and straight and beautiful and dignified; now that the years had made Hornblower stoop-shouldered her eyes were on a level with his.

"Horatio —" she began, and then paused when she saw the stranger; but someone who knew Barbara well — Hornblower, for instance — might guess that perhaps she had not been unaware of the presence of a stranger in the dining-room before she entered, and that perhaps she had come in like this to find out what was going on. Undoubtedly she had removed her spectacles for this public appearance.

The stranger came to polite attention in the presence of a lady.

"May I have the honour of presenting my wife to Your Highness?" asked Hornblower.

The stranger made a low bow, and, advancing, took Barbara's hand and stooped low over it again to kiss it. Hornblower watched with some little annoyance. Barbara was woman enough to be susceptible to a kiss on the hand — any rascal could find his way into her good graces if he could perform that outlandish ceremony in the right way.

"The beautiful Lady Hornblower," said the stranger. "Wife of the most distinguished sailor in Her Majesty's Navy, sister of the great Duke — but best known as the beautiful Lady Hornblower."

This madman had a way with him, as well as being well informed. But the speech was thoroughly out of character, of course; Napoleon had always been notorious for his brusquerie with women, and had been said to limit his conversation with them to questions about the number of their children. But it would never occur to Barbara to think like that when such a speech had just been made to her. She turned an inquiring blue eye on her husband.

"His Highness —" began Hornblower.

He played the farce out to the end, recounting the stranger's request and laying stress on the importance of his arrival in Paris.

"You have already ordered the carriage, I suppose, Horatio?" asked Barbara.

"As a matter of fact I haven't yet."

"Then of course you will. Every minute is of importance, as His Highness says."

"You are too kind, my dear lady," said His Highness.

"But —" began Hornblower, and he said no more under the gaze of that blue eye. He walked across and pulled at the bell cord, and when Brown appeared he gave the necessary instructions.

"Tell Harris he can have five minutes to put the horses to. Not a second longer," supplemented Barbara.

"Yes, my lady."

"My lady, my lord," said the stranger as Brown withdrew. "All Europe will be in your debt for this act of kindness. The world is notoriously ungrateful, but I hope the gratitude of Bonaparte will be unmistakable."

"Your Highness is too kind," said Hornblower, trying not to be too sarcastic.

"I hope Your Highness has a pleasant journey," said Barbara, "and a successful one."

The fellow had won every bit of Barbara's esteem, obviously. She ignored her husband's indignant glances until Brown announced the carriage and the stranger had rolled away into the deluging rain.

"But my dear —" protested Hornblower at last. "What on earth did you do that for?"

"It'll do Harris no harm to drive to Maidstone and back," said Barbara. "The horses are never exercised enough in any case."

"But the man was mad," said Hornblower. "A raving lunatic. A stark, staring, idiotic impostor, and not a very good impostor at that."

"I think there was something about him," said Barbara, sticking to her guns. "Something —"

"You mean he kissed your hand and made pretty speeches," said Hornblower in a huff.

It was not until six days later that *The Times* published a dispatch from Paris.

Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, the Pretender to the Imperial Throne, was today nominated as a candidate in the elections about to be held for the Presidency of the French Republic.

And it was not until a month after that that a liveried servant delivered a packet and a letter at Smallbridge. The letter was in French, but Hornblower had no difficulty in translating it —

My Lord

I am commanded by Monseigneur His Highness the Prince-President, as one of his first acts on assuming the control of the affairs of his people, to convey to you His Highness's gratitude for the assistance you were kind enough to render him during his journey to Paris. Accompanying this letter Your Lordship will find the insignia of a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, and I have the pleasure of assuring Your Lordship that at His Highness' command I am requesting of Her Majesty the Queen, through Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, permission for you to accept them.

I am also commanded by His Highness to beg that you will convey to Her Ladyship your wife his grateful thanks as well, and that you will present for her acceptance the accompanying token of his esteem and regard, which His Highness hopes will be a fitting tribute to the beautiful eyes which His Highness remembers so well.

With the highest expressions of my personal regard,

I am,

Your most humble and obedient servant

Cadore, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

"Humbug!" said Hornblower. "The fellow will be calling himself Emperor before you can say Jack Robinson. Napoleon the Third, I suppose."

"I said there was something about him," said Barbara. "This is a very beautiful sapphire."

It certainly matched the eyes into which Hornblower smiled with tender resignation.



